

« Saved at Surprise

a
shadow
falls
story

c. c. hunter



« Turned at Dark

a
shadow
falls
story

c. c. hunter



« Choser
at Nightfall

a
shadow
falls
novel

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« Whispers at
Moonrise

a
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« Taken at Dusk

a
shadow
falls
novel

c. c. hunter



« Awake at Dawn

a
shadow
falls
novel

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« Bory at Midnight

a
shadow
falls
novel

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BORN AT MIDNIGHT
AWAKE AT DAWN
TAKEN AT DUSK
WHISPERS AT MOONRISE
CHOSEN AT NIGHTFALL
TURNED AT DARK
SAVED AT SUNRISE

C. C. HUNTER



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TURNED AT DARK

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Also by C. C. Hunter

About the Author

Praise for the Shadow Falls Series

Born at Midnight

c. c. hunter

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To Lilly Dale Makepeace.

*Just looking at your smile reminds that magic is alive and
thriving in this big old world.*

Acknowledgments

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Chapter One

“This isn’t funny!” her father yelled.

No, it wasn’t, Kylie Galen thought as she leaned into the refrigerator to find something to drink. In fact, it was so not funny she wished she could crawl in beside the mustard and moldy hot dogs, shut the door, and not hear the angry voices spewing from the living room.

Her parents were at it again.

Not that it would go on much longer, she thought as the mist of the fridge seeped out the door.

Today was the day.

Kylie’s throat tightened. She swallowed a lump of raw emotion and refused to cry.

Today had to be the suckiest day of her life. And she’d had some pretty sucky days lately, too. Acquiring a stalker, Trey breaking up with her, and her parents announcing their divorce—yup, sucky pretty much covered it. It was no wonder her night terrors had returned full force.

“What have you done with my underwear?” Her father’s growl spilled into the kitchen, snuck under the refrigerator door, and bounced around the hot dogs.

His underwear? Kylie pressed a cold diet soda can to her forehead.

“Why would I do anything with your underwear?” her mother asked in her oh-so-nonchalant voice. That was her mom all right, nonchalant. Cold as ice.

Kylie’s gaze shot out the kitchen window to the patio where she’d seen

her mom earlier. There, a pair of her dad's tighty-whities dangled half out of the smoldering grill.

Just great. Her mother had barbecued her father's shorts. That's it. Kylie was never eating anything cooked on that grill again.

Fighting tears, she shoved the diet soda back on the rack, shut the fridge, and moved into the doorway. Maybe if they saw her, they'd stop acting like juveniles and let her be the kid again.

Her dad stood in the middle of the room, a pair of underwear clutched in his fist. Her mom sat on the sofa, calmly sipping hot tea.

"You need psychological help," her father yelled at her mom.

Two points for her dad, Kylie thought. Her mom did need help. So why was Kylie the one who had to sit on a shrink's sofa two days a week?

Why was her dad—the man everyone swore Kylie had wrapped around her little finger—going to move out today and leave her behind?

She didn't blame her dad for wanting to leave her mom, aka the Ice Queen. But why wasn't he taking Kylie with him? Another lump rose in her throat.

Dad swung around and saw her, then shot back into the bedroom, obviously to pack the rest of his things—minus his underwear, which at this moment sent up smoke signals from the backyard grill.

Kylie stood there, staring at her mom, who sat reading over work files as if it were any other day.

The framed photographs of Kylie and her father that hung over the sofa caught her attention and tears stung her eyes. The pictures had been taken on their annual father and daughter trips.

"You've got to do something," Kylie pleaded.

"Do what?" her mom asked.

"Change his mind. Tell him you're sorry you grilled his shorts." *That you're sorry you've got ice water running through your veins.* "I don't give a flip what you do, just don't let him go."

"You don't understand." And just like that, her mom, void of any emotion, shifted her attention back to her papers.

Right then, her dad, suitcase in his hand, shot through the living room. Kylie went after him and followed him out the door into Houston's stifling afternoon heat.

"Take me with you," she begged, not caring if he saw her tears. Maybe the tears would help. There'd been a time when crying got her whatever she wanted from him. "I don't eat much," she sniffled, giving humor a shot.

He shook his head but, unlike her mom, at least he had emotion in his eyes. "You don't understand."

You don't understand. "Why do y'all always say that? I'm sixteen years old. If I don't understand, then explain it to me. Tell me the big secret and get it over with."

He stared down at his feet as if this were a test and he'd penned the answers on the toes of his shoes. Sighing, he looked up. "Your mom ... she needs you."

"Needs me? Are you kidding? She doesn't even want me." *And neither do you.* The realization caused Kylie's breath to catch in her lungs. He really didn't want her.

She wiped a tear from her cheek and that's when she saw him again. Not her dad, but Soldier Dude, aka her very own stalker. Standing across the street, he wore the same army duds as before. He looked as if he'd just walked out of one of those Gulf War movies her mom loved. Only instead of shooting at things or being blown up, he stood frozen in one spot and stared right at Kylie with sad, yet very scary eyes.

She'd noticed him stalking her a few weeks ago. He'd never spoken to her and she hadn't spoken to him. But the day she pointed him out to her mom, and Mom hadn't seen him ... well, that's when Kylie's world slid off its axis. Her mom thought she was making it up to get attention, or worse. With the worse being that Kylie was losing her grip on reality. Sure, the night terrors that had tormented her when she was a kid had returned, worse than ever. Her mom said the shrink could help her work through them, but how could she do that when Kylie didn't even remember them? She only knew they were bad. Bad enough to have her wake up screaming.

Kylie wanted to scream now. Wanted to scream for her dad to turn around and look—to prove that she hadn't lost her mind. At the very least, maybe if her dad actually saw her stalker, her parents would let her off from seeing the shrink. It wasn't fair.

But life wasn't fair, as her mom had reminded her more than once.

Nevertheless, when Kylie looked back, he was gone. Not Soldier Dude, but her dad. She turned toward the driveway and saw him shoving his suitcase in the backseat of his red convertible Mustang. Mom had never liked that car, but Dad loved it.

Kylie ran to the car. "I'll make Grandma talk to Mom. She'll fix..." No sooner had the words escaped Kylie's lips than she remembered the other major sucky event she'd had plopped into her life.

She couldn't run to Grandma to fix her problems anymore. Because Grandma was dead. Gone. The vision of Nana lying cold in the casket filled Kylie's head and another lump crawled up her throat.

Her dad's expression morphed into parental concern, the same look that had landed Kylie at the shrink's office three weeks ago.

"I'm fine. I just forgot." Because remembering hurt too much. She felt a lone tear roll down her cheek.

Dad moved in and hugged her. The embrace lasted even longer than his usual hugs, but it ended too soon. How could she let him go? How could he leave her?

His arm dropped from around her and he physically set her back. "I'm just a phone call away, Pumpkin."

Swiping at her tears, hating her watery weakness, she watched her dad's red convertible get smaller as it buzzed down the street. Wanting to be alone in her room, she started to run inside. Then she remembered and looked back across the street to see if Soldier Dude had pulled his usual disappearing act.

Nope. He was still there, staring, stalking. Scaring the bejeebies out of her and making her angry at the same time. He was the reason she had to see a shrink.

Then Mrs. Baker, her elderly neighbor, toddled out to get her mail. She

smiled at Kylie but not once did the old librarian glance at Soldier Dude taking up residence on her front lawn, even when he stood less than two feet from her.

Weird.

So weird it sent an unnatural chill tiptoeing down Kylie's spine, the same kind of chill Kylie had gotten at Nana's funeral.

What the hell was going on?

Chapter Two

An hour later, Kylie walked down the stairs with her backpack and purse over her shoulder.

Her mom met her in the entryway. “Are you okay?”

How could I be okay? “I’ll live,” Kylie answered. More than she could say about Grandma. Right then, Kylie had a vision of the bright purple lipstick the funeral home had put on her grandmother. *Why didn’t you take that off of me?* Kylie could almost hear Nana asking.

Weirded out by the thought, Kylie looked back at her mother.

Her mom stared at Kylie’s backpack and her worry wrinkle appeared between her eyes. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“You said I could spend the night with Sara. Or were you too busy grilling Dad’s shorts to remember?”

Her mom ignored the grilled-shorts comment. “What are you two going to do tonight?”

“Mark Jameson is having an end-of-school party.” Not that Kylie felt like celebrating the event. Thanks to Trey dumping her and her parents divorcing, Kylie’s whole summer was headed for the toilet. And the way things were going, someone was going to walk by and flush it.

“Are his parents going to be there?” Mom raised one dark eyebrow.

Kylie flinched emotionally, but physically didn’t blink. “Aren’t they always?”

Okay, so she lied. Normally she didn’t go to Mark Jameson’s parties for that very reason, but blast it, look where being good had gotten her. She

deserved to have some fun, didn't she?

Besides, hadn't her mom lied when her dad asked about his underwear?

"What if you have another dream?" Her mom touched Kylie's arm.

A quick touch. That's all Kylie ever got from her mom these days. No long hugs like her dad gave. No mother/daughter trips. Just aloofness and quick touches. Even when Nana, her mom's mom, died, Kylie's mom hadn't hugged her and Kylie had really needed a hug then. But it had been her dad who'd pulled her into his arms and let her smear mascara on his suit coat. And now Dad and all his suit coats were gone.

Drawing in a gulp of oxygen, Kylie clutched her purse. "I warned Sara I might wake up screaming bloody murder. She said she'd stake me in the heart with a wooden cross and make me go back to bed."

"Maybe you should hide the stakes before you go to sleep." Her mother attempted to smile.

"I will." For one brief second, Kylie worried about leaving her mom alone on the day her dad had left. But who was she kidding? Her mom would be fine. Nothing ever bothered the Ice Queen.

Before walking out, Kylie peered out the window to make sure she wouldn't be assaulted by a guy wearing army duds.

Deeming the yard to be free of stalkers, Kylie ran out the door, hoping that tonight's party would help her forget just how badly her life sucked.

* * *

"Here. You don't have to drink it, just hold it." Sara Jetton pushed a beer into Kylie's hands and ran off.

Sharing elbow room with at least thirty kids, all packed into Mark Jameson's living room and talking at once, Kylie clutched the ice-cold bottle. Glancing around at the crowd, she recognized most of them from school. The doorbell rang again. Obviously, this was the place to be tonight. And according to every other kid at her high school, it was. Jameson, a senior whose parents never seemed to care what he did, held some of the wildest

parties in town.

Ten minutes later, Sara still MIA, the party shifted into full swing. Too bad Kylie didn't feel like swinging along with them. She frowned at the bottle in her hand.

Someone bumped into her shoulder, causing the beer to splash on her chest and run down in the V of her white blouse. "Crap."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the responsible bumper said.

Kylie looked up into John's soft brown eyes and tried to smile. Hey, being nice to a cute guy, who'd been asking about her at school made trying to smile easy. But the fact that John had been friends with Trey kept the thrill down to a minimum.

"It's okay," she said.

"I'll get you another." As if nervous, he shot off.

"It's really okay," Kylie called after him, but between the music and the hum of voices, he didn't hear her.

The doorbell rang again. A few kids shifted around and gave Kylie a view of the door. More specifically, the shift gave her a view of Trey walking inside. Beside him—or she should say plastered against him—sashayed his new slutty girlfriend.

"Great." She swung around, wishing she could teleport herself to Tahiti, or back home would be even better—especially if her dad would be there.

Through a back window, she spotted Sara on the patio and Kylie darted outside to join her.

Sara looked up. She must have read the panic on Kylie's face, because she came running over to her. "What happened?"

"Trey and his screw toy are here."

Sara frowned. "So, you look hot. Go flirt with some guys and make him sorry."

Kylie rolled her eyes. "I don't want to stay here and watch Trey and what's her name making out."

"Were they already making out?" Sara asked.

"Not yet, but get one beer in Trey and all he'll think about is getting into a

girl's panties. I know because I used to be the girl in the panties."

"Chill." Sara pointed back at the table. "Gary brought margaritas. Have one and you'll feel fine."

Kylie bit her lip to keep from screaming that she wouldn't feel fine. Her life had toilet-bound stamped all over it.

"Hey." Sara nudged her. "We both know all you'd have to do to get Trey back is to grab him and take him upstairs. He's still crazy about you. He found me before I left school today and asked about you."

"Did you know he was going to be here?" Betrayal started unraveling the little sanity she had left.

"Not for sure. But chill."

Chill? Kylie stared at her best friend and realized how different they'd become these last six months. It wasn't just Sara's need to party or the fact that she'd given up virginhood. Okay, so maybe it was those two things, but it seemed like more.

More as in Kylie had a sneaking suspicion that Sara longed to rush Kylie to join the partying-non-virgin ranks. Could Kylie help it if beer tasted like dog piss to her? Or if the idea of having sex didn't appeal?

Okay, that was a lie, sex appealed to her. When she and Trey had made out, Kylie had been tempted, really tempted, but then Kylie remembered her and Sara talking about how the first time should be special.

Then she recalled how Sara had given in to Brad's "needs"—Brad who was the love of Sara's life—yet, within two weeks of giving in, the love of Sara's life had dumped her. What was so special about that?

Since then, Sara had dated four other guys, and she'd slept with two of them. Now, Sara had stopped talking about sex being special.

"Look, I know you're worried about your parents," Sara said. "But that's why you need to just let loose and have some fun." Sara tucked her long, brown hair behind her ear. "I'm getting you a margarita and you're going to love it."

Sara darted off to the table by the group of people. Kylie started to follow but her gaze slapped against Soldier Dude, looking as scary and weird as

ever, standing by the group of margarita drinkers.

Kylie shot around, prepared to bolt, but she smacked right into a guy's chest, and darn it if more beer didn't jump out of the bottle and fall right between her boobs. "Great. My boobs are going to smell like a brewery."

"Every guy's dream," the husky male voice said. "But I'm sorry."

She recognized Trey's voice before she did his broad shoulders or his unique masculine scent. Preparing herself for the pain that seeing him would cause, she raised her gaze. "It's okay, John's already done it once."

She tried not to stare at the way Trey's sandy brown hair fell against his brow, or the way his green eyes seemed to lure her closer, or the way his mouth tempted her to lean in and press her lips to his.

"So it's true." He frowned.

"What's true?" she asked.

"That you and John have hooked up."

Kylie considered lying. The thought that it would hurt him appealed to her. It appealed to her so much that it reminded her of the stupid games her parents played lately. Oh, no, she would not stoop to their "grown-up" level.

"I haven't hooked up with anyone." She turned to leave.

He caught her. His touch, the feel of his warm hand on her elbow, sent waves of pain right to her heart. And standing this close, his clean, masculine scent filled her airways. Oh God, she loved his smell.

"I heard about your grandma," he said. "And Sara told me about your parents getting a divorce. I'm so sorry, Kylie."

Tears threatened to crawl up her throat. Kylie was seconds away from falling against his warm chest and begging him to hold her. Nothing ever felt better than Trey's arms around her, but then she saw the girl, Trey's screw toy, walk outside, carrying two beers. In less than five minutes, Trey would be trying to get in her panties. And from the too-low-cut blouse and too-short skirt the girl wore, it appeared he wouldn't have to try too hard.

"Thanks," Kylie muttered, and went to join Sara. Luckily, Soldier Dude had decided margaritas weren't his thing after all and left.

"Here." Sara took the beer from Kylie's hand and replaced it with a

margarita.

The frosty glass felt unnaturally cold. Kylie leaned in and whispered, “Did you see a strange guy here a minute ago? Dressed in some funky army outfit?”

Sara’s eyebrows did their wild, wiggly thing. “How much of that beer did you drink?” Her laughter filled the night air.

Kylie wrapped her hands tighter around the cold glass, worried she seriously might be losing her mind. Adding alcohol to the situation didn’t seem like a good idea.

An hour later, when three Houston cops walked into the backyard and had everyone line up at the back gate, Kylie still had the same untouched margarita clutched in her hands.

“Come on, kids,” one of the cops said. “The sooner we move you to the precinct, the sooner we can get your parents to come get you.” That was when Kylie knew for certain that her life really had been toilet-bound—and someone had just flushed.

* * *

“Where’s Dad?” Kylie asked her mom when she stepped into the room at the police station. “I called Dad.”

I’m a phone call away, Pumpkin. Hadn’t he told her that? So why wasn’t he here to get Pumpkin?

Her mom’s green eyes tightened. “He called me.”

“I wanted Dad,” Kylie insisted. No, she needed her dad, she thought, and her vision clouded with tears. She needed a hug, needed someone who would understand.

“You don’t get what you want, especially when ... my God, Kylie, how could you do this?”

Kylie swiped the tears from her face. “I didn’t do anything. Didn’t they tell you? I walked a straight line. Touched my nose and even said my ABCs backwards. I didn’t do anything.”

“They found drugs there,” her mother snapped.

“I wasn’t doing drugs.”

“But do you know what they didn’t find there, young lady?” Her mother pointed a finger at her. “Any parents. You lied to me.”

“Maybe I’m just too much like you,” Kylie said, still reeling at the thought that her dad hadn’t shown up. He’d known how upset she’d been. Why hadn’t he come?

“What does that mean, Kylie?”

“You told dad you didn’t know what happened to his underwear. But you’d just flame-broiled his shorts on the grill.”

Guilt filled her mother’s eyes and she shook her head. “Dr. Day is right.”

“What does my shrink have to do with tonight?” Kylie asked. “Don’t tell me you called her. God, Mom, if you dare bring her down here where all my friends—”

“No, she’s not here. But it’s not just about tonight.” She inhaled. “I can’t do this alone.”

“Do what alone?” Kylie asked, and she got this bad feeling in her stomach.

“I’m signing you up for a summer camp.”

“What summer camp?” Kylie clutched her purse to her chest. “No, I don’t want to go to any camp.”

“It’s not about what you want.” Her mom motioned for Kylie to walk out the door. “It’s about what you need. It’s a camp for kids with problems.”

“Problems? Are you freaking nuts? I don’t have any problems,” Kylie insisted. Well, not any a camp could fix. Somehow she suspected going to camp wouldn’t bring Dad home, it wouldn’t make Soldier Dude disappear, and it wouldn’t win Trey back.

“No problems? Really, then why am I at the police station at almost midnight picking up my sixteen-year-old daughter? You’re going to the camp. I’m signing you up tomorrow. This isn’t up for debate.”

I’m not going. She kept telling herself that as they walked out of the police station.

Her mother might be bat-shit crazy, but not her dad. He simply wouldn't let her mom send her off to a camp filled with a bunch of juvenile delinquents. He wouldn't.

Would he?

Chapter Three

Three days later, Kylie, suitcase in hand, stood in the YMCA parking lot where several of the camp buses picked up the juvenile delinquents. She freaking couldn't believe she was here.

Her mom was really doing it.

And her dad was really letting her mom do it.

Kylie, who'd never drunk more than two sips of beer, who'd never really smoked one cigarette, let alone any pot, was about to be shipped off to some camp for troubled kids.

Her mom reached out and touched Kylie's arm. "I think they're calling you."

Could her mom get rid of her any faster? Kylie pulled away from her touch, so angry, so hurt she didn't know how to act anymore. She'd begged, she'd pleaded, and she'd cried, but nothing worked. She was about to head off to camp. She hated it but there was nothing she could do.

Not offering her mom one word, and swearing not to cry in front of the dozens of other kids, Kylie stiffened her back and took off to the bus behind the woman holding the sign that read SHADOW FALLS CAMP.

Jeez. What kind of hell hole was she being sent to?

When Kylie stepped on the bus, the eight or nine kids already there raised their heads and stared at her. She felt an odd kind of stirring in her chest and she got those weird chills again. Never, not in all sixteen years of her life, had she wanted to turn and run away as much as she did now.

She forced herself not to bolt, then she met the gazes of ... *oh, Lordie,*

can you say freaks?

One girl had her hair dyed three different colors—pink, lime green, and jet black. Another girl wore nothing but black—black lipstick, black eye shadow, black pants, and a black long-sleeve shirt. Hadn't the goth look gone out of style? Where was this girl getting her fashion tips? Hadn't she read that colors were in? That blue was the new black?

And then there was the boy sitting almost at the front of the bus. He had both his eyebrows pierced. Kylie leaned down to peer out the window to see if she could still see her mother. Surely, if her mom took a look at these guys, she'd know Kylie didn't belong here.

"Take your seat," someone said, and stepped behind her.

Kylie turned around and saw the bus driver. While Kylie hadn't noticed it earlier, she realized even the bus driver looked a little freakish. Her purple-tinted gray hair sat high on her head like a football helmet. Not that Kylie could blame her for teasing her hair up a few inches. The woman was short. Elf short. Kylie glanced down at her feet, half expecting to see a pair of pointed green boots. No green shoes.

Then her gaze shot to the front to the bus. How was the woman going to drive the bus?

"Come on," the woman said. "I have to have you kids there by lunch, so move it along."

Since everyone but Kylie had taken their seats, she supposed the woman meant her. She took a step farther into the bus, feeling as if her life would never, ever be the same.

"You can sit by me," someone said. The boy had curly blond hair, even blonder than Kylie's, but his eyes peering at her were so dark they looked black. He patted the empty seat beside him. Kylie tried not to stare, but something about the dark/light combination felt off. Then he wiggled his eyebrows, as if ... as if her sitting beside him meant they might make out or something.

"That's okay." Kylie took a few steps, pulling her suitcase behind her. Her luggage caught on the row of seats where the blond boy sat and Kylie

looked back to free it.

Her gaze met his and her breath caught. Blond boy now had ... green eyes. Bright, very bright green eyes. How was that even possible?

She swallowed and looked at his hands, thinking that maybe he had a contact case out and had changed his lenses. No case.

He wiggled his brows again, and when she realized she was staring at him, she yanked her suitcase free.

Shaking off the chill, she moved on to the row of seats she'd chosen as her own. Before she turned to sit down, she noticed another boy in the back. Sitting by himself, he had light brown hair, parted to the side and hanging just above his dark brows and green eyes. Normal green eyes, but the dusty blue T-shirt he wore made them more noticeable.

He nodded at her. Nothing too weird, thank God. At least there was one normal person on the bus besides her.

Sitting down, she gave blond guy another glance. But he wasn't looking at her, so she couldn't see if his eye color had gone weird again. But that's when she noticed the girl with three different hair colors had something in her hands.

Kylie's breath caught again. The girl had a toad. Not a frog—a frog she could have probably handled—but a toad. A huge honking toad. What kind of a girl dyed her hair three different colors and carried a toad with her to camp? God, maybe it was one of those drug toads, the ones people licked to get high. She'd heard about them on some stupid crime show on TV but had always thought they'd made it up. She didn't know which was worse: licking a toad to get high or carrying a toad around just to be weird.

Pulling her suitcase up on the seat next to her just so no one would feel the need to join her, Kylie let out a deep sigh and looked out the window. The bus was moving, although Kylie still didn't see how the bus driver managed to reach the gas pedals.

"Do you know what they call us?" The voice came from the seat where toad girl sat.

Kylie didn't think she was talking to her, but she turned her head that

way, anyway. Because the girl looked directly at her, Kylie figured she might be wrong.

“Who calls us?” Kylie asked, trying not to sound too friendly or too bitchy. The last thing she wanted was to piss these freaks off.

“The kids who go to the other camps. There’s like six camps in the three-mile radius in Fallen.” Using both hands she pulled her multicolored hair back and held it there for a few seconds.

That’s when Kylie noticed the girl had lost her toad. And Kylie didn’t see a cage or anything where she could have tucked it away.

Great. She would probably have some freak’s humongous drug toad hopping into her lap before she knew it. Not that toads totally scared her or anything. She just didn’t want it jumping on her.

“They call us boneheads,” the girl said.

“Why?” Kylie pulled her feet up in the seat just in case a toad hopped by.

“The camp used to be called Bone Creek Camp,” the girl answered. “Because of the dinosaur bones found there.”

“Ha,” said the blond boy. “They also call us boners.”

A few laughs echoed from the other seats. “Why is that funny?” the girl wearing all black asked in a tone so deadly serious that Kylie shivered.

“You don’t know what a boner is?” Blond Boy asked. “If you’ll come sit beside me, I’ll show you.” When he turned around, Kylie got another look at his eyes. Holy mother of pearls. They were gold. A striking feline gold. Contacts, Kylie realized. He had to be wearing some kind of weird contacts that were doing that.

Goth Girl stood up as if to join the blond guy.

“Don’t do it,” Toad Girl, without her toad, said and stood up. Moving out into the aisle, she whispered something in Goth Girl’s ear.

“Gross.” Goth Girl slammed back in her seat. Then she looked over at the blond boy and pointed a black-painted fingernail at him. “You don’t want to piss me off. I eat things bigger than you in the dead of night.”

“Did someone say something about the dead of night?” a voice came from the back of the bus.

Kylie turned to see who'd spoken.

Another girl, one Kylie hadn't known was there, popped up from the seat. She had jet black hair and wore sunglasses almost the same color as her hair. What made her look so abnormal was her complexion. Pasty. As in pasty white.

"Do you know why they renamed the camp Shadow Falls?" Toad Girl asked.

"No," someone answered from the front of the bus.

"Because of the Native American legend that says at dusk, if you stand beneath the falls on the property, you can see the shadows of death angels dancing."

Dancing death angels? What was wrong with these people?

Kylie swung around in her seat. Was this some nightmare? Maybe part of her night terrors? She pushed deeper in her cushioned seat and tried to focus on waking herself up from the dreams the way Dr. Day had shown her.

Focus. Focus. She took in deep breaths, in through the nose, out the mouth—all the while silently chanting, *It's just a dream, it isn't real, it isn't real.*

Either she wasn't asleep or her focus had gotten on the wrong bus, and darn if she didn't wish she'd followed it onto a different bus. Still not wanting to believe her eyes, she gazed around at the others. Blond Boy looked at her, and his eyes were black again.

Creepy. Was none of this coming across completely off the normal chart to anyone else in the bus?

Turning in her seat again, she looked back at the boy she'd dubbed the most normal. His soft green eyes, eyes that reminded her of Trey's, met hers, and he shrugged. She didn't exactly know what the shrug meant, but he didn't appear all that weirded out by everything. Which in some small way made him as weird as the others.

Kylie swung back around and grabbed her phone from her purse and started texting Sara. *Help! Stuck on a bus with freaks. Total, complete freaks.*

Kylie got a text message back from Sara almost immediately. *No, you*

help me. I think I'm pregnant.

Chapter Four

“Oh, shit.” Kylie stared at the text message thinking it would disappear, or that she’d see a “just joking” magically appear at the bottom. Nope. Nothing disappeared or appeared. This was no joke.

But please. Sara couldn’t be pregnant. That didn’t happen to girls like them. Smart girls ... girls that ... Oh, hell. What was she thinking? It happened to everyone and anyone having unprotected sex. Or sex with a faulty condom.

How could she forget that little film at school, the one Mom had to sign for her to see? Or the pamphlets Mom had brought home and unceremoniously left on Kylie’s pillow like a bedtime snack?

Talk about a mood killer. She’d arrived home from one of the hottest dates she’d had with Trey, wanting to enjoy the high from his hot kisses and bold caresses, only to find the statistics of unwanted pregnancies and equally unwanted sexually transmitted diseases waiting for her. And her mother knew Kylie always had to read herself to sleep. No sweet dreams that night.

“Bad news?” someone asked.

Kylie looked up to see Toad Girl sitting in the aisle seat across from her, her legs pulled up to her chest and her chin propped onto her knees.

“Uhh. Yeah ... no. I mean...” What she meant was it was none of her damn business, but being that blunt or rude never came easy for Kylie—well, not unless the person really pushed the wrong buttons—buttons that her mom seemed to know so well. Sara called Kylie’s unwillingness to state her mind the “too nice” disease. Her mom would have called it manners, but because

her mom excelled at hitting Kylie's buttons, her mom considered Kylie lacking in the manners department.

Kylie pulled her phone closed just in case Toad Girl might have super twenty-twenty eyesight. Then again, she guessed the person she should worry about having super eyesight was the blond guy, with his ... She cut her gaze to where he sat and found him staring at her with ... blue eyes. O ... kay, at least one thing was clear, it couldn't get any weirder.

"It's nothing really," she said, forcing herself to look back at the Toad Girl and not stare at her multicolored hair. The bus came to a quick stop and Kylie's suitcase dropped to the floor. Aware that the blond guy still stared, and afraid he might take the empty seat as an invitation to come sit beside her, she moved over.

"My name's Miranda," the girl said, and smiled, and Kylie realized that other than her hair and her pet toad, the girl looked pretty normal.

Kylie introduced herself, giving the floor a quick check to confirm the toad hadn't decided to visit.

"Is this your first time at Shadow Falls?" Miranda asked.

Kylie nodded. "Yours?" she asked out of politeness, then she looked down at her phone, still clutched to her stomach. She needed to text Sara back and say ... oh heck, what was she going to say to Sara? What did you say to your best friend who just told you that she might be ...

"My second time." Miranda pulled her hair up and bunched it on top of her head. "Though I don't know why they want me to come back, it's not like it helped me the first time."

Kylie stopped trying to mentally write the text and met the girl's hazel eyes—eyes that hadn't changed colors once—and curiosity had Kylie almost stuttering. "What ... what's it like? The camp, I mean. Tell me it's not too bad."

"It's not terrible." She released her hair and it fell into waves of black, lime green, and pink around her head. Then she glanced to the back of the bus where the pale chick now sat up and leaned forward as if listening. "If you don't mind the sight of blood," she whispered.

Kylie chuckled, hoping beyond hope that Miranda would, too. But nope. Miranda didn't even smile.

"You're joking, right?" Kylie's heart did a cartwheel in her chest.

"No," she said in a completely unjoking manner. "But I'm probably exaggerating."

A loud clearing of a throat echoed in the bus. Kylie looked up to the front to where the bus driver stared into the big mirror. Oddly, Kylie felt as if she stared right at Miranda and her.

"Stop that," Miranda hissed in a low voice, and clapped her hands over her ears. "I didn't invite you in."

"Stop what?" Kylie asked, but the girl's odd behavior had Kylie shifting farther away. "Invite me where?"

Miranda didn't answer; she frowned up at the front of the bus and then bounced back into her seat.

That's when Kylie realized she'd been wrong. Wrong about the fact that it couldn't get any weirder.

It could, and it did.

Not terrible. If you don't mind the sight of blood. Miranda's words played like scary music in Kylie's head. Okay, the girl admitted to exaggerating things, but come on, losing even a little blood was too much. *What kind of hellhole had her mother sent her to?* she asked herself for what was probably the hundredth time since she'd gotten on the bus.

Right then Kylie's phone buzzed with an incoming text. Sara again. *Please don't tell me ... u told me so.*

Kylie pushed her own problems aside to think about her best friend. They may have had a rough few months, but they had been best friends since fifth grade. Sara needed her.

Kylie started texting. *OMG, wouldn't say that. Don't no what 2 say. R U OK?? Do ur parents no? Do you no who the father is?* Kylie deleted the last question. Of course Sara knew who the father was. It had to be one of three guys, right? Unless Sara hadn't been honest about what she'd done on the dates with her two last guys.

Oh, God, Kylie's heart went out to her best friend. Even considering Kylie's terrible circumstances of her parents' divorce, Nana's death, and being sent to "bloody" Shadow Falls Camp with some very strange people, Sara had it worse.

In two months, no matter how bad things were, Kylie would go home. By then, she'd hopefully have gotten over the shock of losing her dad, and Nana. And maybe over the summer, Soldier Dude would lose interest in her and disappear permanently. But in two months, Sara would have a belly the size of a basketball.

Right then, Kylie wondered if Sara would even go back to school. God, Sara would be so embarrassed. To Sara, fitting in was ... everything. If blue eye shadow was the rave, you can bet Sara would have blue eye shadow before the week was out. Heck, she'd missed nearly a week of school when she got a big pimple on the end of her nose. Not that Kylie liked going to school with a big zit, but duh, everyone got a pimple every now and then.

But not everyone got pregnant.

Kylie could only imagine what Sara was going through.

Kylie reread her text, added a little heart, and hit send. As she waited for Sara to text back, Kylie realized she'd never been happier than right now that she hadn't given in to Trey.

* * *

"Ten minutes for bathroom breaks," the bus driver said.

Kylie looked up from the phone to the convenience store. She didn't have to go, but considering she wasn't exactly sure how much longer the ride would be, she dropped her phone in her purse and stood up in the aisle to follow the others off the bus.

She'd taken two steps when someone wrapped a hand around her arm. A very cold hand. Kylie jumped and swung around.

The pale girl stared at her. Or at least she assumed she stared at her. With her almost-black sunglasses, Kylie couldn't be sure.

“You’re warm,” she said as if surprised.

Kylie pulled her arm away. “And you’re cold.”

“Nine minutes,” said the bus driver firmly, and motioned Kylie forward.

She turned around and walked out of the bus, but she felt Pale Girl’s stare bore into the back of her. Freaks. She was stuck with freaks all summer. Cold freaks. She touched her arm where the girl had held her and could swear she still felt the chill.

Five minutes later, bladder empty, she started back to the bus and saw a couple of the other kids paying for drinks. Goth Girl looked over at her from the front of the line. Then the boy with all the piercing who’d sat at the front of the bus walked past Kylie without saying a word. Deciding to grab some gum, she found her favorite grape flavor and went to stand in line. When she felt someone step behind her, she looked back to see if it was Pale Girl again. Nope, it was the boy from the back of the bus, the one with soft green eyes and brown hair. The one who reminded her of Trey.

Their gazes met.

And held.

She wasn’t sure why he reminded her of Trey. Sure, their eyes were similar but it was more than that. Maybe it was the way his shirt fit across his shoulders, and the certain air of ... distance. Trey hadn’t been the easiest person to get to know. If they hadn’t been assigned as lab partners in science class, she didn’t know if they’d ever have gone out.

Yup, something about this guy seemed hard to get to know, too. Especially when he didn’t even speak. She started to swing back around when he raised his eyebrows in some kind of weak greeting. Taking his lead, she raised her own brows at him and *then* turned around.

When she faced forward, she saw Miranda and Pale Girl talking by the door and they were both looking right at her.

So, they were now ganging up on her, were they?

“Great,” she muttered.

“They’re just curious,” the deep voice whispered so close to her ear that she felt the warmth of his words against her neck.

She looked over her shoulder at him. This close, she could really see his eyes, and she realized she'd been wrong. These weren't Trey's eyes. This guy had flecks of gold around his pupils.

"About what?" she asked, trying not to stare.

"You, they're curious about you. Maybe if you opened up a little..."

"Open up?" Okay, that annoyed her. She'd been giving him the benefit of the doubt about being the normal one, but not if he was going to start acting as if she was being the unfriendly one. "The only ones who spoke to me were the blond guy and Miranda, and the other one, and I talked to all of them."

He quirked the other eyebrow at her. And for some reason that pushed her button. "Do you have a nervous twitch or something?" she asked, and then bit her tongue. Maybe she was overcoming the too-nice disease. Sara would be proud. Her mom ... well, not so much.

Her mom.

Just like that, the image of her mom standing there in that parking lot filled Kylie's mind.

"You don't know ... do you?" the boy asked, and his eyes widened, his gold flecks seemed to sparkle.

"Know what?" she asked, but her mind seemed stuck on her mom. On the fact that she hadn't even hugged her good-bye. Why had Mom done this to her? Why had her parents decided to split? Why did any of this have to happen? The familiar knot, the need-to-cry knot, formed in her throat.

He looked over at the door and when Kylie followed his gaze, Miranda and Pale Girl were still there. Had all three of them gone to the camp before and they were like buddies and she was the new kid on the block? The new kid they'd decided to pick on?

The lady behind the counter spoke up. "Hey, you wanna pay for that gum?"

Kylie looked back at the cashier. She dropped a couple of bucks on the counter and left without getting her change. She brushed past Miranda and the other girl with her chin held high and without blinking. She dared not blink for fear the flutter of her eyelashes would bring on tears.

Not that their snotty attitudes made her want to cry. It was her mom, her dad, Nana, Trey, Soldier Dude, and now even her concern for Sara. Kylie couldn't care less if these weirdoes liked her or not.

Chapter Five

An hour later, the bus pulled into a parking lot. Kylie had seen the Shadow Falls Camp sign posted in front. A wiggle of fear stirred in her stomach. She shifted her gaze around, almost surprised the place didn't have a high fence and a locked gate. They were, after all, considered to be "troubled" teens.

Kylie heard the bus engine rumble to a stop. The bus driver jumped down from the seat and stretched her little chubby arms up over her head. Kylie *still* didn't know how she reached the gas pedals.

"We're the last bus to arrive, guys," she said. "Everyone is waiting in the mess hall. Leave your things in the bus and someone will bring them to your cabins later."

Kylie looked at her suitcase. She hadn't put a tag on it. How would they know it was her suitcase? Easy—they wouldn't. Great, she could take the luggage with her and risk getting in trouble for not following the rules, or leave it and risk losing all her clothes.

She was not going to lose her clothes. She reached for her suitcase. "They'll bring it to you," Miranda said.

"It doesn't have my name on it," Kylie replied, trying to keep the sharpness from her tone.

"They'll figure it out. I promise," she said as if trying to be nice.

But was Kylie going to believe her? *No*.

Suddenly, the green-eyed Trey lookalike moved into the aisle. "Believe her," he said.

Kylie looked at him. While she didn't trust Miranda, there was something

about this guy she believed. While standing there, he reached in his pocket and pulled out some money and dropped it in her hands.

“Excuse me,” Goth Girl, said, and pushed past Miranda.

Kylie stared at the dollar and few coins.

“It’s your change from the store.” He motioned for her to step into the aisle.

She dropped the money into her purse and started out. His footsteps dogged hers. She felt him behind her. Felt him lean in a little closer, his shoulder brushing against her back.

“My name’s Derek, by the way.”

Caught up in listening to his deep voice and feeling Derek behind her, she didn’t see Blond Boy jump out into the aisle. In mid-step motion, Kylie had one of two choices. Plow into Blondie or fall back into Derek. An easy decision. Derek’s hands caught her by the upper forearms. His fingers pressed against her bare skin where her sleeves ended.

She looked up over her shoulder and their gazes met.

He smiled. “You okay?”

Amazing smile. Like Trey’s. Her heart did a little jump. God, she missed Trey.

“Yeah.” She pulled away, but not before noting Derek’s warm touch. Why that seemed important she didn’t know, but the pale girl’s coldness had left an equally odd impression.

They moved out of the bus and made their way into a large cabin-like structure. Right before Kylie entered the door, she heard a strange kind of roar. Like a lion. She paused to see if she heard it again, and Derek bumped into her. “We’d better move inside,” he whispered.

Kylie’s stomach fluttered with fear. As she took that first step over the threshold, she somehow sensed her life would forever be changed.

About fifty or sixty people filled the huge dining hall that had large picnic tables running parallel to each other, and the air smelled like pork-n-beans and grilled hamburgers. Some of the kids were sitting, others were standing.

Something felt off, odd. It took her a minute to realize what it was.

Silence. No one spoke. If this was the school's lunch room, she probably wouldn't be able to hear herself think. And that's what everyone appeared to be doing right now. Thinking.

A quick sweep of the crowd had Kylie once again feeling as if she didn't belong here. There was a large amount of what Kylie's mom would call "rebellion evidence." Sure, Kylie rebelled. But she guessed she did her thing in less noticeable ways, not so much with her clothes and such, but in her surroundings. Like the time she and Sara had painted her room purple without permission. Her mom had freaked.

These kids, they didn't just paint their rooms, they wore their rebellion boldly. Like Miranda's hair or that other kid on the bus who had nose rings and piercings. As Kylie's gaze shifted around, she noticed a couple of kids had tattoos or shaved heads. And there were tons more goth-dressed kids. Black obviously had not gone out of style with troubled kids.

Uneasiness started crawling on Kylie's skin. Maybe she had hung out with Sara too long, but it seemed evident that she didn't fit in. But unlike Sara, Kylie wasn't so eager to become one with this crowd.

Two months. Two months. She repeated the words like a litany in her head. In two months, she'd be out of here.

Kylie followed Blond Boy to an empty table in the back. And when she got there, she realized all her bus companions had hung together. Not that she felt as if she belonged with them, she hadn't even had eye contact with some of them, but face it, a known freak was better than an unknown one.

Suddenly, Kylie started feeling people turn and look at her. Or were they looking at all of them? The new kids were on display. The crowd's gazes became a collage of cold stares with different-colored eyes, but similar expressions and a lot of eyebrow twitching.

Weirded out to the max, she looked at Derek, then Miranda and even Pale Girl and Blond Boy, and damn it if they were doing it, too. The eyebrow thing. It wasn't cartoonish, and not as noticeable as Sara's whole roll your eyes and pucker your brows kind of thing, but just a little twitch.

Like Derek had done back at the convenience store.

What was it with the eyebrows?

Looking back into the crowd, fighting the urge to look down at her shoes, she forced herself to hold their gazes. Face it, she didn't want to be the chicken of the bunch. The one everyone picked on. And if that made her like Sara, so be it.

"Looks as if we are all here," a female voice said from the front.

Kylie tried to find the face behind the voice, but her gaze clashed with another stare—a cold, bright blue-eyed stare that somehow stood out from the rest. Pulling her attention away from just the eyes, Kylie noticed the boy's jet-black hair. And just like that, she remembered.

She remembered him.

She remembered ... her cat.

"It can't be," she muttered under her breath.

"What can't be?" Derek asked.

"Nothing." Kylie forced her gaze to the front where the woman spoke in a singsong type of voice.

"Welcome to Shadow Falls Camp. We are..."

The woman, probably mid-twenties, had long red hair that hung almost to her waist. She wore jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt. Standing beside her was another woman about the same age, but good God, she wore goth. All black, even her eyes appeared black. Somebody really needed to subscribe to a fashion magazine or two.

Kylie looked over at Goth Girl who'd been on her bus. The girl stared at the woman with a sense of admiration.

"My name is Holiday Brandon and this is Sky Peacemaker."

Right then the cabin door opened and a couple of men walked in. They looked like lawyers, or some other serious type of profession that demanded they wear matching black suits.

Kylie watched the two women up front shift their gazes to the visitors and frown. She got the feeling the two men weren't expected. That they were even unwelcome.

Sky, the goth leader, walked over and led the men outside and Holiday

continued. “Okay,” the singsong voice said. “First we’re breaking down into newbies and returnees. Everyone who has been here before will move outside. You’ll find some helpers out there with your schedules and cabin assignments. As always, the rules of this place are posted in your cabins. We expect you to read them. And let me make something clear right now, we’re not going to rearrange cabin assignments. You are here to get along, and get along you will. If a serious problem arises, bring it to the attention of either myself or Sky and we’ll discuss it, but not until after twenty-four hours. Any questions?”

Someone in the front raised a hand. “Yeah,” the female voice echoed in the room. “I have a question.”

Kylie leaned to the right to see the girl. The girl, another goth-dressed individual, turned around. “It doesn’t have anything to do with the rules, but ... I want to know, who the hell is she?”

The girl pointed—pointed right at the table where Kylie stood. Or was she pointing right at Kylie? No, she couldn’t be.

Oh, damn. She was. She was pointing *at* Kylie. “Crap,” she muttered when about sixty pair of eyes all turned and focused directly on her.

Chapter Six

“Relax,” Derek said in a voice so low she was certain no one else heard it. And she could barely hear him thanks to the thumping of her own heart.

“Introductions will happen over lunch,” a female voice said. Kylie thought it was Holiday again, but she couldn’t be sure. They all continued to stare. Stare at her. Her mind raced and her heart pounded. Gushing sounds echoed in her ears.

Tearing her gaze away, she eyed the door and fought the urge to run. Run fast and run hard. But face it, she’d never been a good runner, and too many freaks stood between her and the door. Then, oddly, she remembered something she’d learned about wild animals. If you run, they think you’re dinner and will chase you.

Oh, double crap. Okay, deep breath. Then another one. Her lungs expanded. These weren’t wild animals, just weird-ass teenagers.

Right then, Kylie’s phone beeped with another incoming text. Probably Sara. Kylie ignored it. And for the first time, Kylie decided she possibly could have been wrong about Sara’s situation being more difficult than her own. She wasn’t a hundred percent certain of that, but something deep in her gut said this wasn’t just about her going to Mark Jameson’s party.

But what else could it be about?

And why? Why of all the freaks in the room had she been singled out? Was it because she didn’t twitch her eyebrows? Oh, she could twitch her brows as good as the next person. And darn if she wouldn’t be practicing that as soon as she got alone. Problem was, she just didn’t understand the whole

twitching thing. Was it the Shadow Falls Camp version of a secret handshake?

“Come on. Let’s get things moving,” the singsong voice said again. “Returnees, outside. Newbies, hang right here.”

Kylie experienced the tiniest bit of relief when the crowd stopped staring and started shuffling around, reaching for purses and backpacks. Or at least most of them stopped staring. Kylie looked over to the right and saw the black-haired boy with bright blue eyes standing there, his gaze locked on her. *Lucas Parker*. She recalled his name, even though it had been a long time since she’d seen him.

I’m glad they left, she recalled her dad saying. *Take my word on it, that kid is going to grow up to be a serial killer*. Kylie felt a fist wrap around her heart and squeeze. Was she really at a camp with a possible serial killer?

Could it really be him? Of course, she could be wrong. It had been, gosh, over ten years. Chills tiptoed up her spine, and then he turned and moved into the flow of other returnees out the door.

Kylie saw Miranda take a few steps. She stopped in front of Kylie and said, “Good luck.” Kylie couldn’t tell if the girl was being a smartass or serious, so she just nodded.

The blond boy stepped behind Miranda and grinned at Kylie. “Wouldn’t want to be you,” he said as if joking, then he followed Miranda out.

Knees locked so she wouldn’t crumble, Kylie came to her senses long enough to realize that at least half the crowd had gone. And of her bus buddies, the only ones remaining were Pale Girl, Goth Girl, Derek, and the guy with all the piercings.

“Okay,” Holiday said. “Now, what I want is for all of you who know why you’re here, to move to the far left. All of you who don’t, move to the far right.”

Kylie remembered her feeling that this was about more than her trip to the police station and started to move to the right, but she noticed everyone shifting to the left. Not wanting to be singled out any more than she already had been, she went to stand beside Derek.

He shot her a look of disbelief. Deciding to practice the whole eyebrow thing, she crinkled her forehead.

When she looked over, only four people stood on the right side of the room. One of them was the pierced boy from her bus.

Holiday looked at both groups and Sky walked in and stood beside the redheaded leader. “Okay, righties, come with me. Sky is going to talk to everyone else.” Holiday started out, then stopped and glanced back over her shoulder. Her gaze slapped right into Kylie. “Come with us, Kylie.”

Shocked the women knew her name, she shook her head. “I know why I’m here,” she lied.

“Really?” asked Holiday.

Deciding to take a stab at it, she said, “I got caught at a party where drugs were found.”

A few snickers filled Kylie’s ears.

Holiday frowned at the snickerers and motioned Kylie forward.

“Is it because my parents are getting a divorce?” she asked, feeling desperate.

Holiday didn’t say anything, but then she didn’t have to. The look she shot Kylie reminded her of her mom’s don’t-go-there stare. And the one time Kylie had gone there, she’d been grounded for a month. So Kylie followed Holiday and the four others out of the dining hall.

When they walked past the crowd standing outside, Kylie felt all the eyes turn toward her. Miranda nodded and mouthed the words “good luck.” For some reason, Kylie suspected the girl’s intentions were genuine.

Then Kylie spotted Lucas Parker standing beside the goth girl who’d raised her hand and asked about Kylie in the big meeting. They had their heads together, whispering, and they both stared at Kylie as if she didn’t belong there. And damn if Kylie didn’t agree with them. That’s when Kylie realized that Lucas was dressed goth, too. Or at least he wore a black T-shirt. Of course, he looked really good in that shirt. It fit his upper torso—his very lean yet muscular upper torso—like a glove. So unfair, how guys didn’t have to follow any fashion guidelines to look good.

Realizing she was staring at the guy's abs, and that the goth chick was smirking at her, Kylie turned away and pretended she hadn't noticed the girl's rude expression. Now if she could just pretend none of this was happening. Right then the pierced guy fell into step beside Kylie. She glanced at him and tried to smile. They might be strangers, but at least they'd ridden the same bus and he seemed just as clueless as she was.

He leaned in. "You wouldn't have brought any drugs with you, would you?"

Kylie's jaw dropped open in shock and mortification. *Just shoot me now.* Friggin' great. Thanks to her little slip in the dining room, everyone now considered her a druggie.

* * *

Holiday, her red hair flowing down her back, led them into a smaller cabin with a tin roof, located right behind the dining hall. From the wooden-plank porch hung a sign that read CAMP OFFICE. Kylie and the other four followed her to a back room that looked like a classroom.

"Have a seat, guys." Holiday leaned against the desk in the front as she waited for everyone to settle in.

Kylie felt the woman's gaze on her every few seconds as if she thought Kylie might try to bolt. Much to Holiday's credit, the idea had crossed Kylie's mind more than once. Hence the reason she chose the desk closest to the door.

Yet something kept Kylie from running, something besides the fact that she had never excelled at the fifty-yard dash. Something more than fear of being caught trying to escape.

Curiosity.

For an unknown reason, Kylie sensed that whatever Holiday had to say, it was going to explain things. And Kylie desperately wanted an explanation.

"Okay," Holiday said, and offered everyone what appeared to be a relax-everything-is-cool kind of a smile. Nevertheless, it was going take more than

a smile to convince Kylie.

“What I have to say is going to be a relief to most of you, because deep down you’ve known that something was ... different. Some of you have known it all your life, some of you have only recently come upon your destiny, but either way, this is probably going to be a shock.” Holiday’s gaze shifted to Kylie. “You guys are here because you are special. Gifted.”

Holiday paused and Kylie waited for someone to ask the question, and when no one did, she blurted it out. “Define special.”

“We’ve all read about the supernaturals, thing of legends, and from childhood, we’re taught that they don’t exist. The truth is that they do exist. Not everyone in the world is alike. And some of us are a lot more different than others. Some of us were born like this, some of us were changed. But no matter how this happened to you, if you are here it is because this is your destiny. It was chosen for you.”

“Wait a minute,” Kylie said before she could stop herself. “What are ... I mean, are you saying that ... that things like ... like—”

“Vampires exist?” Pierced Guy asked. “Oh, shit. I knew I wasn’t crazy. That’s why I got really sick.”

Kylie had to swallow to keep from laughing. She’d been about to say things like angels, but this was ... it was stupid. The boy had obviously done too many drugs. Everyone knew that ... that vampires and crap like that didn’t exist.

She waited for Holiday to correct the guy. And then waited some more. During that second delay, Kylie remembered how cold Pale Girl’s touch had been. She remembered Blond Boy’s ever changing eye color, she remembered Miranda’s disappearing toad. No. She refused to let herself start to ...

“That’s right, Jonathon,” Holiday said. “They exist. And yes, you were turned last week.”

“I knew they weren’t just dreams,” said the other girl. “The wolf I dreamed of. It was real.”

Holiday nodded.

“No.” Kylie held up her hand and shook her head so hard that blond hair brushed back and forth across her face. “I’m not going to believe this.”

Holiday met Kylie’s gaze. “I’m not surprised that it’s you, Kylie, who finds this the hardest to believe.”

“What am I?” blurted out the other sandy-haired girl.

What am I? The girl’s question vibrated in Kylie’s head. Not that she had the least bit of desire to ask it herself. She didn’t believe in this crap. *I do not believe.*

Holiday smiled at the girl and gave her a soft accepting look. “Your birth mother was fairy. You have healing gifts. And I know you have suspected this.”

The girl’s eyes widened with what appeared to be relief. “I healed my little sister, didn’t I? My parents thought I was crazy,” she said. “But I knew I’d done it. I felt it when it happened.”

Holiday gazed at her with sympathy. “That is sometimes the hardest part of this. Knowing what we know and not being able to share it with others. But very few ordinary humans can accept us for who we are. This is part of the reason you are here—to learn how to deal with your gifts and how to live in a normal world.”

Kylie’s mind raced. She recalled the strange things that had been happening—the return of her night terrors and ... Soldier Dude, the stalker that only Kylie seemed able to see. Panic started to unravel her logic. She closed her eyes and desperately tried to wake herself up. It had to be a dream.

“Kylie?” Holiday’s voice had her opening her eyes. “I know this is hard for you to accept.”

“It isn’t just hard. It’s impossible. I don’t believe—”

“But you are scared to ask, aren’t you? Scared to ask the reasons you are here, because deep down, you know you belong here.”

I know that neither my mom or dad want me. That’s why I’m here. “I shouldn’t be here,” Kylie snapped. “I haven’t been having dreams of wolves. I have night terrors. I’m hardly able to remember my dreams. I haven’t been bitten by a bat, and I haven’t healed anyone.”

“Vampires and werewolves are not the only supernaturals that exist.” Holiday paused and then pressed her palms together in front of her. “What do you want, Kylie? Proof?”

Chapter Seven

“Yeah, proof would be good,” Kylie said, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice. “But now you are going to tell me that you can’t give me that, right? You’re going to tell me some little speech about how I have to believe in it anyway, right?”

“No, actually, I planned on giving you the proof.” Holiday’s voice held an odd kind of calm that made Kylie take a deep breath. It also scared the bejeebies out of her. What if Holiday was telling the truth? What if ... Kylie recalled how cold the pale girl was on the bus. No way. She was not going to believe in this. Vampires and werewolves existed in fiction, not in real life.

The woman pulled a cell phone from her jeans and made a call. “Can you send Perry into the office classroom? Thanks.”

She placed the cell back in her pocket. “Now, all of you are welcome to stay and see this. Or if you’d like to go on out, each of you have a mentor waiting out front. They are here to answer your questions.”

Kylie watched them look among themselves and they all agreed to stay. It made her feel better knowing she wasn’t the only one having doubts about any of this.

After a few minutes, long minutes during which silence penetrated the room like a fog, she heard the sound of footsteps in the front of the cabin. The door opened, and the blond boy from her bus, the one with weird eyes, walked into the room.

“Hi, Perry. It’s good to see you again,” Holiday said with sincerity.

“It’s good to be back.” His gaze met Kylie’s and her breath caught when

she found herself staring at eyes so dark that they didn't appear human. Right then, his creepiness level moved up in leaps and bounds.

"It would make me very happy if you'd do the honor of showing us your special gift."

Those non-human eyes didn't shift from Kylie. Perry grinned. "So you have some non-believers, do you?" Turning his head, he focused on Holiday. "What would you like to see?"

"Why don't we let Kylie decide?" Holiday looked at her. "Kylie, this is Perry Gomez, he's a very gifted shape-shifter, one of the most powerful ones there are. He can probably become anything you can imagine. So why don't you tell him what you'd like to see him become?"

Kylie kept moving her gaze between Holiday and Perry. Realizing they waited for her to say something, she forced herself speak. "A ... unicorn."

"Unicorns don't exist," Perry said, his expression seeming to say he felt insulted by her choice.

"They used to," Holiday added, as if coming to Kylie's defense.

"No shit?" Perry asked. "They really existed?"

"No shit," Holiday repeated. "But we should work on our language." She smiled. "Just think of a horse with a horn. I know you can do it."

He nodded, then he pressed his palms together and Kylie saw his black eyes roll back into his head. The air in the room suddenly felt weak, as if something had sucked the oxygen out of it. Kylie stared at Perry even when everything inside her said not to. Right then her curiosity, her need to know evaporated into the not-so-breathable air. She'd never understood that saying, "Ignorance is bliss," until this moment. She wanted to remain ignorant. She didn't want to see, didn't want to believe.

But she did see.

She saw sparkles forming around his body—sparkles as if a bucket of floating glitter had been spilled around him, as if a thousand lights came on and reflected each miniscule piece of glitter. The hundreds of diamond-shaped twinkles swirled around him. Slowly the sparkles fell to the floor and left standing where Perry had once stood was a huge honking white unicorn

with a pink horn in the middle of its forehead.

Chapter Eight

The unicorn, aka Perry, swatted its tail back and forth, as if strutting its stuff, then swung around in Kylie's direction. The beast took two steps toward her, close enough she could have touched it if she'd been so inclined. But no inclination existed.

It reared its head, made a neighing noise, then one of its deep dark black eyes winked at her.

"Shit!"

"Damn!"

"Oh my God!"

"Holy cow!"

"Mo fo!"

Kylie wasn't sure who said what, one may have even leaked out of her mouth, for all five responses had shot through her addled brain. Taking in another gasp of air, she looked at Holiday, who stared at her with soft green eyes.

"It's okay," Holiday said. "Perry, change back now."

Kylie dropped her forehead against the flat, cool surface of her desk top and concentrated on breathing and *not* thinking. If she let herself think, she'd cry and the last thing she wanted to do in front of these people was show any sign of weakness. Hell, these freaks probably fed on weak people.

"You guys should leave now," Holiday's voice, now with an authoritarian tone, seemed to echo in the room, bouncing inside Kylie's head.

She counted to ten and then somehow managed to sit up. The desks

around her stood empty. Perry, back to his human form, and the others shuffled out of the room. Perry gave her a quick glance over his shoulder. His brown eyes, normal-looking eyes this time, almost appeared apologetic.

Remembering Holiday's order about leaving, Kylie forced herself to stand. If she could just get out of here, she might be able to find a secluded place where she could freak out in private. Where she could cry, and attempt to come to terms with ... No. Don't think yet. Not yet. She swallowed the few tears crawling up her throat and her sinuses stung.

"Where are you going?" Holiday asked.

Kylie looked back her. It hurt to talk around the knot of emotion lodged between her tonsils. "You said we should leave."

"They should leave. *You* need to stay."

"Why?" A watery film coated her vision and hopelessly, Kylie realized she couldn't stop it. The tears had arrived. *Why?* The one-word question plowed through her confused mind and morphed into dozens of questions. Why was any of this happening? Why was she being singled out again? Why did her mother not love her? Why did her dad turn his back on her? Why couldn't Trey give her a little more time? Why did all these freakish kids act as if she were the weirdo here?

She blinked back a few tears and dropped back into the seat. "Why?" she asked again. "Why am I here?"

Holiday sat in the desk beside her. "You're gifted, Kylie."

She shook her head. "I don't want to be special. I just want to be me—normal me. And ... and to be completely honest with you, I think there's been some huge mistake made here. You see, I'm not ... gifted. I ... I certainly can't turn myself into anything. I don't suck at anything, except maybe algebra. But I've never been great at things, either. Sports are so not my thing, and I'm not super talented or even the extra smart type. And believe it or not, I'm okay with that. I don't mind being just average ... or normal."

Holiday laughed. "There is no mistake, Kylie. However, I know exactly how you feel. I felt just like that when I was your age and especially when I

realized the truth.”

Kylie swiped at her face to hide the evidence of her tears and then forced herself to ask the question she’d been trying not to think about since the whole thing started. “What am I?”

Chapter Nine

“Can you handle the truth?” Holiday asked softly, her eyes filled with empathy.

Handle it? I just saw a boy turn himself into a unicorn. Can it get any worse?

Seconds after Kylie asked herself that, she got a chill. What if it could get worse? She recalled Holiday saying there were other types of supernaturals besides vampires and werewolves, which in Kylie’s mind had to be the worst kind of supernatural, not that she had expertise in the field or anything, but what if Holiday had only said that to calm her down? Would she have lied?

“Yes, I can handle it,” Kylie said, sounding braver than she felt.

But when Holiday opened her mouth to speak, Kylie blurted out, “No.” She dropped her face into her hands, then removed them and stared again at the redheaded camp leader. “I don’t know if I can handle it.”

How could she when it was just too much?

Kylie bit down on her bottom lip so hard it hurt. “I mean, if you are about to tell me something like I’m dead, that I need to start acquiring a taste for blood and I can’t even eat sushi, I won’t be able to handle it. Or if you’re going to tell me that I’m going to start howling at the moon, eating people’s cats, and will spend the rest of my life having to get waxed if I want to wear a bathing suit, then I don’t think I can handle it, either. I like cats and I tried waxing once, and that hurt like a son of a gun.” She dropped her hand between her legs, remembering.

Holiday laughed, but Kylie had been as serious as a heart attack. Waxing

had really hurt and she hadn't let Sara talk her into anything like that since.

"Do you think I can handle it?" Kylie asked, afraid of the answer.

"Honestly, I don't know you very well yet, but I trust Dr. Day's assessment of you."

Kylie blinked. "What does my shrink have to do with this?"

"Your shrink—as you call her—is the one who recommended you to us. She recognized your gifts, she's half fairy, you know."

Kylie tried to process that information. "I'm here because of her? That woman is..." Kylie leaned closer, almost as if whispering might make it less of an insult. "She's a few fries short of a Happy Meal." Kylie dropped her hands on the desk. "I wouldn't lie to you. She's a flake."

Holiday frowned. "Unfortunately, all supernaturals come off a bit flaky when viewed from the normal prospective. She spoke very highly of you."

Kylie felt a little guilty then, which she suspected had been the camp leader's intent.

Holiday dropped her palms on top of Kylie's hands. "I won't lie to you, either, Kylie. The truth ... the truth is, we don't know what you are."

Kylie sat up a little straighter, chewing on that bit of information, and Holiday sat quietly as if allowing Kylie the time to adjust. Not that Kylie was adjusting. Oh, hell no. She was working on finding a positive slant to all of this. "Don't you see? That's because I'm not anything. I'm just me. Normal me."

The woman shook her head. "You have gifts, Kylie. Those gifts could have come from various supernatural forms and almost always they are hereditary."

"Hereditary? Neither of my parents are ... supernaturals."

Holiday didn't look convinced. "In rare cases, it could skip a generation. It could be fairy, it could be you are a descendent of one of the gods. It could be—"

"Gods? Gifts? What gifts?"

Holiday cleared her throat, and her eyes met Kylie's with empathy. "You can talk to the dead—sometimes in your sleep. Other times when you're

awake.”

Warmth spread into the top of Kylie’s hands, but cold spread into her heart. “The dead?” Her mind started filtering through images, all of them Soldier Dude, since she couldn’t recall anything from her night terrors.

“No, you’re wrong. I never talked to them. Never, ever. Not one word. Mom taught me to never talk to strangers, and I’ve lived by that.”

“But you’ve seen them, right?”

Tears welled up in Kylie’s eyes again. “Just one. And I’m not sure he’s a ghost. Sure, my mom didn’t see him, but my mom ... she’s always in her own little world.” But then there was her neighbor, the way she had walked right past Soldier Dude and never even glanced at him. *Oh damn. Damn.*

“It’s scary, I know,” Holiday said. “I remember when I first started experiencing it.”

Kylie pulled her hands out from under Holiday’s grasp. “You ... you have the same ... talent?”

Holiday nodded and looked over to the left.

Kylie gave the room a visual sweep. “But none are here now, right?”

Instantly, Kylie felt it. That cold ... the eerie in-the-bones kind of cold that she’d experienced so often lately.

“They are always here, Kylie. You’re just turning your mind off.”

“Can I do that?” Kylie asked. “Can I just turn my mind off permanently?”

Holiday hesitated. “Some people can, but this is a gift, Kylie. To not use this gift is a waste.”

“A waste? Oh no, I didn’t ask for this gift.” Her own words echoed inside her head and she realized she’d practically admitted that this was real. She didn’t want it to be real. Didn’t want to accept it or believe it. “I’m not sure I have this gift. I mean, I hear about normal people seeing ghosts all the time.”

Holiday nodded. “It’s true. Some ghosts accumulate enough energy that even a normal has been able to see them.”

“Then that’s what’s happening to me. I’m just dealing with a super-charged ghost. That’s it. Because I’m just normal.”

“The evidence says different.”

Her breath caught. “What evidence?”

Holiday stood up and motioned for Kylie to follow. Her knees felt weak when she stood, but she followed. Holiday spoke as she walked. “First, there’s the fact that you are unreadable.”

“Unreadable?” Kylie asked as they walked into a small office.

“All supernaturals have the ability to get a sneak peek into other minds. When reading a human, we see a similar pattern with everyone. When reading other supernaturals, we can generally sense what they are. Unless they are purposely blocking us out. Which most don’t do as a sort of courtesy to others.”

“Is that the eyebrow-twitching thing?” Kylie asked.

“You don’t miss much, do you?” Holiday smiled. “And the thing is that people with the gift of ghost whispering are often slow at reading others and are very difficult to read. We’re not being rude, but our minds function on a different plane than everyone else’s does. With practice, however, we can train ourselves to open up enough so that we aren’t coming off as holier than thou. Your pattern, and the fact that you are unreadable tells me that you are more than human. And then there’s this evidence.” The camp leader pulled out a file drawer. She drew a piece of paper out of a file with Kylie’s name on it and placed that paper in Kylie’s hands.

Kylie looked at the copy of her birth certificate. Nowhere on the document did it say anything about her being supernatural or about her seeing ghosts. She glanced up at Holiday with questions running through her mind.

Holiday must have either read her thoughts, or her expression, because she answered, “You were born at midnight, Kylie.”

“So? Why is that supposed to mean something?”

Holiday ran her finger over all the files. “Everyone here was born at midnight.”

Kylie’s heart thumped a little harder. She watched Holiday’s red-painted fingernail move over the file tabs where the names appeared in bold type. None of the names meant anything to Kylie until her gaze found one that did.

Lucas Parker.

Not that he mattered. His name only leapt out at her because it was one of the few familiar things here. Another sweep of icy emotion tiptoed up her spine.

Kylie swung around and her breath caught when she saw him. Not Lucas, but Soldier Dude. And he just stood there, closer than ever before, and stared at her with his cold, dead eyes.

* * *

Less than ten minutes later, Kylie sat at a lunch table.

Alone.

Only her, Holiday, the other camp leader, and the two men, occupied the dining hall.

Every few minutes, Kylie's mind would try to wrap around everything that had happened—everything from the unicorn to her not being human. But her mind wasn't in a wrapping mood.

Deny it. Deny it. The words played like a song in her head.

The sound of the voices in the front of the dining hall brought Kylie's gaze up. Holiday had received a call from Sky, and because it was almost lunch time anyway, Holiday had told Kylie to just come with her and she'd show her to her cabin after lunch.

Holiday's gaze shifted to Kylie. Kylie stared at her phone, pretending she didn't feel uncomfortable, while Holiday and the other camp leader, Sky, stood at the front with the two black suits who had dropped in earlier.

Kylie couldn't hear the conversation, but whatever it was, she could tell it wasn't good. She peered up between her lashes again. Holiday and Sky were frowning. Holiday seemed the most anxious of the two, tapping her foot and twirling her hair in a tight rope.

Then one of the men raised his hands in the air and spit out, "I'm not pointing fingers, but I'm telling you like it is. Get to the bottom of this and make it stop or I swear, higher-ups are going to shut the camp down."

Shut the camp down? Kylie lowered her gaze and pretended not to hear,

but she couldn't stop the hope from building in her chest. Ever since Holiday had left her alone at the table, Kylie had been tempted to call her parents and beg them to come get her.

Ah, but what would she tell them? *Hey, Mom, Dad, guess what? You sent me to camp with real freaks, a bunch of bloodsuckers and cat killers. And oh, I'm a freak, too, but they don't know what kind yet.*

Kylie's stomach clenched at the thought of how that conversation would turn out. Chances were her mom would yank her out of the camp and commit her to a psycho ward. Not that it would be worse than what she was in now.

Staring at her hands, Kylie remembered what Holiday had said about her gift being hereditary. Did her mom or dad see ghosts? Not her mom, otherwise she wouldn't have brought in the mental doctor the first time Kylie brought up Soldier Dude. And her dad would have told her if he had any special abilities, wouldn't he?

Not that Kylie had accepted that she had any gifts. It was still highly probable that Holiday was wrong about her being one of them. Maybe Soldier Dude was just a high-powered ghost, like Holiday said could happen. And surely there were normal people who were born at midnight, right?

Nevertheless, the idea of trying to tell her parents any of this seemed absurd. Seemed absurd? Who was she kidding? It was over-the-top completely one hundred percent crazy, and if she hadn't seen Perry change himself into a unicorn, she wouldn't have believed it, either.

The conversation up front got a little louder, but not as loud as before, not loud enough for Kylie to distinguish words. So she stared at her phone and pretended to read Sara's last text, but in truth, she'd already read it.

Her friend hadn't told her parents about her missed period, and as soon as Sara's mom left for her lunch appointment, Sara was going to the store to buy a pregnancy test. Sometime this afternoon, Sara would know if she was pregnant.

Kylie hadn't asked Sara about the father, she hadn't even asked Sara if she would consider an abortion. For some reason, Kylie didn't see Sara doing that. But six months ago, Kylie would have sworn that Sara would never find

herself pregnant, either.

Kylie let herself worry about Sara for a minute before she shifted back to her own issues. Like how she was going to survive the next two months. And by survive, she didn't mean just mentally. Vampires and werewolves killed people.

Only the bad ones, Holiday had explained on the walk over here when Kylie had almost jumped out of her skin anytime someone came close. Was Holiday certain that no bad ones were at the camp? Some of them had looked pretty grim to Kylie. Not that she considered herself an expert at distinguishing bad supernaturals from good ones. But in a way it sort of compared to how Kylie felt about snakes and spiders—there were good ones, and there were bad ones. But for safety's sake, she avoided all of them.

God, Kylie hoped she didn't get stuck rooming with any of them. Surely Holiday wouldn't expect her to sleep in a cabin with someone who ... who might be tempted to kill her while she slept. Then again ... Great, that meant she'd probably be sleeping with one eye open the entire two months.

The conversation between the two black-suited guys and the camp leaders came to an end and the two men started to leave. But one of them, the taller of the two, turned around and looked right at Kylie. And then he did it. He twitched his brows at her.

Kylie looked away, but she sensed him standing there in that same spot, still staring and twitching. She felt her cheeks heat up.

The door to the dining hall shut, but then she heard it open again. Kylie looked up and saw the other teens start to filter into the room. As each one entered, Kylie found herself guessing—fairy, witch, werewolf, vampire, or shape-shifter. Were there other kinds of supernaturals? She'd have to ask Holiday about the different types, like what “descended from the gods” meant.

Kylie started trying to put the types she did know into one of two groups: supernaturals who wouldn't consider a human a part of the food chain, and those who did.

Derek walked through that door and Kylie found herself curious about

what type of supernatural he was. He stopped a few feet in the room and looked around. The moment his eyes lit on her, she knew he'd found what he'd been looking for. He'd been looking for her. Even not knowing what he was, or exactly what group he belonged to, the thought that he liked her enough to look for her made her feel less lonely.

As he moved toward her, a very small smile appeared in his eyes, and she thought again about how he reminded her of Trey. Was that why she liked him, or at least liked him better than everyone else? Because he did look like Trey a little?

She'd have to be careful, she told herself, not to confuse familiarity for something more.

"Hey," he said as he sat down beside her. When she looked up at him, she realized her shoulder barely came to his mid-forearm. Which meant he was taller than Trey—probably by a couple of inches.

Kylie nodded and dropped her phone in her purse.

"So...?" he asked.

Kylie met his green eyes with flecks of gold. She knew exactly what that one-word question asked. He wanted to know what she was. She started to answer him, to tell him she didn't know what she was, just her gift, but she suddenly found she wasn't ready to say it aloud. To say it aloud meant she believed it. And she didn't, not yet.

"It's been a crazy morning," she said instead.

"I can imagine," he answered, and she sensed a bit of disappointment in him. He'd wanted her to trust him.

Good luck with that, Kylie thought. Between people dying on her—meaning Nana—people divorcing on her—meaning her parents—and people breaking up with her because she wouldn't put out—meaning Trey—her ability to trust anyone had taken a dive off some very high cliff. And it had landed on the bottom of some gully, a mangled mess, right beside her heart.

Miranda dropped down in the seat on the other side of Derek. "Hey..." She leaned over and looked at Kylie. "We're rooming together. Isn't that cool?"

“Yeah.” Kylie quickly tried to figure out exactly what Miranda was. She remembered the toad and for some reason guessed her to be a witch.

“I’m in with you guys, too,” someone else said, and sat down on the other side of Kylie.

Kylie turned and found herself staring at her own reflection in Pale Girl’s dark shades.

Chills ran up Kylie’s spine. Kylie didn’t know if she was a werewolf or a vampire, but something told her she was one of the two. Which basically meant, she fell into the humans-are-on-the-food-chain group.

The girl lowered her glasses, and Kylie got a look at her eyes for the first time. They were black and slightly slanted, exotic, as if she was part Asian. “My name’s Della ... Della Tsang.”

“Uh ... Kylie Galen,” she managed to say, hoping her hesitation didn’t come off as fear. But it was fear and Kylie couldn’t deny that.

“So Kylie,” Della said, pulling her glasses down another inch, “do tell. Exactly *what* are you?”

Was it her imagination that at least a dozen other teens turned and looked toward their table? Did they have super hearing? Kylie’s phone buzzed. “Uh, I should ... take this.”

She grabbed her phone from her purse, stood up, and went to stand in the corner, away from everyone.

Glancing at the screen to see who to throw handfuls of praise to for calling at the right moment, Kylie’s heart did a tug. She’d expected it to be Sara, maybe her mom or dad. She hadn’t expected it to be Trey.

Chapter Ten

“Hello?” she answered hesitantly, and her chest immediately filled with a familiar kind of missing-Trey achiness that until she saw him at the party had almost disappeared. Almost.

“Kylie?” The deep sound of his voice did another pull on her emotions.

She swallowed a knot down her throat and visualized him in her mind—his green eyes staring at her like he did when they made out. “Yes?”

“It’s Trey.”

“I know,” she answered, and closed her eyes. “Why are you calling me?”

“Do I need a reason?”

Since you’re sleeping with some other girl, you do. “We’re not together anymore, Trey.”

“And maybe that’s a mistake,” he said. “I can’t stop thinking about you since I saw you at the party.”

She’d bet he stopped thinking about her when he got his new bang toy alone that night. Lucky for them, they’d left about fifteen minutes before the cops had arrived. So while Kylie had been sitting at the police station, Trey had probably been expanding on his luck by getting lucky with his new girlfriend.

“Sara told me that you were at some camp in Fallen,” he said when she didn’t say anything. “She said your mom sent you there because of the party.”

“Yeah,” she answered, even though she realized it wasn’t the whole truth. But she couldn’t tell Trey the truth. Not even part of the truth. That’s when it

hit her, how many lies she'd have to tell everyone she knew. That's when she realized something else. Her mom hadn't been lying when she'd said Dr. Day had convinced her that Kylie needed to come here. Maybe her mom hadn't wanted to get rid of Kylie as badly as she thought. That should have made her feel better, but the achiness in her chest grew.

She missed her mom. She missed her dad. She wanted to go home. The gonna-cry knot formed in her throat and she swallowed it.

"Are you allowed to get phone calls?" Trey asked, his voice bringing her back to the moment and away from her thoughts.

Allowed? Kylie hadn't considered that. "I think so. No one's told me I couldn't." But she hadn't read the rules that were supposed to be posted in her cabin, either. Not that it was her fault; she hadn't been allowed to go to her cabin yet.

She looked up to see if anyone else was on a phone. She spotted two people talking and two more texting. One of the texting kids was Jonathon, aka Piercing Guy, who stood with two other guys. Beside them stood Goth Girl, who hung with a crowd of other goths.

Kylie also spotted Lucas Parker. Not on the phone but talking to a group of girls that looked like his personal fan club. He was smiling at something someone said. And she could see the girls holding on to his every word, practically swooning all over him. Let them laugh and swoon, Kylie thought. He hadn't killed their cat.

"I'm going to a soccer camp in Fallen next week," Trey said, bringing her back to the conversation. "I thought maybe we could ... maybe we could find a way to get together. To talk. I miss you, Kylie."

"I thought you were with that girl, Shannon."

"We weren't ever really going out. But we're not seeing each other anymore. I could never talk to her."

But I'll bet you did other things. It hurt to remember how the girl had hung all over him at the party.

"Say you'll at least meet me," he said. "Please. I really miss you."

Her chest grew heavier. "I don't know if I can ... I mean, I don't know

how things are run here yet.”

“I think our camps are just a mile or so apart. It wouldn’t be hard for us to meet.”

She closed her eyes and thought how good it would be to see Trey. To see anyone she knew wasn’t a freak, but especially Trey. He had always been her go-to person when things bothered her. Which was why his breaking up with her had broken her heart.

“I can’t make any promises, not until I figure things out here.” Kylie looked up.

Holiday and Sky were moving to the front of the room. “Lunch is ready,” Sky said. “Let’s let the new people start first. And then we’ll jump into introductions.”

Introductions? The thought of having to talk to the group had butterflies nosediving in her stomach.

Kylie saw Derek turn and look at her as if wondering if she wanted to get in line together. She kind of liked the idea of standing beside him, instead of standing alone.

“I have to go, Trey,” she said.

“But Kylie—”

She hung up. She hadn’t done it to be mean, but the idea that he might feel a bit rejected didn’t bother her too much. Payback could be hell.

Derek stood up and waved her over. Yup, Derek was taller than Trey. Moving Derek’s way, Kylie tried not to flinch when Della joined them, and the three of them walked to the line together.

Della ended up behind Goth Girl from their bus and they started talking.

Derek turned and focused on Kylie.

“Boyfriend?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“The phone call?”

“Oh.” She shook her head. “Ex.” Instantly she remembered how several of the other kids had looked at her when Della had asked what she was. She leaned closer to Derek. “Could you hear me on the phone?” She lowered her

voice. "Could everyone hear me?"

"I couldn't. It was just ... your body language." He seemed to note how she looked out in the crowd. "But yes, some of the others have super hearing."

"But not you?" She hoped he would tell her what she wanted to know. That he'd tell her what he was.

"Not me," he said, and they moved a few steps forward. His arm brushed up against hers and for a second, she didn't know if she wanted to back away or lean closer. The fact that he wasn't cold seemed to make closer an option. When her arm met his again, something so comforting spread through her.

"So what are you?" she asked, and then bit her tongue. It wasn't fair for her to be asking questions that she herself didn't want to answer. "That's okay, you don't have to answer that."

She looked away, embarrassed, and listened to the chatter of the crowd. Unlike earlier, when silence had reigned, now if she tried really hard, she might convince herself that she was in a room filled with regular teens.

And that's when Kylie knew that she'd stopped trying to deny it.

Laughter along with a few of the more feminine squeals filled her ears. She should have found the "regular" thought comforting, but she couldn't push away the truth. The truth was none of these people were regular or normal.

Not even her.

That thought shot a wave of panic into her stomach and she wondered how in the hell she would manage to eat anything now.

"I'm half Fae." Derek's voice came close to her ear. The tickle of his breath sent flutters to her stomach. Not the kind that stemmed from fear, but something different. Pushing that aside, she tried to concentrate on what he said.

Fae? The synonym search in her brain started spinning through files until she recalled reading once that Fae was French for *fairy*.

Her mind started spitting out data. Holiday was fairy. Holiday had said Kylie might be fairy.

She turned and met his green eyes. In a voice so low it barely came out a whisper she asked, “Do you ... do you see ghosts?”

“Ghosts?” His eyes widened as if the question were unbelievable. But duh, how could that seem crazy when ... when ...

Her train of thought came to an abrupt halt when Kylie felt someone behind her. Her heart raced to a fast song and she feared it would be Soldier Dude. But the cold, the one she’d suddenly realized always came when he was near, didn’t seem to be present. She watched Derek’s gaze rise over her shoulder. He nodded.

She turned her head and her breath caught when she found herself staring into the light blue eyes of Lucas Parker.

“I think you lost this.” His voice reminded her of a radio announcer—deep with a rumbling quality that made it unique—memorable. A quality that made him sound older than he appeared.

Aware that she stared, she jerked her gaze to his hands where he held out her Coach billfold that her grandmother had splurged to get her last Christmas.

Immediately, Kylie looked back at the table where she’d left her purse. It sat on top just as she’d left it. How had he gotten her billfold?

She took her wallet from his hands and fought the temptation to make sure her mom’s credit card was still tucked safely inside. Her mom would be so pissed if she lost it.

Torn between doing the socially acceptable thing of saying thank you or questioning him on how he’d gotten his feline-murdering hands on her possession, her mind spun. Then because she mostly always did the socially acceptable thing, the two simple words, “thank you,” formed on her tongue, but she couldn’t spit them out.

She couldn’t help wondering if he remembered her. She couldn’t help noticing how his blue eyes seemed to look inside her, just as they had all those years ago. They hadn’t been friends, but neighbors for a very short time. He hadn’t even been in her grade. But they had to walk the same three blocks home from school every day, and she could remember that walk being

the best part of her day. From the first time she'd seen him riding his bike on her street, he had fascinated her in a mysterious kind of way.

And just like that, she remembered with clarity the last time she'd seen him. The sense of fascination shattered, leaving in its place a cold wind of fear.

She'd been sitting on a swing with her new kitten in her hands—the kitten her parents had given her because Socks had come up missing. Lucas's head had popped over the fence, and his blue eyes met hers. The kitten had hissed and scratched her, trying to run for cover. The boy stared and then said, *Be sure to take the kitten in the house at night. Or what happened to your other cat will happen to it.*

She'd run to her mother crying. That night her dad and mom had gone to talk to Lucas's parents.

Her parents hadn't told her what happened, but she recalled her daddy looking angry when they'd returned from the visit. Not that it mattered, because the next day Lucas Parker and his parents were gone.

"You're welcome," Lucas said, his deep rumble now slightly laced with sarcasm. Then he turned and walked away.

Oh, great. All she needed was to start making enemies of one of the humans-are-on-the-food-chain gang—especially one she knew was capable of doing despicable things. But face it, being nice to Lucas Parker was going to be hard. After all, he had killed her cat and threatened to do the same to her kitten.

Chapter Eleven

During lunch, the introductions proved to be as embarrassing as Kylie thought they would be. Everyone had said their name and “what” they were, but when her time came, she’d only offered her name. The silence in the room had felt suffocating in the seconds afterward. Holiday had jumped in and explained that the origin of Kylie’s powers was still being deciphered and that her “close-mindedness” was not intentional, but a product of her gifts.

If anyone in the room doubted that she was the freak of all the freaks, they had now been informed of the fact by the camp leader. Oh, Kylie suspected Holiday had been trying to help, but Kylie could have really done without it. Luckily, she had already managed to force down half a turkey sandwich because after that, there was no way she could swallow another bite.

Right after her embarrassing moment in the spotlight, Kylie’s phone rang. She saw her mom’s number on the call screen and turned the phone off. The last thing she wanted was for her conversation with her mom overheard by the super-hearing individuals.

As soon as the official lunch meeting ended, Kylie found Holiday to get her cabin directions. Dinner was set at six and until then, the afternoon was free. During downtime, mingling and getting to know your camp companions and cabin roomies was encouraged.

Instead, Kylie spent the four hours mingling with her emotional turmoil and hidden away in her closet of a bedroom. Hey, she understood the difference between “encouraged” and “required.”

Sitting up on the bed, she noticed again the size of her room. Not that she was complaining. The fact that she had her own room made the size a non-issue. Considering the night terrors that plagued her three or four nights a week, the privacy was much appreciated. She just hoped the walls were thick enough to contain what her mother called “bloodcurdling screams.” The walls at home sure as heck weren’t.

Biting down on her lip, Kylie wondered again how her mom could do this to her. Send her here when only a week ago, her mom had suggested she not spend the night off anywhere because it would be embarrassing for her to let others see her in a sleep-dazed terror.

Shaking off thoughts of her mom, Kylie looked around the room again. Her afternoon hadn’t been a total waste. She’d unpacked her things, called her mom—aka, the Ice Queen—back, tried to get in touch with a MIA Sara—who still hadn’t called or texted—read the camp rules, and indulged in a good ol’ fashioned meltdown with lots of tears.

A much-deserved meltdown.

For sixteen years she’d tried to figure out who she was. And while she’d always known she’d had a ways to go, she’d felt pretty confident in her discoveries. But today she realized not only was she wrong about who she was, but she didn’t even know *what* she was.

Talk about an identity crisis.

Her phone buzzed again. She looked at the caller ID and saw her dad’s name.

Her dad who’d left her.

Her dad who hadn’t picked her up at the police station.

Her dad who hadn’t visited her before she’d been forcibly shipped off to camp.

Her dad who obviously didn’t love her near as much as she’d thought he did.

Her dad who in spite of everything, Kylie missed with all her heart.

If that made her a daddy’s girl, so be it. Besides it was probably just a temporary condition. Sooner or later she’d give up loving him so much like

he'd given up on her. Right?

Her throat locked up. The temptation to answer and beg him to come get her was so strong that she tossed the phone onto the foot of the bed. She listened to the buzz and knew if she answered that call she'd tell him about supernaturals and about her being one of them—about running into Lucas Parker the potential serial killer.

Keeping secrets from her mom had always felt easy, because it seemed her mom kept her own secrets; but keeping things from her dad was algebra—damn hard.

So instead of taking the call, she plopped her head on the pillow and gave in to another bout of tears. When someone knocked on her bedroom door, Kylie still wore the watery evidence of tears on her cheeks.

Before Kylie could decide what to do, the door opened and a nose peeked through the crack. "Are you awake?"

Since Kylie sat up on the bed and saw Miranda's eyes right above the nose, Kylie didn't lie. "Yes."

Miranda stepped in—uninvited.

"Hey, I just..." Miranda's hazel gaze lit on Kylie's face and the girl's mouth dropped open.

Kylie knew exactly what had the little witch gaping. Kylie envied the girls who could cry and barely smear their mascara, but she lacked that particular skill. When Kylie cried, her fair skin broke out in big red dots and her eyes swelled so much that she didn't look human.

Wait. According to Holiday, Kylie wasn't human. Who knew?

"Are you okay?" Miranda asked.

"Fine." Kylie forced cheeriness into her voice. "Allergies."

"Should you go see a nurse? Seriously, you look terrible."

Thanks. "No. I'm fine. It'll go away in a bit."

"It's not contagious, is it?" Miranda stopped a few feet into the room.

"I sure as heck hope not," said a voice at the door. A voice that belonged to Della, who still wore her dark shades, and who Kylie had learned during the introductions was a vampire. Yup. A real vampire.

“I’m not contagious,” Kylie said, and realized she should have said yes so they’d leave her alone.

Miranda moved in and sat on the foot of the twin bed, and Della followed her but didn’t sit down. Instead, the girl removed her sunglasses and eyeballed Kylie up and down. Her dark expression reminded Kylie of a how a person on a diet stared at a Girl Scout cookie right before it became mouth mush.

Kylie’s skin crawled at the thought of becoming mush in anyone’s mouth.

“You are coming to dinner and the campfire, aren’t you?” Miranda asked.

“Is ... is it mandatory?” Kylie asked, hoping her reaction to Della didn’t show.

“Are you scared of me?” Della blurted out, axing all of Kylie’s hopes of hiding the fact that Della scared the pee out of her.

“Why ... why would I be scared of you?”

“Because I have sharp teeth?” She opened her mouth and exposed her pearly whites that did indeed showcase two sharp canines. “Because I might suck your blood out?”

It took effort not to cringe at Della’s words, especially when the girl ran her tongue over her lips.

“Quit teasing her.” Miranda laughed and rolled her eyes.

“That’s just it.” Della waved at Kylie. “Her heart is racing and her pulse is running off the chart. Look at the vein in her neck, it’s throbbing. I don’t think she knows I’m teasing.”

The fact that Della mentioned Kylie’s veins had her blood pumping harder. “Of course I do,” Kylie lied. “Holiday said everyone here was good ... people.”

“And you believed her?” Della’s black eyes accused Kylie of being dishonest.

Kylie decided right then that Della’s ability to read her vital signs surpassed her ability to lie. “I want to believe her. But I’ll admit it, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that ... that supernaturals exist.”

“But you’re a supernatural,” Miranda said. “How could you not know—”

“Holiday *thinks* I’m a supernatural.” Yeah, somewhere in the last few minutes Kylie had gone back to hoping Holiday’s analysis was meritless.

“You are a supernatural,” both Miranda and Della said at the same time, both their eyebrows twitching ever so slightly.

“Or at least, you aren’t all human,” Della said. “We can tell that by looking at your brain pattern.”

“And you guys are never wrong?” Kylie clutched her knees tighter to her chest.

“Everyone’s wrong once in a while,” Miranda said.

“But not very often,” Della added.

Nevertheless, their answer spurred Kylie’s hope. “But it does happen. Right?” The heaviness in her chest lightened.

“Yeah, there are the people with brain tumors,” Della added.

Kylie dropped her forehead on her knees. She was either a supernatural or dying of a brain tumor; she didn’t know which was worse.

“And a few whose brains are just loopy,” Miranda added.

Kylie raised her head. “Loopy?”

“Yeah, like a frog’s hair from being loco.”

“Then maybe I’m just loopy. I’ve been accused of that before.”

“No, wait,” Miranda said. “Didn’t Holiday mention you had gifts?” Miranda and Della both raised inquisitive eyebrows.

Kylie shrugged. “Yeah, but that could just be because I’m dealing with a super-charged ghost.”

“Ghost?” Miranda and Della said in unison.

Kylie could be wrong, but both girls looked appalled and scared. Their shock reminded her of Derek’s reaction earlier when she’d asked if he could see ghosts.

“You can see the dead?” Della stepped back from the bed. “Oh, hell. I do not want to room with someone who has ghosts hanging around. That’s too freaky.”

Even Miranda popped up off the foot of the bed. Kylie stared at them, completely befuddled. “You’re joking right? You two are scared of me?”

You're a witch." She pointed at Miranda. "And you're a vampire." She wagged her finger at Della. "And ya'll are calling me"—she poked herself in the chest—"freaky?"

Miranda and Della exchanged a look, but neither girl denied what Kylie had just said.

"Fine, forget it then," Kylie said, hurt by their attitude. "But just for the record, I don't talk to them." Then she realized that both girls were looking at her the same way she'd been looking at them all day. The bitterness of tasting her own medicine had Kylie turning things over in her mind.

"So they just hang around you?" Della started eyeballing the room. "Please tell me there's not any here right now."

"There's not," Kylie snapped, but her anger wasn't directed at her, just the situation. Because dad-blast it, if she'd heard someone could see ghosts, she'd probably be afraid of them, too.

"Good." Miranda reclaimed her spot at the foot of the bed.

Della continued to glance around. "Nope. Too weird. I don't want to room with you."

"I'm not any weirder than you are." Kylie stared at the vampire and for some reason wanted Della to accept her.

"She has a point," Miranda said to Della. "We're probably pretty scary to her, too. I say, let's try to make this work. You know, be buds."

Della let out a deep breath. "Okay, but you'll tell us when you see a ghost hanging around?"

Kylie nodded, but quickly realized how hard that request was going to be to keep, because the familiar icy feeling of a ghostly presence hit right then. The saving grace was that she didn't "see" the ghost. Not that she looked hard, but who could blame her not wanting to clash gazes with a dead person?

* * *

Kylie hadn't thought she could eat, but when the warm, spicy scent of pizza

hit her nose, she realized how little she'd eaten all day. She'd managed to down one slice of thin pepperoni and cheese and eat half her salad before she started feeling self-conscious from the occasional twitching stares. Some of the campers were still trying to figure her out. Well, good luck with that. She took another bite of salad and hoped that if they managed to do it, they'd let her in on the secret.

As Kylie moved her gaze around the room, she found Derek sitting at another table. There was a red-haired girl sitting next to him, and from her body language she found Derek more interesting than her pizza. The girl leaned so close to Derek that her left breast brushed against his arm and from the way Derek leaned into the girl, Kylie figured he enjoyed the girl's attention.

The tiniest bit of jealousy echoed in her chest, but Kylie pushed it back. It was just because he looked like Trey. Biting down on her lip and her emotions, she knew she'd have to be careful where Derek was concerned. It would be easy to confuse her feelings for him.

Right then the half-fairy looked over his shoulder at her. Their gazes met and held. The flutter, the good one, started happening again in the pit of her stomach.

"I think he likes you," Miranda whispered.

Realizing she and Derek had drawn attention, she glanced away. "He's probably just curious about me like everyone else," she whispered back.

"Nope. He's hot for you," Della said, reminding Kylie of the supernatural hearing of some of the campers. "When he was sitting by you at lunch, he oozed so much testosterone that it was hard to breathe. He wants your body," Della teased.

"Well, he's not getting it," Kylie said.

"So you don't like him?" Miranda asked, sounding thrilled.

"Not like that, I don't." It felt like a lie, but she ignored it, because she knew any feeling she might have stemmed from his looking like Trey. She had enough stuff going on in her life right now. She sure as heck didn't need to start falling face-first into another relationship, especially one based on a

lie. Derek wasn't Trey.

And Trey wanted her back. Or at least he'd insinuated that on the phone earlier. With all the other stuff she'd been zapped with today, she hadn't had time to consider how his confession made her feel. Happy? Sad? Angry? Maybe a little of all three?

Trying to prevent emotional overload, Kylie reached for her glass of diet soda and watched Della pull the pepperoni off the pizza and pop it in her mouth. The very tips of her sharp canines caught Kylie's attention and her thoughts skipped past Trey issues and landed on living-with-a-vampire issues.

As another piece of pepperoni disappeared down Della's throat, Kylie realized that the girl was eating. From the fictional books she'd read, she'd assumed vampires didn't eat. They only drank ... Kylie's gaze slammed against Della's glass filled with some red, thick liquid.

"Oh crap." Kylie's stomach heaved, and she placed a hand over her mouth.

"What?" Della asked.

"Is that ... blood?" she muttered, and looked around the dining hall, noticing the glasses filled with the red substance that were occupying the tables in the room.

Miranda leaned in. "It's gross, isn't it?"

"Hanging out with toads is gross." Della's voice came edged with anger.

"I don't hang out with toads," Miranda snapped, her hazel eyes grew bright with what appeared to be embarrassment. "I put a spell on this guy. He deserved it, of course, but now I can't seem to reverse it so whenever he misbehaves, he automatically turns into a toad and pops in to see me."

Desperation echoed in Miranda's voice, but Kylie barely paid it any heed. For some reason the fact that Miranda could turn people into toads didn't bother Kylie near as much as the fact that Della was drinking blood. But holy hell. What kind of blood was it?

Della looked at Kylie and read her disgust. "Seeing dead people is gross, too. This"—she picked up her glass and took a big gulp—"is not gross."

When Della pulled the glass away, a couple of red drops beaded right below her bottom lip. Della's pink tongue shot out and caught the droplets.

Kylie's stomach knotted and the pizza, now a lump in the bottom of her gut, wanted to find its way up.

"Of course"—Della's smile came off wicked—"you guys will find that out when you have to try it."

"I tried it last summer and it was gross," Miranda said. "It tastes like a dirty penny smells."

"What?" Kylie swallowed hard. "I have to drink blood? I'm not doing it. Nope. Not me." She put her hand over her mouth and concentrated on not barfing.

"Not drink it, just taste it," Miranda said. "We all have to learn about each other's cultures toward the end of the summer. We, the witches, put on a ceremony and show some of our magic; the werewolves, last time we actually saw Lucas Parker transform himself. It was scary. Whatever you do, don't piss off a werewolf."

Kylie's mind stopped fixating on drinking blood and fixed on Lucas Parker transforming into a wolf. Then she remembered their little meet-up during lunch. The one where she'd probably pissed him off.

Of course, she didn't need to hear Miranda's warning. She knew firsthand what he was capable of doing. Then for some crazy reason, she found herself trying to find him in the crowd. He either wasn't there, or had his back to her.

"Werewolves aren't as badass as vampires," Della said, defending her species with enthusiasm. "Werewolves only have full power once a month. Vampires—we're a hundred percent twenty-four/seven. It's *my* kind that you don't want to piss off."

Kylie sat there trying to digest the conversation while her shaky stomach worked on digesting the pizza.

"And then the shape-shifters—that was weird, but not scary," Miranda continued.

"What did the Fae do?" The question came from a deep, obviously male voice.

Kylie recognized Derek's voice before her eyes found him. And when she did find him, she realized he'd found her, too. He stared right at her.

Her already knotted stomach knotted some more. Only these knots, like the flutters, weren't all unpleasant. Yup, she was going to have to be extra careful with Derek where her emotions were concerned.

"Well," Miranda said, her tone a little higher pitched than normal. "Because fairies have different gifts, each one did a short presentation." Miranda gave her hair a twirl and smiled extra wide.

"What's your gift?" Della asked Derek as she pulled another piece of pepperoni off the pizza and slipped it between her lips. Lips that had just drunk blood.

A long pause followed the question. Derek's posture stiffened. "Who said I even have gifts?" His tone implied he didn't like to be questioned. Or could he be like her, and wasn't too thrilled to have his gift?

"One of the fairies last year could read people's thoughts," Miranda continued, obviously not picking up on Derek's mood. "Can you read my mind now?" She bit down on her lip and sent him a sultry look.

Kylie's gaze shot back to Derek. Could he read minds? No, she didn't think he could, because he'd asked earlier what she was. Or was he just making conversation?

She recalled thinking some private thoughts about his body, comparing it to Trey. Oh, great. How embarrassing would that be if he knew she'd imagined him without his shirt? Then she realized she was doing it again. Kylie felt her face flush and Derek, still staring, didn't miss a thing.

"Another fairy could move objects with his mind," Miranda said louder as if trying to get Derek's attention on her. "Of course, witches can do that, too."

"Really?" Della sounded honestly amazed. "Do it now. Move my plate." She leaned back as if to give Miranda room.

Miranda's gaze shot to Della and she frowned. "I can't. It's against the rules."

"Rules? Screw the rules," Della said. "Do it. No one is going to know but

us.”

“I can’t.” Miranda’s cheeks turned pink, almost as pink as the streaks in her hair. It was good to know Kylie wasn’t the only one who suffered from blushing.

“Why not?” Della argued. “Just because of some stupid rule?”

Miranda glared at Della. “Why don’t you just go drown yourself in blood?” Miranda glanced at Derek, who she’d obviously wanted to impress, and turned pinker.

“Oh, stake me!” Della snapped.

“Be careful, or I might,” Miranda shot back, her expression passing embarrassment and going straight to anger.

Kylie’s gaze shifted from Miranda to Della as they took turns slamming each other with insults.

Great. Now her two roommates were going to be trying to kill each other.

“You two should chill,” Derek said, as if he’d read her mind.

“I’m already as chilled as I can get,” Della said, and focused on Miranda. “Somebody’s got a chip on her shoulder. And you’d best be careful, because I’d be more than happy to knock it off for you.” She jumped up and before Kylie could focus on her, she was gone.

“Cool,” a new voice in the crowd said.

Perry, aka Weird-Eyed Boy who’d turned himself into the unicorn, stood beside Derek. Kylie stared at his black eyes, and her heart raced to the tune of panic.

“Hey,” Perry said to Miranda. “I’d love to watch you two go at it and rip each other’s clothes off.”

“In your dreams,” Miranda said.

“Yeah.” Perry chuckled. “Especially the clothes off part.”

“Grow up.” Miranda grabbed both hers and Kylie’s trays and shot off to drop them off.

“Thanks,” Kylie said to her, but looked from Derek to Perry, not sure which one made her more nervous—Derek who made her feel things she didn’t want to feel, or Perry who just plain freaked her out. Her phone

buzzed. She pulled her cell from her purse, hoping it was Sara with not-pregnant news and not her dad. A sigh escaped her lips when she saw Sara's number.

"Later," Kylie said to the guys. Then, eager to escape, she took off outside where she could have a private conversation. Though who the heck knew how far she'd have to go so the super-hearing supernaturals couldn't listen in?

Chapter Twelve

“Just don’t panic,” Kylie told Sara thirty minutes into their conversation. “It’ll probably be fine.” Kylie couldn’t say that with a huge amount of enthusiasm, but she gave it a shot. That’s what friends did. Yet deep down, Kylie knew if Sara was pregnant, and there seemed to be a good chance she was, it wouldn’t be fine.

“Thanks, Kylie,” Sara said. “What am I going to do without you all summer?”

“Survive,” Kylie said. “That’s all I’m planning to do, too.”

Kylie had spent the entire conversation hiding behind the office, sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree and trying to calm Sara down.

Sara’s mom had canceled her lunch and insisted her daughter spend the day with her, going to the art museum and then shopping. The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston was great and Sara actually liked art. As for the shopping, who wouldn’t love that? But not with your mom while you’re afraid you were pregnant.

“I totally can’t believe this is happening,” Sara continued. She hadn’t even picked up a pregnancy test yet. She was too freaked.

Not that Kylie wasn’t up to her eyebrows in her own issues, but talking to Sara about her problems helped Kylie not to focus on her own. Plus, focusing on Sara was pretty much the norm for them. Face it, when Sara was upset, and sometimes even when she wasn’t, Sara tended to be a tad self-absorbed. Kylie never minded. She’d always preferred listening to other people’s problems than blabbering about her own.

Good thing, Kylie supposed, since right now she couldn't talk about what was going on. Well, not to any normal person, anyway.

"Well, I should go," Sara said.

One of the last sprays of the day's sun shot a golden glow around the green scenery. With dusk closing in, the heat index no longer felt so suffocating.

"Call me when you get the test," Kylie said.

"I will. And thanks."

Kylie closed the phone and her eyes. Leaning her head against the tree, she recalled her newfound hope that maybe Holiday was wrong about Kylie being a supernatural. She also remembered the two black-suited guys saying the camp could be closed down if "it" didn't stop—not that Kylie had any idea what "it" was. But if both of those hopes came true, Kylie could almost see her life being tolerable.

Or at least somewhat tolerable. The issues of her parents, Nana, and Trey almost felt manageable now. Amazing how one's perspective altered after learning you might not be human.

Holiday's voice played through Kylie's mind: *The truth ... the truth is we don't know what you are. It could be fairy, it could be you are a descendent of one of the gods. It could be—*

Kylie recalled interrupting the camp leader, and now she wished she'd hadn't. Even though she hadn't given up on being normal, she couldn't help but wonder what else she might be.

Trying to stop the emotional jitters from making her stomach twitch, she concentrated on not thinking and just listening. A late-afternoon breeze stirred the leaves of the tree, crickets warmed up for their night song, a baby bird called to its mama. Kylie remembered the hiking trips she'd taken with her dad. Should she call her dad back now?

Later, she told herself. Maybe then she would know what to say to him about why he hadn't come to get her at the police station when she called him. For now, she was just going to sit there and absorb nature and almost relax. She closed her eyes and slowly the tension faded.

Kylie wasn't sure how long it had been, ten minutes or an hour, but something jarred her awake. Her eyes sprang open to darkness. She sat very still, listening. Not even the crickets breathed. Fighting the fear of the unknown, she remembered real monsters existed.

A deep, sinister roaring, like a lion, filled the dark silence, and then came the howling of dogs ... or were they wolves? She glanced up at the black sky. The moon, not a full moon, looked blurry from the smear of clouds crawling past it. The sudden need to go somewhere where she felt safer shot through her. Before she moved, she heard a twig snap.

She wasn't alone.

Her heart raced and she considered her options—scream or run. Maybe both. Before she could do either someone spoke up.

“Still afraid of me, huh?”

She recognized Della's voice and her heart stopped most of the racing. Most of it. “Not as much as before.” Kylie looked up. The vampire loomed over her.

Della laughed. “I like the way you mostly tell the truth.”

“You can really tell when people are lying?” Kylie asked.

“Not everyone. Depends on how good of a liar they are. The good ones can control their pulse enough so I don't hear it. Then there's the people for who lying is so second nature it doesn't affect them.”

Kylie stood and dusted the grass and twigs off the butt of her jeans. She'd have to be careful and not lie to Della. Or either get better at it.

“Holiday sent me to sniff you out.”

“Sniff me out?” In the dark, Kylie could barely make out Della's expression, but she could tell the girl was smiling. Her white teeth seemed to almost glow in the night.

“You can smell me?” Kylie brought her arm up to her nose.

As if Kylie was a communal sniffing project, Della leaned in and sniffed. An appreciative moan left the girl's lips.

The tips of Della's sharp canines appeared at the corners of her mouth and Kylie jerked her arm back. Della's smile faded. Kylie got the odd impression

that the vampire honestly didn't want Kylie to be afraid of her. So vampires had feelings, too. Somehow, realizing that made the girl more human and less scary.

"Everyone is at the campfire." Della started walking.

Kylie moved in step with her, not an easy task since Della's pace wasn't for wimps. "Do I really smell good to you?"

Della didn't look at her. "Do you want me to lie so you'll feel better? Or do you want the truth?"

"The truth ... I think."

Della stopped and her tone came out huffy. "There's blood in your veins, I really like blood, so yes, you smell yummy. But it doesn't mean ... Let me put it like this. Imagine you're hungry and you go into a hamburger joint. Every table is filled with people and their plates of big juicy hamburgers and greasy fries. The smell is ambrosia. So ... what do you do?"

"Hurry and order," Kylie answered, not getting the point.

"You mean you wouldn't go steal any food off anyone's plate?"

"No," Kylie said.

"Okay, so if stealing someone's lunch is bad, you can imagine stealing a few pints of blood might create a tad more of an issue than swiping a Big Mac. I'd have to be really starving. Or really angry before I'd do that."

The girl came off pretty dang angry. Kylie asked, "Do you get *really* angry a lot? Have you ever got that mad?"

Della let out another exasperated huff. "I've never killed anyone that I can remember. Is that what you want to hear me say?"

"Yeah." Kylie smiled. "So vampires really aren't a threat to humans?"

"I didn't say that," Della said.

"Meaning?" Kylie asked.

"Meaning just like there's good and bad humans, there are good and bad vampires. And really bad vampires who belong to gangs and purposely try to cause havoc everywhere they go."

"What kind of havoc?" Kylie asked.

"Let's just say they'd steal your Big Mac. Or worse."

“Okay,” Kylie said, pretty sure she knew what “worse” meant, and she didn’t like it one bit.

“Then there are the betweeners,” Della continued.

“Betweeners?”

“Like humans who have been known to get into some trouble, but aren’t totally bad. Vampires can be like that, too.”

Kylie nodded. They started walking again and her curiosity grew. “What are your gifts? If ... you don’t mind me asking?”

“Heightened senses. Heightened strength. And—oh, shit! I just remembered your gifts.” She came to an abrupt halt. “There aren’t any ghosts around here, are they?”

Kylie did a quick check for coldness. “Nope. But seriously, I don’t think I’m really gifted.”

“You don’t want to be gifted, do you?” Della asked.

“No,” Kylie answered, coming close to lying. Then she remembered Della was a human—make that a “nonhuman”—lie detector.

Kylie realized they were heading into the woods; a spray of clouds passed over the moon and darkness cloaked the area. That’s when Kylie heard it again, the deep roar of what sounded like a jungle cat.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

“You mean the white tiger?”

“The what?” Kylie reached out and grasped Della by the elbow. The coldness of her skin had Kylie letting her go even quicker than she grabbed her. The roaring stopped but the temperature of Della’s skin sent a chill up her arm. Were vampires really dead? She didn’t think she could ask that question.

Della looked back at her as if she knew the coldness repulsed her. Kylie looked down and tried to pull free a twig that had clung to her jeans, hoping to keep Della from seeing too much.

When Della started moving again, Kylie remembered what they’d been talking about. “This is Texas. We don’t have white tigers.”

“You do at wildlife parks. There’s one a few miles from here. It’s both a

refuge and a park. Like a zoo. Visitors can drive through and even feed the tamer animals.”

“I went to one once,” Kylie said. “I just didn’t know there was one here.”

“Yup.” Della raised her nose in the air and sniffed. “And most of the animals need their litter boxes cleaned. Stuff stinks. Especially the elephants’ crap.”

Kylie inhaled, fearing the stench, but only the scent of the woods, of moist earth and green vegetation filled her nose. She supposed having a heightened sense of smell wasn’t always a good thing.

Each step took them deeper into the woods. Thorn bushes caught on her jeans. She had to speed walk to keep up.

“Where is the bonfire?” Kylie asked, feeling winded.

“About a fourth of mile. A little farther than our cabin.”

“Why didn’t we take the trail?”

“It’s quicker this way.”

Maybe for a vampire. They continued on for another three or four minutes without talking. Kylie thought of all the questions she’d like to ask Della, but didn’t know if she would be offended.

Concentrating on the ground to avoid the largest thorn bushes and stumps, Kylie plowed right into the back of Della.

“Sorry—”

Della swung around so fast, Kylie only saw a blur, but there was no mistaking the girl’s cold hand pressing over Kylie’s mouth. “Shh.” Della’s fierce expression added a menacing touch to her warning. Then she swung back around, her head tilted as if listening.

Kylie tuned her own ears to hear. But like earlier, when Kylie had just awakened, only silence filled the woods—no insects, no birds. Even the trees held their breath.

Why?

A blast of cold air shot past as if something had flown by. But nothing was there. Then Della made a low guttural growl.

Kylie looked up. The girl’s eyes were glowing, and a lime green color

beamed from her face, making her look anything but human. Fear took up residence in Kylie's chest, crowding out her heart and lungs.

The whisk of wind passed again. Kylie looked back over her shoulder, and when she looked back around, she saw him. He stood far too close—taking up half of her personal space. Blinking, she took in his jet-black hair and Asian eyes. Eyes similar to Della's, but his eyes glowed gold not green.

His surreal stare focused on Della. "Hey, Cuz."

He cut his cold, gold gaze back to Kylie and leaned in. His nostrils flared. "I see you brought us a snack."

Chapter Thirteen

Before Kylie could think to react, Della jumped in front of her. “What are you doing?” Della demanded. “You can’t ... you can’t be here.”

“Don’t worry, Cuz,” he said. “They can’t hear or smell me this far away. I know their limitations.”

“Forget their limitations. *You* aren’t supposed to be here,” Della snarled.

“So I can’t come see my favorite cousin?”

“Not here.” She waved her hand. “Now leave before you get my ass in all kinds of trouble.”

“You’re not going to introduce me to this yummy-smelling individual.” In a flash, he moved to stand in front of Kylie again. This time even closer. She could see an ugly scar running alongside his chin. The smell of his breath wafted up her nose. It smelled like the grocery store when you got too close to the meat department. Raw meat.

One word echoed in her panicked brain. *Run!*

Fear kept her from obeying.

Della growled and less than a second later, her vampire roomie had sandwiched herself between Kylie and the scar-faced cousin. “Leave her alone, Chan. You’re scaring her.”

He took a step back. “I’m just joking. I had my dinner.” He ran his hand down his shirt—a light colored shirt that Kylie noted had stains down the front. Stains that could very well be ...

Fear froze her lungs as the coppery scent of blood filled her nose. A noise escaped her lips. She took a step backward and almost tripped on her own

feet.

Della shot her a quick glance, then refocused on Chan. "Go home. I'll see you when camp's over."

"So you're going to join us when you get out of this joint?" he asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing when this is over. That's why I'm here, to figure that out."

"Your parents will never accept you. You can't live in that world anymore," Chan said.

"You don't know that," Della said, pain sounding in her tone.

"I do know. I tried it. Save yourself and them the heartache and just come and live with us. We're your new family."

"I told you I'll make my decision when I leave here."

"This place is going to feed you a pack of lies. They want to change us ... all of us. It's a ploy by the government."

"They aren't feeding me anything. They made it clear, it's my choice. Now go away before you get me thrown out of here."

"Trouble is my middle name, Cuz."

"Chan." Della made that low snarling sound again.

"You are no fun," he said, and then took off, moving so fast he left only a cold wake of fear behind.

Kylie found a tree to lean against. Della stood there, head tilted as if listening and staring off in the direction Chan had disappeared, no doubt making sure he'd left.

Slowly, she turned to Kylie. Her eyes had faded back to her own shade of black. The moon found its way from the clouds, allowing Kylie to read the emotions in Della's face.

"I'm sorry," Della said, and her expression matched her words.

Kylie couldn't answer; she hadn't even gotten her breathing under control. Back still against the tree, she wrapped her arms around herself to fight off the chill that had nothing to do with the temperature.

"He wouldn't have hurt you," Della said.

"He called me a snack," Kylie insisted, managing to eke the words out

from her shaking lungs.

“He enjoys scaring people. He wouldn’t have done anything.”

Kylie arched a brow in disbelief. “Is he ... does he belong to one of those gangs that harm humans?”

“No, he just likes to act out sometimes.”

“Is that why you kept getting between us?”

“I did that because I could smell how afraid you were.”

While Kylie couldn’t totally buy into Della’s words, she sensed Della believed it. Or at least she wanted to believe it.

The normal noises of the woods returned. A few insects chirped in the distance. Della stood there almost fidgeting. “Can I ask you a big favor?”

“What?” Kylie asked.

“Don’t mention this to anyone? Other supernaturals aren’t supposed to visit.” The pleading in Della’s voice seemed to cost her.

“What if he comes back?” Kylie could almost smell the scent of raw meat that had lingered on his breath.

“He won’t. I’ll make sure of it.” Pausing, Della studied Kylie’s face. “Please. If they find out, I could be sent home and I really need to be here right now.”

Kylie remembered how Della had protected her and for reasons Kylie didn’t quite understand, she trusted the vampire to protect her again. But did she trust her enough to put her life in her hands? Probably not, but her gut instinct made the decision for her.

“Just make sure he doesn’t come back. I don’t want to become another blood spatter on his shirt.” Saying the words sent another chill down Kylie’s back.

When the chill hung on longer than it should, she wondered if the cold stemmed from her panic or was it from something else? Was someone else here? Someone other than ...

“Thanks.” Della smiled. “I knew I liked you. Come on—let’s get to the bonfire before they send someone after us.”

They started walking again, but every other step had Kylie looking over

her shoulder. What frightened her more—finding a ghost or Della’s cousin—she wasn’t sure.

* * *

The smell of wood smoke grew stronger as they made their way through the woods. The half moon shifted in and out behind clouds, shrouding them either in moon shadows or complete darkness. The strange animal sounds kept playing in the distance—lions, elephants, and even wolves. But thankfully, the cold faded into the darkness.

Della never seemed to lose her way so Kylie stayed close, ignoring the feel of thorns and bushes catching on her jeans. Finally, a reddish glow appeared between the trees.

Able to think clearly at last, Kylie took advantage of their last few minutes alone to ask Della a few questions. “Is ... your cousin the one who did this to you?”

Della looked over her shoulder. “Did what to me?”

“Turned you into a vampire.”

“Oh. No. I was born with the virus. But yes, it was probably the contact with him that activated it.”

“I thought you became a vampire by getting bit? Or is that just a myth? I mean, I realize there’s a lot of myths about supernaturals. I saw you could eat pizza. And you were in the sun.”

Della smiled. “The sun and I don’t get along, but sunscreen mostly takes care of that. I can eat—not like I used to. I mostly need blood. And yes, some humans can be turned by being ... bit. There are parts of the myths that are true. However, most of us are born with the virus. But it takes being exposed to another vampire before the virus is activated.”

Kylie tried to understand. “So you knew you were a vampire all your life?”

Della chuckled. “Hardly. The virus runs in my family but we never knew anything about it because it only affects one in fifty family members, and

even then it may not be the active virus. Everybody thought Chan died in a car accident when he was in France. Then one night I saw him, at this party. Freaked me out.”

“I can imagine.” A lot of this was freaking her out.

“Anyway, he of course could sense that I had the gene and having come in contact with him, he knew I’d turn and get sicker than hell. He showed up to help me. He told me that I was a vampire. It was a big friggin’ shock to my system. Sort of like what you’re going through right now.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t been sick. We’re not sure if I’m anything.”

“Yeah, denial is a big part of it,” Della said. “I remember. I swore I just had a bad case of the swine flu.”

Kylie bit back another denial and let Della continue. “I went through it all. Of course with vampires it’s worse. The change is damn painful.” She moved a few branches out the way and held them back for Kylie to pass.

“So your parents don’t know?” Kylie asked.

“You kidding?” Della asked. “They would freak.”

They kept walking and Della continued. “I got really sick at first. The doctors didn’t understand it, either. Chan explained everything to me. He hid in my bedroom and took care of me for almost two weeks. I owe him big for that.”

“Enough to leave your family for him?” Kylie asked, remembering what Della and her cousin had argued about. Then Kylie recalled her own family drama and sympathized with Della’s plight. Losing someone you loved hurt like hell. An image of her father flashed in Kylie’s mind and her chest tightened.

Emotion made Della’s eyes bright. “There’s a community of vampires who live in Pennsylvania. Chan thinks it’s best if I go there and live. It’s hard to live with family and keep this from them. I just ... I don’t know what’s right. We ... my family and I, used to be so close. Well, Dad’s always been a hard ass, but I know he loves me. Mom was my best friend and I have a little sister and I can’t imagine leaving her.”

“Would your mom let you go if you asked her?” Kylie asked.

“No. I’d have to run away and I know that would break their hearts. Which is why most young vampires fake their deaths, so the family moves on. I don’t want to do that, but ... I’m pretty much breaking their hearts now anyway. It’s like a war zone at home.”

Della’s voice shook and Kylie didn’t look but she figured there were tears in her roommate’s eyes. Then again, Kylie wasn’t sure if vampires could cry. But tears or no tears, she could hear the pain in Della’s voice.

“It’s hard,” Della continued. “I had to go out at night to get blood. It’s not as if I can keep a supply in the fridge. I’m basically nocturnal now, so staying awake at school during a boring class was almost impossible. The school convinced my mom I was either doing drugs or depressed. My parents, even my mom, were riding me and accusing me of all sorts of shit. All we did was fight, and I couldn’t make it stop. So Chan may be right.”

Kylie struggled for something to say. Staring straight ahead she spotted the red and orange flickers from the bonfire. The voices of the campers who were standing around a fire filled the night. She glanced at Della and offered her the only thing she could. “If it makes you feel any better, my home life sucks right now, too.”

They walked out from the last line of trees into the clearing and they almost collided with a dark figure that leapt out of the trees, landing with almost a silent thud. Della growled. A startled yelp filled Kylie’s throat, but then she recognized the dark figure with very blue eyes.

Lucas Parker.

“That’s a good way to get hurt,” Della snarled.

His gaze stayed fixed on them, harsh, accusing.

Kylie froze under his intense stare, but Della, unaffected by his ominous presence, gave Kylie a cold nudge to continue walking.

Lucas fell in step beside her and his deep voice came out as little more than a whisper. “If he comes here again, I won’t sit by and do nothing.” With that, Lucas took off.

“Shit,” Della muttered.

Ditto.

Kylie watched Lucas move into a circle of other campers, and all of them greeted him as if he was some kind of leader. Before Kylie could look away, the girl who always seemed attached to Lucas's hip glanced back and her eyes turned greenish gold as she stared daggers at Kylie.

"Someone's jealous," Della snapped.

While the idea was laughable, Kylie could swear she did see jealousy in that girl's eyes.

* * *

A short time later, Kylie found herself alone, staring at the fire and listening to the strange animal sounds in the distance. Her gaze followed the trail of smoke that seemed to snake up to where the half moon hung in the sky. Breathing in the scent of burning wood and charred marshmallows from the sticks of several campers, Kylie fought emotional overload. Then, gazing at the flickering fire, she found herself missing Sara like she'd never missed her before.

At first, Kylie didn't understand the upheaval of feelings for her best friend, but when she glanced around the crowd the reasons became clear. Blindingly clear.

Welcome to the world of cliques.

School had always been about the cliques. Among the many, there'd been the cheerleader/popular clique, the school band clique, and then the smart/college-focused clique—completely different from the geek clique—and the art club clique. Then there was the one Kylie and Sara belonged to, the cliqueless clique.

Not that it was the worst one to belong to. In truth, it wasn't even a clique at all; they just belonged to the group that was considered floaters. They hung—not really belonged to, but just hung—with one group for a while, then they'd move to another. Thankfully, people didn't dislike them or poke fun at them like they did some of the unpopular groups. How could they poke fun at them when people hardly knew they existed? Or at least that's how Kylie had

always felt at school. Not really disliked, or mistreated, just invisible.

And the reason for missing Sara right now, well, that was a no-brainer. Kylie might have been a floater, but she'd never had to float alone. Since fifth grade, she and Sara had been a team. And Sara had definitely been the head floater—the role naturally taken on since she was the one who worried the most about fitting in.

Inhaling another gulp of smoke, Kylie moved to escape the path of the wind. As her gaze moved from one group to another, one of Nana's old sayings filled her head, birds of a feather flock together.

The flocks, or cliques, were different at camp than in high school. She spotted Della and the pierced boy, Jonathon, crowding around a group of kids, all vampires, no doubt.

Standing close to the fire, roasting marshmallows, was Perry, the shape-shifter, and with him were two other guys and a girl. Kylie wondered if they could all turn into unicorns.

Derek stood to the side of another crowd, as if he wasn't so sure he wanted to belong. She assumed these must be the fairies, or Fae as he called them. Not that she blamed him for using the different version. No straight guy would want to be called a fairy. Not that anyone could mistake Derek for gay. Something about the way he walked and carried himself was overtly female-loving male—like Trey.

Staring under her lashes, she let herself admire Derek's overtly male body. The wide shoulders, the square jaw, the way he filled out his jeans. That's when she realized she was doing it again—comparing Derek to Trey. She really, really didn't want to get caught up in that emotional storm, so she looked away.

Luck would have it that her gaze shot straight to another hard male body among a different flock of campers. Lucas. His warning about Della's cousin echoed in her head as she let her gaze move over his tall frame. Not that she planned to allow herself to appreciate the view for long. The fact that she appreciated it at all annoyed her. She owed her cat more loyalty than that. Right?

Before she could force her gaze away from his solid torso wrapped in the black T-shirt, she noticed his goth-dressed girlfriend standing next to him. Her body was pressed so close, that nobody would dare come between them.

Lucas turned around as if he'd sensed her staring. Kylie attempted to look away, but his gaze locked on hers. She felt caught. Then the strangest thing happened. A forgotten memory surfaced. She'd been walking home from school, and a few of the older boys had started picking on her. One of the bullies had picked up a rock and slung it at her, but Lucas appeared out of nowhere and caught the rock. Like some kind of pro baseball player, he slung it back at the kid and hit the bully right between his legs.

The boy fell in the street moaning. Lucas had walked beside her the rest of the way home—as if to protect her. Those bullies never bothered her again.

Realizing she continued to stare at Lucas during her memory recall, she swung around. She noticed Miranda chatting with an artsy-looking crowd—obviously the witches of the group. Still feeling the tingle of Lucas's gaze, and needing something to get her mind off both him and her ex-boyfriend's lookalike, she started moving toward Miranda.

Hopefully, Kylie had learned enough floater skills from Sara to get her through the next few months. Because face it, why should camp be any different than high school? Belonging to a group and fitting in just wasn't in her cards.

* * *

Kylie's pillow didn't smell right—didn't feel right, either. Nothing felt right. She'd been the first to leave the campfire. When Holiday stopped her on her way out to ask how she was doing, Kylie had been tempted to hit the leader with a deluge of questions. *Couldn't I just be a bit loony instead of gifted? And if I'm truly gifted, how do I find out what I am? And ... What's the real chance that camp could be closed down by those black-suited dudes? Oh, and can I do anything to make sure that happens?* Okay, she wouldn't have asked

the last two questions, but not from a lack of wanting.

More than anything in the world, Kylie wanted to go home—back to her own miserable life, back to her own miserable world.

Nevertheless, standing in front of Holiday, Kylie recalled the supersonic hearing of some of her campmates and put her questions on hold. According to her schedule, which had been handed out at the campfire, she'd have an hour counseling session with Holiday before lunch tomorrow.

Before that, right after breakfast, Kylie was to show up for the daily activity of Meet Your Campmates Hour. Supposedly each camper was to be paired up with someone for an hour to get to know a little about each other, their gifts, and the culture of their species.

Now, wouldn't that be fun? Not.

Sure she was curious, yet it would be kind of be nice to figure out what she was, or hopefully what she "wasn't" before investing in what everyone else was. And if she could prove she wasn't anything but human maybe she could go home.

She rolled over for about the hundredth time, knowing part of the reason she couldn't sleep was the fear that she'd have another night terror. Good God, she didn't want to have to explain that to her cabin mates.

The sound of her stomach grumbling filled the lonely darkness. Was there anything to eat in the fridge? Slipping out of bed, wearing a pair of navy boxers with hearts and a pink tank top, she moved to the door.

The door creaked when she stepped out of her room. The eeriness seemed to bounce against the log walls. Kylie gazed at the two closed doors leading into the other bedrooms. She'd heard Della and Miranda come in and listened to see if the two of them were still planning to kill each other. Hey, if she was going to have to wake up to a bloody mess, she wanted to be prepared.

Fortunately, the two of them had exchanged a non-combative conversation. It seemed all Miranda wanted to talk about were the boys. Derek included. Not that Kylie minded, of course.

A couple more steps and Kylie looked again at the bedroom doors. Hopefully, they were now both dead asleep. Okay, maybe *dead* wasn't the

best word. Especially considering she didn't know if vampires were dead or not. Did they even sleep? And for that matter, were they immortal like the books said they were?

Kylie's bare feet pressing against the plank boards brought on a moan-like sound from the old wood. She recalled the visit from Della's cousin. Then she remembered the vampire gangs. Clutching handfuls of her tank top in both fists, she debated skipping a snack, for fear of becoming one.

And then the boards creaked again.

Chapter Fourteen

Kylie took one backwards step closer to her bedroom door. Then another noise made her stop short. She listened, recalling the wild animal sounds from earlier that night. This sound wasn't so wild, though. Breath held, she tuned her ears to pick up the noise. She heard it again, a very faint meowing. A soft, gentle sound.

A movement at the window caught her eye. Kylie swung around. Fear entered her chest first, but melted as soon as she saw the orange kitten perched on the outside window ledge. Startled by her sudden movement, the kitten fell from the ledge. "Don't go," Kylie muttered, at first not understanding her sudden concern for the kitten. Then understanding hit. What if Lucas or one of the werewolves happened by?

Kylie hurried to the door and opened it. She knelt down at the threshold and made the squeaky little noise that she knew cats loved.

"Come here, baby. I'll take care of you," she cooed. Her words were met by a rustling in the bushes. "Trust me." A few seconds later, the little yellow fur ball came swaying over.

"What a cutie," she whispered, and with a gentle finger stroked its white chin. The kitten turned on its purring machine, moved in, and started rubbing itself against her bare calves. She scooped up the creature and stared into the gold eyes, snuggling the purring little animal against her breasts, and then carried it inside.

The cat meowed and tried to escape from her arms, as if it didn't want to be shut inside, but Kylie held it tight. "No, no," she cooed. "There are

monsters out there. You're safe here."

The animal seemed to relax as she passed her fingers softly over the back of its ear. "You hungry?" She butted her nose against the top of the kitten's head and cradled it closer against her chest.

She walked to the fridge, opened it to see what she could munch on, as well as offer the poor kitten.

A door creaked open behind her, and Kylie turned and watched Miranda, wearing a large yellow T-shirt and a pair of long pajama bottoms with smiley faces printed on them walk out of her room. Her tri-colored hair was a tad mussed and Kylie noticed she looked younger without her normal makeup.

"Hey," Kylie said.

"I thought I heard..." Miranda stopped and her eyes grew round. "What's that?"

"A kitten. Isn't she ... or he adorable?" She held the animal up to check its sex. The kitten started twisting, even hissed, but Kylie held it tight. "It's a boy. *He* was peering in our window." She cradled him against her chest again and glanced back at the fridge. "I think he's hungry."

"Oh, no." The annoyance level in Miranda's tone had Kylie turning back around.

"What?" Kylie asked, genuinely confused. "Are you allergic to cats?"

"Same old trick, huh?" Miranda said, but Kylie didn't think her roommate was talking to her.

Instead, Miranda pointed a finger at the kitten and started wiggling her pinky finger back and forth. "Roses are red, violets are blue, show your true self or I'll put a hex on you."

"Stop. I'm changing back." The words spewed from the kitten.

Kylie stood frozen. *Words*. Oh, what the hell! Was she dreaming? Cats couldn't ... talk. She looked at Miranda, not completely ready to toss the kitten across the room, but close. "Did I imagine...?"

Miranda looked at Kylie and her lips twitched almost in a smile, but she held it back, and directed her gaze back to the kitten. "Do it now, Perry!"

Perry.

Kylie looked down at the kitten cozied up against her breasts. Sparkles, diamond-shaped sparkles floated around the red tabby. Then *poof*. Perry appeared, standing in front of Kylie, his head plastered against her breasts.

Kylie screamed.

Della shot into the kitchen. “What’s...?” She blinked. “Do you guys want to be alone?” She snickered and motioned to Kylie and Perry.

Snapping out of her stupor, Kylie grabbed the little twerp by the ear and yanked him off her chest. “He’s leaving now.”

“Ouch. Ouch,” Perry muttered as Kylie dragged him past the kitchen table. “Let go of my ear!” he ordered in a roar that sounded like some kind of angry beast.

But Kylie wasn’t feeling up to taking orders and she was too mad to be scared of him. Holding on to his ear like a tick to a dog, she dragged Perry past the small coffee table, yanked open the door with her free hand, and then shoved the pervert out the door with such force that he landed on his ass.

But she wasn’t finished with him yet.

She pointed a finger at him. “You come anywhere near my breasts again and it won’t be your ear I drag you out by next time. And in case you don’t know what body part I’m referring to, let’s just say the next time you turn yourself into a kitten, you’ll find you’ve been *neutered*.” She slammed the door with a loud *whack*.

“Creep.” Kylie swung around, clenching and unclenching her fists.

Both Della and Miranda stood there, eyes wide and mouths hanging open in a kind of warped shock.

Miranda giggled first. “Sorry,” she muttered. “But that was so freaking funny.”

“Was not,” Kylie snapped, still fuming, her throat tightening with anger.

“Oh, yes it was.” Della started laughing so hard that she fell against the table. “You have spunk hidden behind your innocent face. I *like* it.”

“Either that or she’s stupid,” Miranda said, and then snorted. “Do you realize what Perry is? He’s like the most powerful shape-shifter in the world right now. Everyone knows you don’t piss off a shape-shifter. They have

terrible tempers.”

“I ... he ... he tricked me into letting him snuggle up against my breasts.” She recalled hearing the twerp’s voice morph into a very threatening roar.

Okay, so maybe her actions had been a tad stupid, but nothing, nothing made her blood boil more than someone making a fool out of her, and that’s what he’d done.

Fighting the tears, because she always cried when she was mad, she spotted the fridge still open and marched over to shut it. The cold blast from the white box hit her face the same time as she remembered ... “Gross, I checked out his privates.”

Behind her, both Della and Miranda spewed more laughter. Then for some off-the-wall reason, what hadn’t seemed funny suddenly did. Kylie leaned into the closed fridge and started laughing. For the next five minutes, they sat at the kitchen table, giggling until they had tears in their eyes. It reminded Kylie of what she and Sara would so often do.

Or had until everything had changed.

“You should have seen his expression when you were pulling him by the ear,” Della said. “I wish I’d had a camera.”

“I almost felt sorry for him,” Miranda said.

“Sorry for him?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah, he’s kind of cute in that boyish kind of way. Don’t you think?”

“Cute? Oh, heck. He’s a freak,” Kylie insisted.

“Aren’t we all?” asked Della, her humor fading just a notch.

Not sure I am, Kylie thought, and almost said as much, but something plopped down on the table. Kylie screamed when she saw the toad.

Miranda rolled her eyes and snatched up the creature. “Being bad again, Mr. Pepper?” she seethed at the amphibian, holding the beast a foot from her face, his toad legs dangling almost to the table.

“What did he do for you to put a spell on him?” Della asked, studying the toad in disgust.

“Like our friend Perry, he’s a member of the pervert club.” Miranda gave the toad a little shake. “He’s my piano teacher and he tried to start playing

something besides the piano, if you know what I mean.”

Della snarled at the toad. “Why don’t we just make him a midnight snack and be done with it? Do toad legs taste as good as frogs?”

“Hmm. Don’t know.” Miranda glanced at Della. “But I’m willing to find out,” she said, and eyed the toad.

Kylie could be mistaken, but she could swear the toad’s eyes grew large with fear.

Miranda laughed. “If only I was that type of witch.”

“What kind of witch are you?” Kylie asked, somewhat relieved.

“A screwed-up witch.” Miranda frowned and then scowled at the toad. “You know the drill, Mr. Pepper, stop thinking bad thoughts and you’ll go back to normal.”

The toad wiggled his legs and then vanished into thin air.

“What kind of curse did you put on him?” Della asked.

Miranda moaned in frustration. “If I knew that, I could stop it.”

“You mean, you don’t remember?” Della asked.

Miranda lowered her gaze. “I remember what I thought I said, but I’m ... I’m dyslexic and I get my spells wrong sometimes, and I have to know exactly what I said to make it stop. So until then, every time that pervert thinks about an underage girl, he’s transformed into a toad and pops in for a visit.”

Kylie leaned in. “While it sucks for you, it sounds like he deserves it.”

“Yeah, *he* does. But he’s like a constant reminder that I’m a screw-up.”

“True,” Della said. “But on the positive side, you’re keeping him from doing anything wrong. I hate perverts. I had an old neighbor who would stand at his window, empty lotion in his hand, and whack off in front of me or other girls.”

“That’s disgusting,” Miranda said.

“Yeah, but what I hated was that a girl down the street had already told me he did it to her, too. She told her parents, the parents called the police. The police came back and said that he’s a deacon of the church and it was basically my neighbor’s word against his and they believed him.”

“That’s why I did the whole curse thing,” Miranda said.

“But I handled it.” Della grinned.

“What did you do?” Kylie was almost too scared to ask.

“I broke into his house and replaced his lotion with some really bad-ass superglue that my dad uses at his lab at work. You should have seen the look on his face when he couldn’t get his hand off his dick. Then I made an anonymous call to the police and reported him. I mean, how could he deny doing it? His hand was stuck to the crime scene.”

They all burst out laughing. Wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, Kylie looked at Della and Miranda and she could have sworn they were just normal teenage girls.

Well, she could have sworn until the blast of cold snuck up on her from behind. Kylie glanced over her shoulder hoping beyond hope nothing was there.

But hopes were often futile.

Soldier Dude stood only a few feet from her. Too close. Closer than he’d ever been. The chill from his presence sent an icy fear climbing her spine.

“Kylie?”

She heard Miranda call her name—or was that Della? Kylie couldn’t tell because it sounded as if it came from another world. A world in which ghosts didn’t exist. A world Kylie wanted to get back to, but couldn’t.

The dead guy kept his eyes on Kylie while he slowly reached up and removed his helmet. Blood, bright red blood, gushed down his forehead. Kylie’s breath caught as she watched the blood trickle down his face. Then everything went into slow motion. Kylie stood up, wanting to escape.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Blood droplets splattered onto the floor and left tiny speckles of red on the top of her bare feet. The drops kept coming. The specks of blood kept landing on her feet and then they started forming letters and then a word. *Help ...*

Kylie tried to inhale, but her lungs refused to take in the frigid air. Letting go of the oxygen trapped in her mouth, she saw a cloud of cold air float up

from her own lips.

“What’s wrong?” Miranda’s voice seemed to float in Kylie’s mind.

Good question, Kylie thought.

Too bad she didn’t have a freaking clue.

“Do you guys smell that?” Della’s voice registered in Kylie’s awareness but in a distant kind of way, like background music in a movie. “Something smells yummy.”

“I don’t smell anything.” Miranda’s words followed. Their conversation continued but suddenly it rang like a distant echo. “Oh shit ... shit ... shit. Kylie’s aura is turning black. Black ... black ... black. I think there’s a ghost. Ghost ... ghost ... ghost.”

“Damn,” Della said. “I hate this shit.” Footsteps sounded, her friends were running away. A door slammed. Kylie wanted to run, too, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t move. The blood continued to spatter on her feet, but she refused to look to read the words.

“Wait.” Della’s tight voice sounded through walls. “She stopped breathing. Kylie’s stopped breathing. We have to do something.”

Kylie heard the door swing open. Heard her name being called. But that’s when everything went black and her body slumped to the floor.

Chapter Fifteen

Coolness whisked across Kylie's brow and stirred her into a semi-alert state. One that brought on all the "w" questions: Who, What, When, Why, and Where. The musty smell of the pillow answered the Where question.

Camp. Still at camp.

The emotional overload from the last few days filled her chest. She forced her eyes open. Holiday sat on the edge of the bed. Her red hair hung free over her shoulders and concern appeared on her face and shined from her bright green eyes.

"Is she awake?" The hauntingly familiar masculine voice filled her ears and Kylie could hear echoes bouncing around her head. She shifted her gaze to the left.

Holy crap.

Holiday moved the damp cloth across Kylie's brow again. "Hey, you with us now?"

Kylie wasn't listening, or looking at the camp leader. She gazed at ... Lucas Parker—cat killer extraordinaire.

And protector from bullies, Kylie's subconscious pointed out. Though why her subconscious wanted to defend him was beyond Kylie.

What was going on?

Lucas leaned down as if to touch her. Kylie shot up, pushed the cloth from her face. "What happened?" And then, just like that, it all came back at once.

The ghost.

The blood. So much blood.

Then she was hit by another mind-boggling piece of information. She must have passed out. How geeky was that?

“You fainted,” Lucas said, his big voice filling the small room and making it feel even smaller.

Did he have to point out the obvious? And why was he here anyway? Wasn’t there some of kind of “no boys in the bedroom” rule? If not, Kylie needed to see about getting it added.

She glanced over at Holiday.

“It happens sometimes,” Holiday said. “When the ghosts start getting closer.”

“I’m fine now.” She lunged out of bed and doggone if the room didn’t start spinning on its axis. Round and round. Lucas caught her elbow.

His touch was tight, but not enough to hurt.

His touch was warm and somehow warm tingles danced up her arm and made her even more light-headed. But at least things quit spinning.

Her first impulse was to jerk away, but afraid that would be too telling, she forced herself to appear calm. Of course, if he could read her heart rate like Della, she was pretty much screwed.

And speaking of Della, where were ... Kylie shifted her focus to the doorway. Della and Miranda stood there, shoulder against shoulder, peering in as if Kylie was the nightly entertainment. Oh damn, how embarrassing. She could just imagine them running from their hiding spot—because she had the vague memory of hearing running footsteps—and them finding her on the floor. But how had she gotten in the bed?

Kylie glanced away from her roommates to Lucas. Had he picked her up? Held her in his arms? Her heart rate started climbing again. That’s when she realized that he was still touching her.

“I’m fine.” She gave her arm a quick jerk.

He released her, one finger at a time, as if afraid she might fall on her face again. Right before his last finger let go, she noticed his gaze sweep downward. While her pajamas weren’t indecent, she became instantly aware

of how thin her top was—and even more aware of how the scoop neck of the tank scooped lower than most of her tops. Or as Sara would say, her girls were trying to peer out and say howdy a little more than usual.

Kylie took a step back and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Why don’t you let me talk to Kylie alone,” Holiday said to Lucas, who still hadn’t stopped staring, though his gaze had shifted from her chest to her face with a cold indifference.

He nodded, but she saw his dark brows twitch ever so lightly. So he was still trying to read her, was he? Right now, she was relieved knowing that he wouldn’t get anything.

And just like that, another memory from the past surfaced and she remembered Lucas Parker doing the eyebrow thing when she was young. Had he tried to read her then? That thought brought up the question that had been bouncing around her head since she’d first spotted him. Did Lucas remember her?

“We can finish our discussion tomorrow,” Holiday said to Lucas as if dismissing him.

“Okay,” he said, offering Holiday a smile. Then he walked out.

Della and Miranda moved away from the doorway to let him pass. Kylie didn’t miss the unfriendly way Della and Lucas exchanged glances. Was Della worried that Lucas had told Holiday about her cousin Chan’s surprise appearance at camp? Probably.

“Shut the door,” Holiday added as Lucas was almost out.

Kylie looked back at the camp leader, feeling as if she was about to be chastised for ... for what? Fainting? Or had Lucas told her about Chan and now Kylie was in trouble for not speaking up?

“You don’t have to be afraid of Lucas,” Holiday said.

Kylie studied her. “Can you hear my heartbeat, too?”

Holiday grinned. “I read emotions, not heartbeats, but I also read your fear from the way you turned white as a sheet when you saw him.”

Kylie almost blurted out what she knew about Lucas, but she didn’t. It felt too much like tattling. Instead, she asked a question. “Why was he here?”

“He was in the office when Miranda came to get me.”

Kylie looked at the clock; it was almost one in the morning. She couldn't help but wonder exactly what Lucas and Holiday were doing at that hour. Sure, the camp leader was older, but not by many years.

“Are you and he ... close?”

“Depends on what you mean by close.” Holiday arched a brow. “This is his third time here. He's assisting us with some things and even training to work with us next year. But that's all.” Then she asked, “What happened tonight?”

Kylie swallowed, stalling. How much should she tell?

“The ghost appeared again, didn't he?” Holiday asked in the beat of the indecisive silence.

Kylie nodded, yet more than anything, she wanted to deny it. “Yes, but Miranda and Della said that people who are a little loony sometimes give off the same mental image of not being human. So maybe I'm not gifted and maybe the ghost is just a powerful one, like you said sometimes happens. Or I could even have a brain tumor.”

Holiday sighed. “The chances of either one of those are very slim, Kylie. Don't you think?”

“Maybe, but the chance exists,” Kylie insisted. “I mean, you said most of the time ghost whispering stems from ... a condition that's hereditary. That one of my parents had to have been gifted, too.”

“Neither of your parents ever ... showed any signs of being different?”

“No. Never.” Yet even as she answered, she reconsidered her mother's cold nature. Could that qualify as “different”?

“I also told you that in rare situations it can skip a generation.”

“But I knew my grandparents on both sides. Don't most people know if ... if they're not human?”

“Most people do, but...” Holiday stared at her as if disappointed, and then she folded her hands in her lap. “I suppose that's what you should work on while you're here.”

“Work on?”

Holiday stood up. “Everyone here has a quest. Something they’re seeking answers for. I suppose your quest is to discover if you are, or are not, completely human. And if, as I suspect, you are one of us, then you must also decide if you’ll embrace your gifts to help others, or turn your back on them.”

Kylie tried to wrap her mind around the possibility that one of her parents wasn’t human, that they might understand what Kylie was going through. Wouldn’t they have said something to her?

Holiday placed a hand on Kylie’s shoulder. “You should try to get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

She nodded and watched Holiday almost make it out the door before the question popped out. “How ... how do I find the answers? I can’t go to my parents and ask them if they see ghosts. They’d think I was crazy.”

Holiday turned around. “Or maybe one of them would confess the truth to you.”

Kylie shook her head. “But if all this is a mistake, then all of that would be for nothing. They already have me seeing a shrink. If I start talking about ghosts, they might have me committed.”

“It’s your quest, Kylie. Only you can decide how you want to do this.”

* * *

The next morning Kylie and Miranda walked to breakfast together. Della had already taken off by the time Kylie got up. When Kylie asked about Della, Miranda informed her that vampires often held before dawn meetings where they performed rituals.

“What kind of rituals?” Kylie asked.

“Don’t know exactly, but my guess is it has to do with feeding on blood.”

Kylie pressed a hand to her stomach, sorry that she’d asked. Of course, her sickly feeling could partly be due to the fact that she’d hardly slept. Then on second thought, nope, it was for sure the blood. The idea repulsed her in a big way. Seeing the red stuff in those glasses during dinner last night had been too much. If nothing else, at least Kylie might lose a few pounds over

the summer.

They walked the next few minutes in silence. “How did you sleep last night?” Miranda finally asked, although Kylie knew what her roommate really meant. Namely, was Kylie okay and what the hell had happened to make her faint?

Kylie decided to ignore the subtext and answered the question as asked.

“Fine.” Kylie lied, aware the white lies might work with Miranda, just not Della.

In truth, Kylie had stared holes in the ceiling considering what Holiday had said about Kylie’s quest. No matter how Kylie looked at the problem, she couldn’t think of a way to ask her parents if they were not all human.

But she could think of a lot of questions she’d like to ask someone about herself. Questions like: if I am a supernatural what other kind of species could I be? And if I’m not one of you, do I have some kind of a brain tumor? Kylie didn’t know which was worse.

Then the revelation hit. Maybe getting answers to those questions would help her rule out the possibility of being anything but human. It wasn’t the best plan, but it was a start. And she had to start somewhere.

“You didn’t look fine last night,” Miranda said.

She hadn’t been. When Kylie finally went to sleep, she’d dreamed. Crazy, weird dreams that involved Lucas Parker and her. They were swimming. He hadn’t been wearing a shirt and neither had she. She’d woken up, feeling out of breath, and tingly. Tingly the way Trey had made her feel when they’d kissed for a long time. How could her body betray her and actually find Lucas Parker desirable? Not that she would let her body win this one. If there was anything she knew about herself, it was that she could control her desire. She’d gotten really good at stopping Trey, even when stopping had been the last thing she’d wanted.

So that gave her a new goal. Not only would she try and find out if she was human, she was also going to make darn sure she didn’t get close to Lucas.

“I did okay,” Kylie lied again.

“I don’t believe you, but let’s let that slide for now.” Miranda looked away. “Cute vampire dude on the left,” she whispered, totally changing the conversation.

“What?”

“The blond wearing a football jersey,” Miranda whispered again. “What I wouldn’t give to hook up with him.”

“I thought you didn’t like vampires.”

“I never said that. And if I did, it wouldn’t apply to the male vampires, anyway.”

Kylie couldn’t have cared less about a cute vampire, and the last place she wanted her mind to go right now was to thoughts about hooking up with any guy, but her gaze moved to the left on its own accord. No one was there. “Where?”

“Over there.” Miranda nodded in the opposite direction.

“You mean right,” Kylie corrected. “Not left.”

“Right, left. I always get them messed up. I’m dyslexic, remember? But he’s a cutie. Maybe I’ll get his name in the Meet Your Campmates session today.”

The blond guy stood chatting with a group of other boys. Kylie remembered seeing him, but couldn’t remember his name. His stature and overall appearance reminded her of Perry, who was not Kylie’s type. Especially after what happened last night.

“Are you really okay?” Miranda asked after they passed the group of boys. “You looked out of it last night. Your aura went all freaky.”

“I’m fine.” And then because she didn’t want to talk about last night, she asked, “Are you really dyslexic?”

Miranda didn’t answer right away. “Yeah. And according to my family, you’d think it’s something I asked for.” Her tone had lost the giddiness that seemed constant in her voice.

“So is your family all witches?”

“Yeah, but my mom can be a bitch, as well.”

“Aren’t all moms?” Kylie asked.

“Maybe.” Miranda sighed. “Not that I really blame her. I’ve sort of let the family down, big time.”

“How’s that?” Kylie asked.

“I was destined to be the High Priestess next in line. But before I can be given the title, I have to pass some tests. And tests and I just don’t get along. So my family could lose their place in the coven if I can’t come through.”

“Why does it have to be you? Why can’t one of them step up to the plate?”

Miranda sighed. “It doesn’t work that way. It’s me or the honor goes to Britney Jones.”

“Wow, talk about keeping up with the Joneses.” Kylie gave the joke a stab, hoping to make Miranda feel better.

“Yeah.” Miranda’s tone implied the joke fell short.

“Sorry,” Kylie said. “So what would it take for you to pass the tests?”

“Only to overcome dyslexia. Which is basically impossible,” Miranda said. “Ohh, ohh, look to your left—I mean your right. Your purring breast-loving kitten is here. And he’s blushing. You know, it has to be terrible on his ego to have been tossed out on his ass by you.”

“I hope so.” Kylie spotted Perry, and he did appear rather red-faced.

Good.

“You didn’t tell Holiday about him, did you?” Miranda sounded concerned. The girl obviously had a soft spot for the twerp.

“No.” Kylie frowned. “But I might if he does it again.” She didn’t know if Perry had super hearing, but she hoped so.

They were almost to the dining hall, just past the camp office, when the two black suits from yesterday came barreling out of the door.

Kylie slowed down and studied their body language. They weren’t happy. Watching them hotfoot it to the parking lot, Kylie couldn’t help but hope that their little visit today had to do with the closing of the camp.

Right then, the bigger of the guys stopped and swung around. He stood frozen in one spot, staring and twitching his brows at her.

He leaned down and whispered something to the other man and then they

started forward. Right toward Kylie.
Crappers.

Chapter Sixteen

Kylie felt like a trapped animal in the Black Suit's snare.

Dad-blast it. Why was everyone picking on her?

Better question, what in Hades could they want with her? She wasn't even a card-carrying supernatural person yet. And she hoped she got tossed out of the club before she got rubber-stamped.

Lucky for her, at about twenty feet away, the big guy's phone rang. He paused and answered it. Then he turned to his partner and said something and they both shot off.

She let out a held breath. "Thank God."

"What?" Miranda asked, and studied her in confusion.

Remembering that Miranda wasn't a first-timer, she asked, "Who are they?" She nodded to the retreating black-suited men who were now getting into a black sedan.

"Who?" Miranda asked, staring at another group of boys.

"The Black Suits?" Kylie asked.

"Gross, they are way too old for you." Miranda pulled a hair band from her pocket and put her multicolored hair up in a ponytail.

Kylie shot her roommate a glance. *Honestly, were boys the only things Miranda ever thought about?*

"I'm not interested in hooking up," Kylie said, and started walking again. "I'm just curious."

"Oh. They're from the FRU." Miranda fell into step beside her.

"And who are they?" Kylie asked.

“It stands for the Fallen Research Unit. You know, like Fallen, Texas? The city we passed through to get here? The FRU is basically a part of the FBI. The part that deals with supernaturals.”

“What?” Kylie stopped and grabbed Miranda by the arm. “You mean, the government knows about vampires and such?”

Miranda made a face. “Of course they do. Who do you think funds the camp?”

“I thought our parents did.” Kylie started moving again when she noticed a couple of people staring at them.

“Well, they pay some, but it takes a lot more to keep this place up.”

“But why is the government behind this?”

“Well, that depends on who you ask. The camp has caused a lot of controversy in the supernatural community. Mostly just a lot of bigots mouthing off, if you ask me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of the elders in each species, mostly old farts who don’t believe in interracial relationships, claim the camp encourages it and they want the camp closed down. To their way of thinking, each species should stick to their own kind. To me, it’s the same thing as race. They say we should maintain the purity of the species, but that’s a bunch of bull. The species have been crossing since the beginning of time.”

Kylie tried to digest it. “So the government has the camp because they want the species to get married?”

Miranda laughed. “I don’t think the government cares who we hook up with. They’re doing it to try to promote peace between the species so we don’t go bat-shit crazy one day and try to wipe each other off the face of the planet. Humans included.”

“Are there problems between the species?”

Miranda looked surprised. “You really are ignorant to all this, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Kylie admitted, and didn’t even feel bad about it. She hadn’t even known other species existed when she’d climbed on board the bus. How

could she be informed?

“Okay, here’s a quick history slash political lesson,” Miranda said. “Vampires and werewolves have been waging war against each other for, like, forever. What do you think the Civil War was really about?” She hesitated. “My own ancestors aren’t much better. The Black Plague was set off because they wanted to annihilate fairies.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Kylie asked. And to think she’d listened to her history teacher when he’d said it had been spread by infected rodents.

“Serious as a heart attack. However, in defense of my own kind, witches are the species who are succeeding best at conforming into the human world. There’re less covens that actually live in groups. But of course, that’s also because our lifestyles are easier to blend with the human lifestyle. We also aren’t involved in near as many gangs, causing problems for the humans.”

“Gangs? You mean like the vampire gang?”

“So you’ve heard of the Blood Brothers?” Miranda asked.

Not wanting to mention Della’s cousin, Kylie shrugged. “Della just mentioned that gangs exist.”

“Exist? Oh, yeah. Of all the gangs, the Blood Brothers are probably the worst. They’re into everything, all kinds of crimes. A good mix of everything. Murder, robbery.”

Stealing Big Macs. The concept rolled around Kylie’s brain. “But how come we don’t hear about these gangs or crimes on the nightly news?”

“You do. You just don’t know they’re not human. The crimes are always explained by serial killers, just murders, then there’s the missing people. Haven’t you heard how many people go missing every year?”

“I guess so.” Kylie felt a chill straight through to her bones. She wrapped her arms around her chest and shivered.

“To rogue vampires or werewolves, the rest of us are food,” Miranda said.

Kylie thought about Della’s cousin calling her a snack and wondered if he was rogue. Then she thought about Della’s blending issues and concerns about leaving her family. “This is so screwed up.”

“Not any less screwed up than the human race,” Miranda said.

“I guess not,” Kylie admitted, remembering she had her own human issues happening at home.

Right then she remembered another and more immediate problem she had to contend with. “What’s the Meet Your Campmates Hour really about?”

“Oh, it’s kind of cool.” Miranda grew animated again. “Half of us write our names on a piece of paper and the other half draws. We are paired together and spend an hour getting to know each other. Of course, it’s always better if you get a hot guy.”

Great, with Kylie’s luck, she’d get stuck with Perry. She felt her face grow red when she remembered she’d checked his genitals.

* * *

After breakfast, Kylie stepped out of the dining hall to talk to Sara who’d gone to the drugstore to buy a pregnancy test earlier that morning. Unfortunately, she’d bumped into her mom’s best friend at the checkout counter. Sara had been able to ditch the test before the woman noticed it, but the whole encounter had brought her right back to where she started—with no idea if she was pregnant or not.

“How’s it going at the camp?” Sara asked.

“Just peachy,” Kylie answered. She would have loved to have talked to her best friend about everything that had happened but she knew better. No way would Sara understand when Kylie herself didn’t.

“That bad, huh?” Sara replied. “Aren’t there any cute guys?”

“A few,” Kylie answered, and then she changed the subject back to Sara, and they talked for another ten minutes about Sara’s dilemma.

Kylie still had her phone in her hand when her mom called a second after she’d ended her conversation with Sara.

“How was your first night?” her mom asked.

“Okay,” Kylie lied, still undecided how to deal with her mom and her questions.

“No night terrors?” her mom asked.

“No,” Kylie answered. *No, as in I didn’t wake up screaming bloody murder. I just passed out when a bloody ghost showed up for a visit. After a visit from a shape-shifting kitten and a perverted toad.*

“That’s good,” her mom said. “So what all are you doing today?” Her mom’s voice had that fake cheeriness that Kylie always hated because she knew it wasn’t real.

“I have meetings with one of the camp leaders, a meet-and-greet hour where you meet one-on-one with another camper, and then I think there’s some kind of art program and a hike this afternoon.”

“Sounds like a full day,” her mom answered.

“Sounds boring,” Kylie retorted.

Her mom ignored her remark. “Have you spoken with your dad?”

Kylie hesitated. “He called and left a message, but I haven’t had a chance to call him back.” Another lie. She’d had a chance, she just didn’t know if she could lie as well to him as she did to her mom.

“Well, when you do, check and see if he plans to come up Sunday for parents day. If so, I’ll wait until next week.”

“You two can’t even be in the same room together now?” Kylie asked, not trying to hide her feelings. Her throat tightened with emotion. “Couldn’t you two have at least stayed together until I left for college?”

“It’s difficult, Kylie,” her mom said.

“Yeah, on everyone.” The emotion grew in her throat, but when she looked up she saw Della walking toward her and she fought back the need to cry. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Okay,” her mom said. “Have a good day and call me tonight, okay?”

“Yeah.” Kylie closed the phone just as Della stepped up beside her.

“Hey,” Kylie said. “I looked for you during breakfast.”

“I ate earlier.” She rubbed her stomach and Kylie tried not to think about what Miranda said about the vampire rituals. But the thought was already there, making the half of the Danish she’d consumed feel heavy in the pit of her stomach.

“You’ll get used to it.” Della grinned as if she knew what had caused

Kylie's frown.

"Maybe," Kylie said. Then, remembering to be honest with Della, she added, "But I doubt it."

Della chuckled, then her smile faded. "Sorry about your parents. How long have they been separated?"

"Do you make it a habit of eavesdropping?" Kylie slid her phone in her pocket.

"I wasn't trying to listen in." Resentment rang in Della's voice. "It just, you know, happened."

Kylie bit down on her lower lip and let go of her frustration when she remembered that Della had confided in her about her own family issues. "I'm sorry. It's just hard. It happened last week."

"I can imagine." Sincerity creased Della's forehead. Then her expression changed. "Oh, I almost forgot what I came to tell you. Remember I told you Derek had a little thing for you? I was wrong. It's not little. It's a big thing."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because Brian, the blond vampire, just drew your name for the Meet Your Campmates Hour and Derek asked him to swap."

Kylie compared spending an hour with a strange vampire to spending an hour with Derek, who made her miss Trey, and she didn't know which was worse. "What did Brian say?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

"He said no ... unless Derek was willing to pay for it."

"No way. Tell me he didn't give him cash to get my name."

"Okay. He didn't give cash to get your name." Della laughed and leaned in as if she had some juicy secret to tell. "He's paying in blood, Kylie. A pint, to be exact."

"Blood?" Kylie stood there shocked. The shock quickly turned into disgust. "He can't do that," she said.

"He can and he did. They made a deal. And believe me, you never go back on a blood deal with a vampire."

Kylie shot off to the dining hall to find Derek.

She could not, would not, let him do this.

Chapter Seventeen

Derek came through the door just as Kylie rushed in to find him. “Hey, I was coming to look for you.” He held up a tiny strip of paper. “I got your name.” He smiled.

His smile came off so warm, that if Kylie wasn’t so furious, and disgusted, she could have gotten lost in it.

“Yeah, I know. I heard.” She squinted at him in disapproval.

He studied her and then cautiously added, “I thought we’d take a walk. I found a great spot when I went hiking yesterday.”

“Look, I’m flattered but you can’t do this, Derek,” she snapped.

“Do what?” A frown replaced his smile.

“I know what you did to get my name. And I can’t let you do that.”

“It’s nothing.” He started walking away from the door, and then looked back at her when she didn’t follow. “You coming?”

“It’s blood,” she seethed, and closed the two steps separating them and grabbed him by the forearm. “Come on, I’m gonna make this right.” She gave him a tug, but he didn’t budge. That’s when she noticed how solid his arm felt under her hand.

He leaned in. “It’s done, Kylie. Let’s just go spend our hour together, okay?” His scent—a combination of spicy men’s soap and Derek—wafted over her.

“You’ve already ... done it?” Her gaze shot to his neck.

“No, but the deal’s done.”

“I’ll undo it,” she said, trying to ignore his scent and how much she liked

it ... and how much she liked him. Realizing she still held his arms, she let go. Touching him caused her to recall how she used to touch Trey. How much she liked Trey, missed Trey.

Derek's frown tightened. "You can't undo it. So just come on. Please."

She stood there staring at him. "At least let me try."

He closed his eyes for a second, and then he lowered his head closer and whispered, "Please trust me on this, Kylie. There is nothing you can do to change it."

Something about his voice seemed to reach deep inside her and scramble her thoughts. Or perhaps it was how his breath whispered against her jaw line, the soft, sweet tickle right below her ear that made it impossible to think.

Impossible to tell him no.

"Okay." But even as she crated to his wishes, she told herself she had to be careful. Derek, for whatever reasons, had some kind of power over her and that could be dangerous.

His green eyes focused right on her baby blue ones and he smiled again. "Let's go."

He held out his hand. She almost took it, but managed to refrain at the last second.

"I'll follow." She stuck her hands in her pockets.

Disappointment weakened his smile, but he nodded and started walking. And she did what she told him she'd do. She followed.

They didn't talk for the first five minutes as they started up a trail. Then he turned off the trail and led her up through a thick patch of trees and bushes. Between yesterday with Della and now this, it would be a miracle if she didn't come down with poison oak. Or worse, chiggers.

Just when she was about to say something, she heard the soft sound of running water, as if they were about to come across a small stream.

"It's right here." He glanced back at her, his eyes carrying a smile even when his lips didn't.

She followed him for a few more feet and then stopped and stared at the stream and the humongous boulder, about the size of a twin-size bed, perched

on the edge overlooking the trickling water. The morning sun streamed through the trees, making everything seem so green, so lush. So alive.

Kylie inhaled the air, which smelled just like everything looked—fresh, verdant, and wet. In the distance she could hear what she thought was a waterfall—Shadow Falls. It had to be. The sound of cascading water filled the silence and somehow seemed to call out to her.

“Is there a waterfall around here?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it’s prettier here.” Derek hopped up on the rock. “Come on.” Once settled, he held out his hand to help her up.

She moved in but before she took his hand, the question popped out. “Why did you do it?”

He looked down at her. “Do what?”

“You know what,” she accused.

“Are we still stuck on that?” He shook his head. “It’s not a big deal, Kylie. Now come up and sit down. This place is even more amazing when you look at it from this angle.”

She took his hand and with hardly any effort he pulled her up. Letting go as soon as she had her footing, she found her spot, careful not to sit too close.

Not that it helped all that much.

Feeling his gaze on her, she looked out at the stream and tried to refocus. “Wow,” she muttered. “You’re right. It’s prettier from up here.” And it was. The extra height offered a better view of the flowing water. The streams of light sneaking from the trees hit the water and made it twinkle. From this angle, the whole place seemed to be bathed in a mixture of shadows and light, and it reminded her of something she might have seen in fairy-tale book. Almost ... magical.

“Why?” she asked again without looking at him.

“I was curious about you. I’ve been curious ever since I saw you standing by your mom before you got on the bus. You were so sad and...”

She remembered Miranda saying that some fairies could read your thoughts and before he could continue, she spoke up. “Can you read my mind?” Turning to him, she felt her face heat at some of the more

embarrassing thoughts she'd had about him.

"No." He smiled and in this light, his green eyes with golden flecks literally sparkled. "Why are you blushing? What have you been thinking about me?" He leaned a tad closer until his forehead rested against hers. Her heart did a flip and her next breath tasted sweeter. Realizing she was staring, she remembered what he'd asked.

She didn't answer his question, just asked another one. "Then how did you know I was so sad?"

He hesitated and his smile faded. "I can't read thoughts, but I can read some basic emotions."

She looked at him and sensed he was telling her the truth.

"For some reason I cause a mixture of emotions in you. Some positive, some not so positive, but I'm not sure why."

He was being honest, and Kylie felt she owed him the same in return. "You ... you remind me of someone I know."

He picked a twig off of a tree and studied it. "A good someone, or a bad someone?"

"Both. He's my ex-boyfriend."

"I see." He waited for a minute and then asked, "What happened between you two?"

"He broke up with me."

"Why?" he asked.

She'd offered him some of the truth, but not about this. "You'd have to ask him." It was a lame answer and she knew it the moment the words spilled.

"But he's not here and you are." He took the twig and brushed the leaves across her cheek. Then he followed the path with his finger. He was coming on to her and she didn't exactly know how to stop it.

In truth, she didn't know if she wanted to stop it. Unlike what had been going on lately, these feeling were not so foreign to her. Not that she needed to get caught up in something else right now.

She looked away and tried to clear her head. "What's it like being fairy ...

Fae?”

“Half,” he said.

She glanced back at him and remembered thinking that, just like her, he didn’t sound too thrilled by the idea of being a supernatural. She also realized this might be her opportunity to learn something about the whole fairy species. After all, according to Holiday, Kylie could be part fairy.

“So what’s it like being half fairy?”

“It could be worse, I guess.” He stared at the twig.

“Who did you inherit it from?”

He cut his eyes to her again. “For someone who doesn’t like to answer any questions, you ask a lot.”

He had a point.

“Okay, I’ll tell you about me, but then you tell me about you? Deal?”

He arched an eyebrow and actually seemed to consider it. “Okay.” He leaned back on his arms and studied her.

The position made his chest seem extra wide. She found herself comparing him again to Trey. And sorry, Trey, she thought, but Derek won the best body award. Then again, it wasn’t just his body. She studied his face. His features were ... more masculine. More chiseled.

Chasing that thought out of her head before she started emitting emotion he might read, she started talking. “I don’t know what I am. I think I’m just human but—”

“You’re not human,” he said, and looked at her in that odd way everyone did here.

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know I don’t have a normal brain reading, or whatever it is that you guys read. But I found out that normal humans can give off this same reading if they’re a little off, like halfway crazy. And sometimes I’m pretty sure I’m crazy. Or,” she admitted with less enthusiasm, “the other option is that I could have a brain tumor. And I’ve had lots of headaches lately, too.”

His expression said he was horrified by the idea. “Have you been checked?”

“No.” And until she saw the concern in his eyes, she hadn’t allowed herself to honestly be worried about it. But God, what if she really did have a brain tumor? What if ...

His brow pinched as if confused. “But ... what about seeing ghosts?”

“How did you know...?” She recalled asking him if he saw ghosts. “Some humans can see ghosts. Even Holiday said so.”

He tilted his head in a very disbelieving way. “So you really believe you’re just human?”

His question brought a swell of emotion to her chest. “Yeah.” She paused and then added, “Okay, the truth is, I don’t know what I believe.”

And without warning, tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, damn. Don’t do that.” He reached over and brushed a tear from her lashes. His touch was so warm, so comforting, she almost reached for his hand and held it to her face.

Instead, she moved his hand back and wiped her own eyes. “I’m just so confused. I mean, these last few months have been hell. My boyfriend breaks up with me, my grandmother dies, my parents are getting a divorce, and then I start seeing this dead soldier guy. Now I’m being told that I’m not human and...”

He pulled her against him and she didn’t fight it. She rested her head on the nice spot between his shoulder and chest and just breathed in his scent. Amazingly comfortable, she closed her eyes. Somehow just being like this made the knot of emotion crowding out her heart go away.

“I’m sorry.” She pulled away. “I know guys hate it when girls do this.”

“Do they?”

“Trey did,” she answered.

“I’m not Trey.” Then Derek added, “Actually, it wasn’t so bad.” He smiled and touched her cheek. “Besides, your nose is kind of cute when it turns red like that.”

She swatted his hand and grinned. She wasn’t sure, but it felt like the first real smile she’d had in weeks. “Okay, now it’s your turn. Tell me about you.”

The playfulness vanished from his eyes. Leaning back a little, he pressed

his palms against the rock to hold himself up. And sitting there, his muscles in his arms flexed, his eyes all serious, he looked good. Really good.

“But you are so much more interesting,” he said, his voice low as if he could read her emotions and knew the reaction she was having to his presence.

“You promised. Besides, I told you everything.”

His tilted his head forward and looked up at her through his dark lashes. “You haven’t told me everything.” His voice held the slightest hint of an accusing tone. “As a matter of fact, there’s the thing I’m the most curious about.”

“What thing? What else is there?” she asked, and tried not to get caught up in enjoying the view again.

“What’s up between you and—”

“I’m not talking about Trey and me. That’s ... too personal.”

“Okay, but I wasn’t going to say Trey. I meant what’s going on between you and the werewolf?”

Chapter Eighteen

Kylie pushed her hair behind her ear. *Deny it. Deny that anything is up.*

“What ... werewolf?” she asked, but darn if her voice didn’t lack conviction.

Derek’s eyes stared right at her. His gaze reminded her of Della’s when she knew Kylie had lied.

“Don’t deny it,” he said. “Your emotions were all over the place every time you glanced at him. Kind of like when you look at me, only ... more. You either really like him, or ... he scares you.”

“I thought you could read emotions?”

He sat up and crossed his arms over his chest. “Passion and fear read almost the same.”

“Well, trust me, it’s definitely the latter,” she answered, but after last night’s dream she knew the truth could have been summed up better with one word. *Both*. But she hadn’t admitted that to herself yet. She sure as heck didn’t plan on admitting it to Derek.

“So where do you know him from?” he asked.

“Who says—”

Derek held up his hand to stop her. “It’s not normal to be that scared of people we don’t know.”

She glanced down at her clutched hands. “He lived beside me when I was young. Let’s just say I knew something was off with him then. I just didn’t know what it was ... the whole werewolf thing.”

“Did he—”

“No more.” It was her turn to offer him the determined stare. “I’ve given you all I’m going to. It’s your turn.”

He looked at the stream and she sensed he disliked talking about himself as much as she did. “What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Only everything,” she said with a certain amount of teasing in her voice, hoping to put him at ease.

“My father was Fae. My mother’s human.”

“Was?” she asked. “You said your father was Fae. Did he pass away?”

He picked another twig from the bush and twirled it around with his fingers. “Don’t know. Don’t care. He left when I was eight. A real deadbeat dad, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry.” Kylie sensed he cared a lot more than he wanted her to believe.

“Did you know he was Fae?” She brushed an ant from her arm.

“Yeah, I don’t remember ever not knowing. But after he left, we didn’t really talk about it or him a lot. Mom was crushed that he walked out.”

His mom hadn’t been the only one crushed. Kylie saw sadness in his eyes that he tried to hide. Her own chest felt heavy—heavy for him, and perhaps a little for herself. Her own father issues hadn’t disappeared. They waited in line with everything else she had to fret over and sort out. Then she remembered that this was Derek’s time. He’d listened to her and she owed him the same.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Why? I’m not. If he didn’t want me, I sure as hell didn’t want him.”

He couldn’t lie any better than she could, Kylie thought. “Did you know you were gifted all your life?”

He stared at the piece of stem with a few leaves still attached to it that he had in his hand. “No. I mean, I knew I could read people better than most, but I wasn’t even sure it was ... because of being Fae. It wasn’t until about a year ago that tapping into people’s emotions got stronger. And then ... I finally realized I was different.”

“How are you different?” She felt her eyes moving to his chest,

remembering how good it had felt to rest against him. The craziest thought hit. What would it feel like to kiss him?

He tilted his head to the right and studied her. “How much do I look like your old boyfriend?”

Were her emotions so readable, she wondered, feeling her face flush. “Not that much, but ... enough that...”

“That you’re attracted to me?”

Feeling her face heat to a nice shade of red, she looked back at the stream. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Why not?” His breath was on her cheek again. Warm. Soft. Tempting. When had he gotten this close? Uncomfortable with how near his mouth was to hers, and how tempted she was to let it get even closer, she jumped down from the rock.

“Stop!” he said.

“What?” She turned around to look at him. “I think we—”

“Don’t move,” he said in low, very serious voice.

“Why? I—”

Something rustled in the bushes beside her. Kylie looked down and saw a huge snake slinking out from the thick underbrush. A huge grayish black snake with a pointed nose, the kind of nose her father made her aware of so she would know the difference between a nonpoisonous and a poisonous snake when she went on their camping trips.

Panic built as she recognized the species. A water moccasin, which just so happened to be the most aggressive snake found in Texas.

And one of the most poisonous, too.

The snake moved in tight S-like patterns—patterns that brought it closer to Kylie. Fear swelled inside her. A scream crawled up her throat. Logic said that she couldn’t move away from the snake fast enough to avoid getting bitten. Logic said she needed to stay very still, but ... the hell with logic—she wanted that thing away from her.

Derek’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “It’s okay.” His voice was so low, so soft. “It’s just passing by. Stay very still. Let it go. I’m here. Nothing

is going to happen.”

His hand grew warmer, unnaturally warm, and just like that, her fear vanished. Her heart stopped racing and the clutching in her stomach eased. She watched the snake’s fat, chubby body slither across the tip of her Reeboks as if it were a butterfly passing by. Something in her brain told her that the calm she now felt, the absence of fear, wasn’t normal; that somehow Derek had done this to her. She wasn’t even afraid of that right now. It was as if Derek’s touch had removed her ability to experience fear, leaving only curiosity in its place.

Curiosity about the snake.

About how it moved like that.

Curiosity about Derek. How had he changed her emotions? What would it feel like to lose herself in his kisses? Would he make her feel the way Trey had? Maybe even better?

“You’re doing good. It’s almost gone,” he whispered.

And then it was gone. Its round body slipped into the stream, causing only the slightest of ripples as it sank down and moved with the water’s current.

Derek kept his hand on her shoulder as she watched the creature disappear among the rocks. Then, slowly, he lifted his palm away. The storm of emotion hit her so hard that she screamed. When screaming alone wasn’t enough, she swung around, and started climbing the rock. Her heart pumped in her chest, as if it might burst, and her stomach felt as if it knotted all the way around her backbone.

Derek caught her as she ascended, but she didn’t stop moving, thinking only about getting away from the slithering snake.

“It’s all right,” he said, laughing, and fell back on the huge rock, carrying her with him. She landed half on top of him. His arms came around her, but not too tightly. His hands gently rested on her back.

Blinking, she felt her panic evaporate, and she met his green eyes. This close, the flecks of gold seemed brighter. Her gaze lowered to his mouth, to his lips that appeared so soft, so inviting.

The warmth of his body melted against hers. His natural scent worked its

way into her senses. She caught her breath.

“You okay now?” he asked, his voice deeper.

“Yeah.” When he stole her panic, had he taken her willpower, too, because she really wanted Derek to kiss her. Or she could just kiss him. It sounded like a damn good idea to her. She inched a bit nearer until his lips were so close to hers she could feel their heat.

“Let her go!” a dark male voice boomed from behind them.

Chapter Nineteen

“Let her go, now!”

The deeply serious voice rang a few familiar bells, but quicker than she could wrap her brain around it, Derek shot up with a force that sent Kylie rolling right to the edge of the rock.

Right before Kylie fell, Derek caught her. As soon as she felt secure, she raised her head. Lucas leered at them from the edge of the stream. The flickering of sun and shadows surrounded him, adding to his intimidating presence. His light blue eyes pierced into them with the harshest of stares.

“She’s fine,” Derek said, his tone matching his stern expression.

Feeling suddenly foolish, she felt the need to explain. “I saw a snake.”

Lucas inhaled. He looked around on the ground. “A water moccasin.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I screamed.”

“It’s gone,” Derek said, and his words implied that Lucas should be gone as well.

“I heard her scream,” Lucas said, as if he, too, felt the need to explain his behavior.

The two guys stared at each other, neither saying a word. Kylie got the distinct feeling they didn’t get along. She wondered if fairies and werewolves also had bad blood between them. Heck, for all she knew, World War II could ...

“She’s not screaming anymore,” Derek said.

“I’m fine.” She jumped down from the rock—after giving the ground a quick check for snakes first.

When she looked up, Lucas had turned his disapproving gaze on her. “If you’re that scared of snakes, maybe you should stay out of the woods.”

“I’m not that scared, it just—”

“I took care of her,” Derek said. His tone was dark, almost angry.

“Yeah, I saw how you were doing that.”

Derek sat up higher on the rock as if he was ready to leap down. “Look, if you have a problem—”

Lucas apparently didn’t care to hear what Derek had to say because he swung around and in less than a second, he was gone.

Kylie blushed, realizing how the situation must have appeared to Lucas. Then seeing the unhappy expression on Derek’s face, she said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have screamed, it was just—”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Derek offered her his hand to pull her back up. “He was being a jerk and overreacting. He didn’t have to come here. I wouldn’t have let anything happen to you.”

She stared at Derek’s hand and remembered how her fear had subsided with his intense touch.

“What happened just now?” she asked.

“He just overreacted—”

“No. Not with Lucas. With your touch...”

“What do you mean? My touch?”

Other questions started buzzing around like bees gone wild. “How did you know the snake was here?”

The look, the one that said he didn’t like talking about himself, returned but she wasn’t about to let him off this hook. Not this time.

“Wait. Did you make that snake come here?” she asked.

He frowned. “Do you think I’d put you in danger just for kicks?”

Did she believe that? “No. I don’t. But you knew it was here. You knew it was here before it showed itself.”

“I only knew a second before. If I had known earlier, I’d have stopped you from getting down.”

The sun sprayed a new bright stream of light through the trees and it hit

her eyes, making it hard to see. “How? How did you know?”

He jumped from the rock, landing solid on his feet beside her. “It’s part of my gift,” he said, but he didn’t sound happy about it.

“You can predict the future?” she asked.

“I wish.”

“Then what?”

“I can read the emotions of animals and creatures.” He tucked the tips of his fingers into his pockets.

“Wow.” She attempted to wrap her mind around it. “That’s...”

“Weird, I know,” he growled. “Like I’m Tarzan or something. Holiday says I can shut it off, and that’s why I’m here. To learn how. But Holiday’s not thrilled about my quest. She thinks I’m going to be letting down some Fae god if I turn my back on my gift. But the Fae god can just go to hell. I didn’t ask for this. The only Fae in my life left me and Mom. Why the hell would I want to be like him?”

Kylie heard the pain in his voice and related in a big way. “You wouldn’t. I’m sorry.”

She meant it, too. Not just because she understood all about parental resentment right now, but because like him, if she turned out to be supernatural, she’d be shipping the gift back to sender. While Derek’s plight contained a lot of emotional baggage, Kylie’s contained a heck of a lot of questions. And the unknown brought on its own emotional issues. While she knew the truth could prove to be painful, she needed answers.

And standing in the middle of the woods, with the mixture of sun and shadows, feeling submersed in the supernatural world, she became determined to find those answers.

She met Derek’s gaze again. “Communicating with animals can’t be nearly as bad as ... some other things.”

He kicked a rock into the stream. It splashed and seemed to blend in with the other woodsy noises. “Like seeing ghosts?” he asked, understanding more than she wanted him to.

“Among other things,” she said honestly. “I can’t imagine waking up and

realizing I have to drink ... blood.” Just the mention of the word reminded her of what Derek had done to get her name for this hour chat.

And she couldn’t let him do it. She didn’t know how to stop it, but she had to try.

She looked at her watch. “We should probably be heading back.”

Reaching over, he took her hand in his and turned her wrist over so he could see the time. The feel of his hand sent a sweet electrical current up her arm and it reminded her how close she had come to letting Derek kiss her. Or had she almost kissed him?

“We have a half hour,” he said, holding her hand.

She pulled away, recalling how his touch had controlled her emotions when she’d seen the snake. He’d probably saved her life, but that wasn’t the point. She didn’t like the thought of anyone trying to control her. Or manipulate her, either. “Yeah,” she said, “but we still need to see about how we’re going to get you out of giving blood.”

His expression darkened. “The deal’s already made, there’s no going back. And besides, it’s not an issue.”

“What if he turns you into a vampire?”

His eyes widened. “Oh, hell, you think I’m going to let him bite me? No way. It’s too risky and way too gay.”

She blushed, feeling ignorant. “Then how do you plan to do it?”

“The same way you give blood at a blood drive. With a sterile needle and an IV bag.”

She stood there staring at him, questions coming quicker than she could line them up to ask. “You’re going to a doctor’s office to get it done? How will—”

“No.” He laughed. “Most vampires carry their own supplies. They’re better than most nurses at finding veins. It’s one of the first things a vampire is taught. How to get blood without killing the donor.”

Had Della brought her own blood-draining equipment? “How do you know how vampires...?”

“Feed? I’ve done it a couple of times.” His smile made her feel even more

ignorant.

“You’ve given blood to a vampire before?”

He nodded. “Like I’ve been saying, it’s not a big deal.”

“Who? And how did you even know vampires existed?”

“Her name’s Ellie. We go to school together. And you’re forgetting that all supernaturals recognize each other.”

Yes, she had forgotten the whole eyebrow wiggling thing. And for a darn good reason, too. She didn’t “read” supernaturals, which gave her a little more hope that she wasn’t one of them. Then she wondered if she had any supernaturals in her school back home. Besides Lucas for that short time.

“How many are there?” she asked, even though she was afraid to hear the answer. “How many supernaturals are there compared to humans?”

“I think the consensus puts us a little less than one percent, but growing. Why?”

“Just wondering if I went to school with any.”

“You could have,” he said. “But not likely. Most supernaturals go to private schools or are home-schooled. For obvious reasons.”

“What reasons?” she asked.

“Species issues mostly. Most believe that they need to learn a different history. And most of them can afford it since they use their gifts to become financially well off.”

They? Kylie noticed that Derek didn’t completely view himself as one of them, either. “So you went to a private school?”

He shook his head. “Dad bailed, remember?”

“Yeah.” She sifted through her other questions. “What about the girl you know? Ellie, right? She went to your school?”

“She’s a recently turned vampire,” he said. “She hasn’t gone to live with her kind yet.”

Kylie thought about Della. “Do they all have to go live with their kind?”

“Not from what Ellie said. But I know it isn’t easy for her to blend in with the normals.”

Kylie heard the sense of caring in his voice and her curiosities took a U-

turn away from Della's problems, away from the whole supernatural business to a more personal business.

"Are you and Ellie close?" Embarrassed at how she almost sounded jealous, Kylie shook her head, but she couldn't stop from continuing. "Duh, you gave her your blood. Of course you're close."

He arched his brows and another one of those almost smiles tickled his lips and made his eyes brighter. "Is this your way of asking if we're still together?" The green twinkle in his eye said he liked her interest.

"No." At least she didn't think it was, but oh heck, she wasn't completely sure.

"We broke up about six months ago."

"Why?" she asked, and then just as quickly wished she could take it back.

"She met a werewolf." Resentment laced his voice.

"Not Lucas?" Kylie asked.

"No, not him."

Kylie remembered. "I didn't think vampires and werewolves got along."

"Neither did the Hatfields and the McCoys."

A soft wind blew and a strand of her hair whipped across her face and caught between her lips.

He brushed it back. The tips of his fingers whispered over her cheek, causing all sorts of tingles to run down her neck. She caught his hand, felt the tingles intensify, and then released it just as fast.

"What happened earlier?" she asked before she lost her nerve. "When you touched me."

He stuck both his hands into his jeans pockets, as if he were trying to fight his temptation to touch her again.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, but she could tell he was lying.

She shook her head. "Don't lie to me, Derek. When you touched me, you changed how I felt and we both know it."

He looked shocked that she'd figured that out. "I just stopped you from being afraid so you wouldn't do something stupid and get bit."

"So when you touch someone, you can control their emotions?"

“Yeah,” he said as if wasn’t a big deal.

But it was a big deal, to her anyway. How much of the whole attraction she felt for him was even real? How much of it was because he made her feel it?

Something cold and hard wrapped itself around her heart. “Did you do it before?”

“Do what before?” He looked truly confused now, or was he just faking it?

“Mess with my emotions.”

He studied her. “Why are you getting angry?”

“Did you do this, Derek? Did you make me feel the way I feel about you?”

He looked insulted. “No,” he said with conviction, but she wasn’t convinced.

She poked him in his chest. “So help me, Derek, if—”

He caught her hand and she flinched.

“What? Now you’re afraid of me?” He shook his head. “First you justified what you feel for me because I look like your old boyfriend. And now you think I’m messing with your emotions. Why is it so hard to think that you could just like me?”

“Because you have the power to do it, don’t you? You have the power to make me like you.” She took a deep breath and continued. “Have you ever used this to convince a girl to do things she normally wouldn’t?”

His eyes tightened. “Wow,” he said in an accusing tone. “You are just looking for a reason to dislike me, aren’t you? That boyfriend of yours really did a number on you.”

Maybe. But that was beside the point. She was almost certain that her feelings now had more to do with Derek than Trey. The simple truth was that liking Derek was going to complicate the next few months. She had enough crap on her plate, and she didn’t need this, too.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said, standing a little straighter. “Have you ever used this power on a girl to get what you wanted from her?”

His frown grew almost angry, but she could swear she spotted a bit of guilt in his eyes, too. He looked away.

“If you don’t answer me, I’ll assume the worst,” she said.

“Fine.” He faced her. “I’ve used it to get a girl’s attention, but I’ve never used it to get her to sleep with me. That would be rape. And I don’t care how much you want to dislike me, Kylie, I won’t pretend I’m something bad just to make you feel better.” He waved back to the path through which they’d come. “I think we should probably get back.”

She heard the hurt in his voice. Instant embarrassment shot through her and she realized what a cold bitch she was being. God, maybe she was just like her mom after all.

He started walking. She followed. They walked in silence. “Hey,” she finally said, unable to hold it back any longer.

“What?” He didn’t look at her and kept on moving down the trail.

“I didn’t mean to imply that you were some kind of rapist.”

“Then what were you trying to imply?” He still didn’t look at her.

She tried to think how to put what she needed to say. She hated reaching for the old cliché but it was all she could come up with on short notice. “I like you, Derek, I do. But I’m thinking we should just be friends.”

He laughed but the sound had no humor. “So you’re going to deny that you feel anything.” His pace picked up. “You’re going to deny that you almost kissed me back there. That you wanted to kiss me.”

Increasing the pace of her own footsteps, she wanted to deny it, and almost did, but caught herself before she lied. “No, I’m not denying it, but I can’t trust how I feel right now.”

He swung around. “Because you think I’m messing with your emotions?”

“No. Yes. Okay, maybe that’s a part of it, but it’s also because you remind me so much of Trey. Look, I have all this other stuff happening to me right now.” Emotion tightened her voice. “Things at home are crazy. I’m seeing ghosts. I have people telling me I’m not all human, and I’m halfway hoping I find out that I’m just crazy or that I have a brain tumor.” She blinked and refused to cry again. “I don’t need *this*, too.” She waved a hand between

them. “But I really need a friend.”

He sent her a look of resignation. “Okay. If friendship is all you’re offering, then I’ll take it. Don’t like it, but I’ll take it.”

“Thank you,” she said, meaning it.

He nodded and studied her as if reading her emotions again. Heck, maybe he could read them and then tell her what it all meant, because right now she felt like a scrambled mess.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said.

“Is it?” She paused. “I just don’t know where to start to find the answers.”

Derek drew a deep breath and then looked around as though he was afraid they might be overheard although there wasn’t anyone else in sight. He leaned in closer.

“I don’t have all the answers,” he said, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. “And I don’t even think this is an issue, but ... there’s one thing you might try.”

Chapter Twenty

“Tell me,” Kylie said, eager for any help she could get. “I’m willing to try anything at this point.”

Well, almost anything.

“There’s a girl here,” Derek said. “She’s Fae, too. Her name’s Helen.”

“I met her,” Kylie said. “She was in the group with me when Holiday explained why we were here.”

“Yeah. Her gift is healing. But when she was telling us about herself she said that even before her sister’s tumor was found, she could see it. Personally, I don’t think you have a tumor, but if you’re concerned about it, maybe Helen can check you out. At least you’d stop worrying about it.”

“That’s an excellent idea.” Kylie almost hugged him, but decided at the last moment it wasn’t wise. She really didn’t want to encourage Derek that they could be more than friends. At least not now, a little voice inside her whispered—the little voice that really liked how it felt to be close to him, the same little voice that had wanted her to kiss him earlier. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He brushed the back of his hand down her cheek and you can bet her little voice liked that, too. “By the way…”

“By the way what?” she asked.

He smiled and the gold in his eyes seemed to glow hotter. “Back there. You weren’t the only one who ... I mean, I wanted you to kiss me, too.”

“But we’re just friends,” she said, wishing she could say it with more conviction.

“Yeah.” And he didn’t say it with a heck of a lot of conviction either.

* * *

When they got back to the camp, it was almost time to meet Holiday. Kylie wanted to call Sara, so she decided to go behind the office to the little hiding spot she’d discovered yesterday.

She made it around the building when she realized she wasn’t the only one who’d discovered the hiding spot. Kylie shifted herself in reverse, but not quickly enough. Lucas and his attached to-the-hip girlfriend swung around. Lucas grimaced and Goth Girl smiled. Then she reached up and made a show of buttoning her blouse.

“Sorry,” Kylie muttered, and shot off. But she felt a pair of light blue eyes burning into her back as she went.

She made it around the front, only to find Miranda and Della standing near the office yelling at each other.

Kylie’s first thought was to leave them be, but when she spotted Sky, the other camp leader stepping out of the dining hall, Kylie marched over to break the two up before they got in trouble.

“I swear, if you wave that little pinky finger at me one more time, I’m gonna break it.” Della leaned in. “And you know I can do it.”

“Stop it,” Kylie said, stepping between them. Miranda shuffled back in front of Kylie and bumped noses with Della.

“You lay one bloodsucking finger on me and I’ll hex you with the worse case of pimples you’ve ever seen.”

“You can’t hex me,” Della spouted out. “Your hexes are retarded.”

“Stop it.” Kylie spotted Sky looking over at them. “We’ve got company.”

“Giving pimples is one hex I got down.” Miranda stepped back, but Della moved in.

She obviously didn’t like pimples. “Look, if I get one zit, I’ll drain your blood while you’re asleep and sell it on eBay.”

“Would you guys put a sock in it,” Kylie snapped, but it was too late. Sky

was on the move.

“Is everything okay?” the tall, goth-dressed camp leader asked.

Sky was also a werewolf, or so Kylie had heard. She still couldn’t identify the supernaturals just by looking at them.

Miranda pasted a smile on her face. Della attempted to do the same, although Della’s smile looked more like a snarl.

“It’s fine,” they said in unison. “We’re just—”

“Arguing?” Sky’s eyebrows tightened in accusation.

“Having a little disagreement,” Miranda said.

“Over?” Sky asked.

Della spoke up. “She purposely spilled my blood that was in the fridge.”

“I didn’t purposely spill it. It fell out when I opened the door.”

“There’s blood in our fridge?” Kylie frowned.

Sky rolled her eyes. “You have to learn to get along.” Sky’s dark eyes shot to Miranda. “You are a returnee, Miranda, we expect better from you.”

“Yeah, well, get in line with the be-disappointed-by-Miranda crowd.” Miranda shot off in a huff.

Sky watched her leave and then looked back at Kylie and Della. “Solve your own problems at your cabins, not in public, or Holiday and I will have to get involved. And trust me, you don’t want us involved.” She turned and left.

Kylie glanced back at a smiling Della who appeared unaffected by Sky’s warning.

“So what happened with you and fairy guy?” Della asked.

“Forget that. You and Miranda gotta stop this.”

“Stop what?” Della shrugged.

“Stop threatening to do bodily harm to each other.” Right then, Kylie spotted Lucas’s girlfriend walking toward them. The girl’s eyes narrowed in fury and her lips tightened as she zeroed in on Kylie. If looks could kill, Kylie would be a hair away from decomposing. Then the pissed-off werewolf stormed on past.

With the thought of death hanging on, Kylie noticed a slight headache, a

consistent throbbing in her left temple. The idea that she actually might have a brain tumor had her catching her breath.

“Threatening isn’t doing,” Della said. “So spill it. What did you and Derek do? Did you at least get to first base?”

“We didn’t do anything.” Kylie pressed a hand against her temple. “Look, I like you and Miranda, so both of you need to pull your big girl panties up and stop fighting before they separate us and I get stuck with a different roommate.” Someone like Lucas’s girlfriend.

“That wasn’t a fight. We were just having a tiff.”

“You threatened to sell her blood on eBay,” Kylie said. “Where I come from, that qualifies as a fight.”

“Yeah, but you’re not in your world anymore.”

Della’s statement hit hard like only the truth could. Nothing was the same anymore. A boy had just given a pint of his blood to get to spend an hour with her. She’d seen toads who were really perverts hopping on her kitchen table, and she’d checked a kitten’s privates only to have him end up not being a kitten. And don’t forget, she was being haunted by Soldier Dude. Her head throbbed harder.

“Besides, I’d never sell her blood. I’d savor every drop of it. Witches’ blood is sweet.”

Sweet. Kylie held up her hand. “Stop right there. I can’t handle this.” She looked at her watch. Crap. No time to call Sara. “I have to go meet Holiday,” she said. *And figure out my life, because like Dorothy, I’m simply not in Kansas anymore.* Kylie turned to leave.

Della caught her by the arm. “Oh, I meant to tell you—”

“Wait.” Kylie held up her hand. “Does it have anything to do with blood?” She couldn’t deal with blood talk, period.

Della’s eyes tightened. “No,” she said, sarcasm in her tone.

“Then you can tell me.”

“Or not.” Della crossed her arms. “Maybe I should let you be waylaid for being a smarty pants.” Della walked off.

Waylaid? That didn’t sound good. “Della, wait,” Kylie said.

Della turned back around. “If I tell you, will you put a stop to all the ‘blood is gross’ remarks?”

It was gross. “I’ll try.”

“Trying is for sissies,” Della shot off. Kylie glanced at her watch again. She needed to meet Holiday, but Della’s warning about being waylaid ...

“Della.” Kylie caught up with her. “Okay, no more remarks. Now tell me. How am I going to be waylaid?”

Della let go with a huff. “You know those men in the black suits? I’m told they are FBI.”

“What about them?”

Della cocked her head. “They’re planning on interrogating you.”

“Me?” Kylie asked. “Why?”

“Don’t know.”

The only thing Kylie could think this could be about was ... “Wait. Is this about your cousin? Are you sure he doesn’t belong to one of those gangs?”

“No.” Della frowned. “They’d be talking to me if it was. Besides, they didn’t say anything about visitors. They said they thought you could be hiding something because you don’t let anyone read you.”

Kylie tried to wrap her hurting head around the facts, but she just couldn’t do it. “Are you sure they said me?”

“Yup. Holiday wasn’t happy about it. Yet supposedly they are like the head honchos around here. What they say goes. But I can tell you that Holiday stood up for you. She told them that you were innocent, but they just said they’d find out for themselves.”

And exactly how did they plan to do that? Was it the CIA or FBI who were accused of torturing? Oh damn, she already had a headache—she didn’t want to add “get tortured” to today’s to-do list.

Della’s gaze shifted up over Kylie’s shoulder. “Uh, don’t look now, but I think Holiday’s looking for you. And ... I think she’s found you.”

A second later, Kylie felt someone beside her. Only it wasn’t Holiday. The cold slammed against her side and Kylie knew “he” was back.

She drew in a deep breath, determined not to pass out, but barely

managed to get the cold air down her throat. Forcing herself to move, she shifted her eyes ever so slowly, praying she wouldn't see him this time.

Someone wasn't listening to prayers today. But at the least there was no blood this time. Soldier Dude just stood there staring at her with his big blue eyes. Eyes that seemed to want to tell her something. But what? What could he want? She recalled the word *help* splattered in blood the last time she'd seen him. Just what kind of help could he need from her?

The idea of asking him crossed her mind, but somehow she sensed that if she spoke to him, it would bring him closer. She closed her eyes and mentally pleaded for him to go away.

"And here she is." Della's voice registered ever so slightly in Kylie's awareness. Opening her eyes, she saw Holiday move in between her and Soldier Dude.

"You ready?" the camp leader asked.

The cold faded and the goose bumps on Kylie's arms melted back into normal skin. Even the frigid air in her lungs warmed. A wave of relief washed over her.

"Oh," Holiday said, and took a step back. "Did I interrupt something?"

Kylie knew the camp leader didn't mean her and Della. Blinking, Kylie gazed at Holiday and tried to focus. "Can't you tell him to leave me alone?"

"Doesn't work like that," Holiday said.

"What doesn't work like that?" Della asked.

"Ready?" Holiday said again to Kylie.

"For what?" Kylie asked. Why did the FRU want to talk to her?

"Our meeting," Holiday said.

"Can I come?" Della asked.

Kylie looked at her roommate and saw in her gaze that she was trying to help. An effort that Kylie appreciated more than her roomie could know.

"Can she?" Kylie asked.

"Afraid not." Holiday eyed Della. "I think the vampires are holding a group session. You should be there." The camp leader's gaze shifted back to Kylie. "Come on." Holiday put her hand on Kylie's back and led her away.

But just what the hell Holiday was leading Kylie to was yet to be seen.

Chapter Twenty-one

“There’re a couple of people who want to meet you.” Holiday moved Kylie toward the main office.

“Who?” she asked, hoping that Della was wrong.

“They’re from the FRU.”

She’d heard the acronym several times since arriving at Shadow Falls Camp. This time, however, when the three letters formed in Kylie mind, a new thought hit. *Freaks-R-Us*.

“They’re the people who support the camp,” Holiday added as she guided Kylie up the steps.

“Why?” she asked, and stopped at the door. “Why do they want to meet me?” She wasn’t even sure she was a freak.

Holiday’s gaze softened. “Mostly curiosity. They’ve never met anyone they couldn’t read.”

“I thought you said this was common with people who could see ghosts?”

Holiday appeared to be debating what to say. “It’s not just because they can’t read you, Kylie. It’s because what they can see of your brain pattern isn’t common.”

Kylie’s headache resumed its pounding. And the fear that she really could have a tumor stirred in her chest. She envisioned herself with her head shaved and big ugly scars running across her skull. It was horrible.

But so was admitting that she was as much of a freak as the rest of them.

“You’re special, and they sense this. So come on. It’ll only take a minute and then we can have our meeting.”

Holiday's hand on Kylie's back grew warm. Immediately, Kylie knew the camp leader had emotion-controlling abilities similar to Derek's. All Kylie's reservations about having a brain tumor and about meeting the Freaks-R-Us squad dissolved as the warmth of Holiday's hand flowed inside her.

"Why are you doing that?" Kylie stepped away.

"Doing what?" Holiday asked.

"Trying to take away my fear?" She shifted out of Holiday's reach.

Holiday's eyes grew round. "Wow. You can sense this? That's amazing." She touched Kylie again. "That means—"

"Stop doing it." Kylie backed away again. She didn't care about amazing, or what it meant, at least not now. She cared about what waited for her on the other side of the door and about possibly having a brain tumor. "It makes me think maybe I should be afraid."

Holiday shook her head. "You don't have anything to be afraid of." She reached out again and Kylie looked at her hand.

Holiday held up her palms. "Trust me."

"Sorry," Kylie said. "But I have a hard time trusting people who can manipulate my emotions." And yes, in a small way she meant Derek, too.

Holiday sighed. "Believe it or not, Kylie, I respect that. But right now, I need you to meet these two men. Nothing bad is going to happen. I give you my word."

While Kylie still wasn't convinced, with another look into Holiday's expression, most of Kylie's concerns faded. Only this time it seemed to be from her own intuition rather than Holiday's influence. For some reason, Kylie's gut told her she could trust Holiday. Then again, it could just be because she didn't have a choice. In more ways than not, Kylie was a prisoner at this camp.

* * *

The introductions were as awkward as Kylie expected. The two men did their share of eyebrow twitching, which only made Kylie feel more uncomfortable.

She wanted to tell them they were wasting their time trying to twitch info from her. She didn't, of course. The too-nice disease again. So instead, she sat at a table and tried not to fidget under their intense stares.

The bigger man with darker hair was named Burnett James and the other was Austin Pearson. Up close, Kylie couldn't help but notice how *GQ* perfect the two men were. Not that she was into old guys—or she should say “older” because they looked about ten years older than her—but she could still appreciate perfection.

Kylie also noticed how Burnett kept stealing glances at Holiday when she wasn't looking. He obviously had the hots for her. Not that Holiday seemed aware of his interest. If anything, Kylie got the feeling the camp leader found both men annoying. Especially Burnett.

“So...” Burnett turned a chair around, straddled it, and sat down.

Holiday watched the man and frowned as if disapproving of his sitting position.

“This is your first time to Shadow Falls Camp, huh?” Burnett asked.

Kylie nodded. Then recalling her mother's belief that answering without words showed disrespect, she followed up with, “Yes ... sir.” The “sir” part of the sentence slipped out as an afterthought and she wished she hadn't done it, because it came out sounding sarcastic. Not that she meant it like that, but her interrogators might not realize that.

Burnett placed his elbows on the back of the chair, laced his fingers together, and studied her. After very slow passing seconds, he tilted his head slightly as if listening—listening for something that no one else in the room could hear. Like the sound of Kylie's heartbeat. Just what kind of supernaturals were these two? Were they, like Della, human lie detectors? Somehow Kylie suspected that Burnett had that ability. Which meant Kylie would have to be careful not to get caught in a white lie.

“What brought you to Shadow Falls, Miss Galen?”

Holiday stepped closer. “She was sent here by—”

Burnett held a hand up at Holiday and frowned. “I'd like Miss Galen to answer.” While his words could be construed as non-hostile, Kylie noticed

his edgy tone.

Holiday must have noticed it, too. She shot the man a glare that no doubt contained language she probably couldn't use in the presence of the campers. Kylie got the feeling that this wasn't the first time these two had bumped heads. Heck, for all Kylie knew, they might have bumped more than just heads. They could be old lovers.

Austin cleared his throat as if hoping to clear the tension in the room.

"Go ahead, Kylie," Holiday said, then everyone looked back at Kylie.

She sat up a little straighter and tried not to wince. "I was told ... by Holiday, that my shrink is the one who got me signed up. I think she convinced my mom that this was a camp for troubled teens."

"And are you?" Burnett tossed out the question.

"Am I what?" Kylie asked.

"A troubled teen?" His tone rang with accusations.

"Of course she's not," Holiday insisted.

Burnett shot a frown back at the camp leader. "As a courtesy, I allowed you to be present, but if you keep interrupting—"

"Bite my ass, Mr. James," Holiday snapped, obviously mad enough not to care about Kylie hearing the PG-13 language.

"Don't tempt me," Burnett retorted.

"Tempting you hasn't crossed my mind," Holiday shot back. "You've been a class-A jerk since you came to see me."

Kylie bit her cheek to keep from smiling. The tension between these two could be cut and served up with hot fudge. It was the kind of tension one saw in a romantic flick.

"Maybe it's the icy reception you've given me for no damn good reason. If I didn't know better I'd think you have a prejudice against vampires."

So he was a vampire. Kylie actually felt proud of herself for figuring it out.

"Don't fool yourself." Holiday squared her shoulders. "It's not vampires I have a problem with. It's men who think something as inconsequential as a badge gives them the right to intimidate others. From the moment you walked

into my camp you've acted as if we should bow down to you. And if that's not bad enough, you're now accusing my kids of—"

Austin cleared his throat again, louder than before. "I think we should get back to Miss Galen here."

Or not. Kylie would like to know what it was the FRU was accusing the campers of doing, exactly. However, her curiosity faded rather quickly when everyone's gaze shot back to her and she recalled Burnett's question.

"No, I do not consider myself a troubled teen."

Burnett's right brow arched. "Have you ever belonged to a gang?"

"No," she answered, and wondered if he was referring to the Blood Brothers. "I've never really gotten into any trouble."

"Really. Weren't you just hauled down to the police station during a drug raid?"

Kylie suddenly understood Holiday's dislike for Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome. He did have a way of making people feel small.

Maybe it was Holiday's nerve of standing up to the vampire that gave Kylie courage. Or perhaps it was just that with all the other crap slung at her today, Kylie's ability to play nice had played out. Then again, maybe she had a brain tumor provoking her to do things she normally wouldn't do.

Tilting her chin up, she let the words roll off her tongue without remorse. "You'd think if you were able to get your hands on that report, that you'd have at least read it. Because I'm sure it stated that I was not doing drugs or drinking."

Burnett's eyes tightened in the corners. But Kylie preferred to focus on Holiday's pleased smile.

"Are you finished now?" the camp leader asked.

"Just a few more questions." Burnett's piercing gaze never shifted from Kylie. "How do you feel about our camp, Miss Galen?"

"It's great." Kylie's heart sputtered when she remembered she couldn't lie. "At least everyone else I've met here seems to like it."

"And you don't?"

Don't lie. "I'd rather be at home."

“And why is that?” Burnett’s eyes darkened to black.

“Everything is so ... new to me.”

“What’s new?”

“The fact that people like you even exist.” It was the truth. However, she didn’t mean it to sound so ... derogatory.

“Like me? As in vampires?” he asked, clearly offended.

“Supernaturals,” Kylie corrected.

“And what do you think you are?” he asked smugly.

“I’m not sure,” she answered truthfully. “But I’m hoping I’m nothing. Just me.” *With a brain tumor.* She pushed that thought aside to chew on later.

He stared harder and Kylie’s courage winced. He shook his head and his brows tightened. “Why are you being so close-minded?”

“I’m not. Believing in all this...” It occurred to her that he wasn’t talking about her ability to accept all this, but rather, his inability to read her mind.

“She can’t help it.” Holiday stepped forward. “It’s a condition of one of her gifts. She’s a ghost whisperer.”

Kylie nodded as if to say ditto. Both men’s eyes widened.

“Ghost whisperer?” Austin said, and turned to Holiday, but before he shifted, Kylie spotted something that looked like fear cross his expression.

“Like you?” Burnett glanced at the camp leader.

“You’ve read my file?” Holiday asked.

“It’s my job to know who I’m working with.”

“Funny, you didn’t offer your file to me,” she responded. “And you expect me to work—”

“I’ll have it sent over. If it really interests you,” he countered, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“On second thought, don’t bother,” she clipped out. “But to respond to your earlier comment, yes, Kylie’s a ghost whisperer just like me.” While Holiday’s tone lacked the earlier attitude, the brief smile that flashed on her lips contained attitude plus.

“You, too?” Austin shuddered. “I hate ghosts.”

“Is she fairy?” Burnett asked, staring and twitching again at Kylie as if

attempting to read her once more.

“We’re still trying to decipher that,” Holiday answered.

“So her parents are not registered as supernaturals?” Burnett questioned.

“No,” Holiday replied.

“They could be rogues.”

“Be what?” Kylie asked.

“They would have never sent her here if they were,” Holiday answered Burnett, leaving Kylie’s question hanging.

Kylie’s phone buzzed, but she ignored it, not wanting to miss out on any conversation that centered on her.

“Or maybe that’s why she’s here.” Burnett’s harsh glare focused on Kylie again. “Were you sent here with a purpose, Miss Galen?”

“No, and my parents didn’t do anything wrong,” Kylie insisted.

Holiday took a step closer. “If your hearing isn’t off, you should be able to tell she spoke the truth.”

Burnett nodded. He stood and then focused on Holiday. “You’re right. She doesn’t seem involved. But I want to be updated on her condition.”

Holiday’s expression hardened. “I don’t see why that is necessary.”

“Neither do I,” Kylie blurted out, not liking how they discussed her as if she wasn’t here.

Burnett ignored Kylie and focused only on Holiday. “You’ll comply with my wishes, Miss Brandon, or I’ll see to it that my boss finds a camp leader who will.”

For the first time, Holiday flinched, telling Kylie the camp leader cared more about her job than she did her pride. “I’m simply curious as to why you’re interested in her.”

“In addition to watching over this project, I’m in charge of tracking any anomalies in our alliance. Miss Galen qualifies.”

“I’m an anomaly?” Kylie blurted out in disbelief.

“Okay, I’ll update you,” Holiday said, still paying Kylie no heed.

Burnett looked a tad smug, as if he knew he’d won. Then he glanced back at Kylie. “You may go now.”

Kylie gazed up at Holiday. "I thought—"

Holiday interrupted. "We have a meeting. I'd appreciate if you two could let yourselves out."

Burnett crossed his arms over his wide chest. "Your meeting will have to be rescheduled. I need you to go through the files with me. Since it appears that Miss Galen is not our suspect, we need to find out who is."

"And you just assume that it's one of my kids," Holiday seethed. "Have you even considered that—"

"Yes, I do assume that. All the evidence points here," Burnett snapped.

Evidence of what? The question lay on the tip of Kylie's tongue, but something warned her not to push it.

Holiday's lips tightened before she turned to Kylie. "We'll meet after lunch. Is that okay?"

Kylie nodded, disappointed all her questions would have to wait, but it didn't mean she couldn't start getting other answers. Standing up, she nodded good-bye, then walked out of the meeting room with purpose. She had things to do. Things to figure out. And first on her list was to find a certain fairy and get her brain scanned for tumors.

* * *

Kylie stepped out of the office, not sure how to go about finding Helen the healer. Her phone buzzed again and she pulled it from her jeans. It was a text from Sara. One word appeared on the screen.

"Negative," Kylie said aloud, and smiled in relief for Sara. She started punching in Sara's number when someone moved beside her. A tall and wide frame cast a tall and wide shadow.

Before Kylie looked up, she somehow knew the owner of that shadow would have jet black hair and light blue eyes. Taking a deep breath, she slowly looked up.

Damn, she hated being right.

Chapter Twenty-two

“Can we talk?”

Lucas Parker’s voice sent almost as many chills through her as the slight pressure of his hand against her back. Almost. But not quite.

She fought against the urge to shiver as he nudged her away from the group of kids standing about fifty feet to their left. While his words lent itself to a question, the fact that he was moving, and taking her with him, implied she didn’t have a choice.

The warm feel of his hand on the small of her back took her back to last night’s dream—the one where they were swimming together. That thought reminded her that she’d interrupted Lucas and his girlfriend earlier today. Kylie blinked, praying she wouldn’t break out in a full-blown blush.

“What do you want to talk about?” she managed to ask, but she guessed he meant Derek and her. He’d seemed plenty angry when he’d caught them on the rock—she just didn’t know why. She tried to stop walking, but he kept moving her along. Unless she wanted to trip and land on her face, she had no option but to put one foot in front of the other.

Kylie’s Reeboks rushed to meet his pace. Then she saw the line of thick trees in front of her and no way was she going in the woods with him. Nope.

“Stop!” She jerked away from his hand and tripped, losing her grip on her phone. It landed with a thud on the grass. And Kylie almost joined it.

He caught her by her forearm and lifted her with complete ease. Catching her breath, she realized the back of his hand rested against her breast.

She stared at his hand, against the swell of tingling flesh, her heart racing

—racing from fear and from something else. That something else having everything to do with the dream she'd had last night and where his hand was now. "Let me go," she seethed.

He released her and held his palms out. "I wouldn't hurt you, Kylie."

"How would I know that?" She took a step back and waited to see if he'd say something about knowing her before. Maybe even remind her that he'd saved her from a bunch of bullies. At which time she'd have to remind him that he'd still killed her cat.

But he said nothing. He just stared at her and the expression in his eyes appeared hurt. Like he had that right.

God, did he even remember her? Or Socks?

He passed a hand over his face and asked, "What was that all about?"

What was what all about? Then she thought she knew. "Derek drew my name. We were just talking." *Unlike what you and your sidekick were doing. And not that it was any of your business, anyway.*

In the bright sunlight, Kylie noticed Lucas's beard stubble, something most seventeen-year-olds didn't have. Then she recalled he was a werewolf and wondered if that explained it. Or was he just one of those guys who matured early, who had a full beard by the time they graduated high school?

"I saw how you two were talking, but that's not what I'm asking about."

"In that case, I'm sorry I interrupted you and that girl." She reached down and picked up her phone.

When she stood back up, he was frowning, but to his credit he didn't try to claim she hadn't interrupted anything.

She couldn't explain why that almost upset her. But damn it. What was wrong with her? An hour ago, she'd wanted Derek to kiss her and now she was having the hots for the guy who killed her cat?

Stress, she decided. Stress obviously brought on the hook-up hormones. Or did a brain tumor do that?

Lucas let out a sigh. "I didn't mean that, either. I meant what did the FRU want with you?"

Kylie pressed a hand to her left temple to assuage the ache and tried to

think how to explain it. Then she wasn't even sure she should explain it.

"I don't know." She didn't know enough about what the FRU suspected to make sense of it herself, let alone to explain it to anyone else.

His eyes tightened. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean, I don't know. Nothing is making sense to me these days."

Skepticism filled his expression and insisted she give him more. But why was he asking? Could he be behind whatever it was the FRU suspected her of doing? Her own suspicion started to build.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked.

"They've been hanging around and I can tell Holiday is upset. I asked her about it, but she said I didn't have to worry. If something's going on, I want to help her."

Kylie remembered Holiday had brought Lucas with her last night when she'd had the dream. Maybe the two of them were friends, but if Holiday chose not to tell him anything, far be it from Kylie to interfere.

"They wanted to talk to me because they think I'm an anomaly. They're trying to figure me out like everyone else is."

The disbelief in his gaze lessened. "Did they do it? Figure you out?"

She shook her head. "Apparently I'm a real puzzler."

"Girls generally are," he said, and smiled. And holy crap, if his smile wasn't one of those that made a girl's heart fall over on itself.

She caught herself from being lured into his smile and mentally slammed on the brakes. Then, because she didn't want to stand there while her heart did somersaults, because she needed to find Helen and see if she could detect a tumor in Kylie's brain, Kylie held up her phone. "I have to make a call."

* * *

It took Kylie twenty minutes to find Helen. During that time, she'd texted Sara a bunch of smiley faces, but had foregone calling her. Now that Sara's trauma was over, Kylie felt justified in concentrating on her own. And the first order of business was to get her brain scanned by a certain half fairy.

Moving across the dining hall, she studied Helen who was sitting at the table, her nose in a book. The girl came across as the quiet but really smart type—the kind who never had to study in school, but wasn't really proud of it.

“Hi,” Kylie said when Helen didn't notice her.

Startled, Helen jerked her attention up. A strand of sandy blond hair fell across her face and she brushed it back. “Hi.”

Kylie opened her mouth to speak, only to realize she didn't have a clue how to ask if she would check her for a brain tumor. The silence hung heavy and Kylie forced herself to start talking. “I ... I just...”

Noise from the other side of the room erupted and Kylie looked at the other campers. “I'm Kylie Galen. You and I were in the group—”

“I remember,” she said in a mellow voice. Kylie didn't know Helen, but she instantly identified with her. She was another cliqueless wonder. A loner. Kylie couldn't help but hope that the girl had someone like Sara who made her life easier.

“Can we talk?” Kylie asked. “Somewhere else?”

Helen glanced over at the other campers, and then picked up her book and backpack.

When they stepped out of the dining hall, Kylie noticed several groups of hungry teens congregating near the building. She headed away from them, and tried again to find the words to ask Helen. “I was wondering if ... I sort of—”

“Derek told me,” Helen said.

“He did?” Kylie's chest pinched at the thought of Derek trying to help. Behind that pinch came guilt at still not being able to trust him. Was she wrong to be unsure of her feelings for someone who could control them as easily as he could breathe?

“There's a quiet spot behind the office,” Helen said.

“Not there.” While Kylie didn't think Lucas would already be hooking up again, she didn't want to chance it.

She saw the path back to her cabin was mostly unpopulated, so Kylie

headed that way.

They passed a group of kids, laughing at something one of them said. In the midst of the group, she spotted Lucas's girlfriend, and before Kylie could look away, the girl met her gaze and snarled. Why did the she-wolf hate her so much?

Trying not to focus on Lucas or his girlfriend, Kylie glanced at Helen. "Do you think you can help me?"

Helen shrugged and everything from her expression to her posture appeared uncertain. "I've only done it with my sister. I'll try, but..."

"But what?" Kylie asked as they continued down the path.

"Aren't you scared?" Helen asked.

Kylie stopped walking. "Should I be?"

Helen did another one of her insecure shrugs. "Maybe. I don't know. All I know is that I'm scared."

Oh, just great. Kylie swallowed the nervous tickle down her throat. "Is it going to hurt or something?" When Helen didn't immediately answer, Kylie asked, "Did it hurt your sister?"

"No," Helen admitted.

A sigh left Kylie's throat. Second thoughts started building, but then she remembered how badly she wanted to get to the bottom of everything. "I need to know."

Helen motioned Kylie to move behind a row of large oak trees. The girl tossed down her backpack and then looked at Kylie.

"How do we do it?" Kylie asked, her stomach knotting.

"Honestly, I don't know. With my sister I just ... We were fighting. She had stolen my diary. And then all of the sudden..." She let out a breath.

"So we have to start fighting?" Kylie asked, unsure what Helen was getting at.

"No." She shook her head. "It was almost like ... You know how we can peek into everyone's mind?"

"No, I don't know," Kylie answered, frustration tightening her tone as her headache returned with a new vengeance.

Surprise registered on Helen's face. "You really can't see people's brain patterns? But I thought we all could do that."

"I can't," Kylie answered. "Which is why I don't think I'm one of you guys." She clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking. Her heart lurched at the thought that she honestly might have a tumor. Then her mind went back to the idea of reading brains. "Have you always been able to do it? Always?"

"Sort of. I mean ... I could do it, but I didn't know *what* I was doing. I just thought it was like closing your eyes real tight and seeing the different splotches of red. But now that I know what it is, it's so much clearer."

Their gazes met and Helen twitched her eyebrows.

"What do you see?" Kylie asked, her heart racing.

"Just your pattern." Helen continued to stare, unfocused like when Kylie looked at one of those posters where if she stared at it long enough, she might see a hidden image. "You aren't like ... normal people. They have these even waves. Yours is ... up and down and then you have some weird kind of scribbles. But you aren't letting me read you."

"I don't know how to let you read me." Kylie bit down on her lip and tried to stare at Helen, unfocused to see if she could see anything. Nothing happened, but her eyes crossed.

Blinking, Kylie asked, "Do I have to let you read me before you can see if I have a tumor?"

"No, but..." Helen refocused her eyes.

"But what?"

The girl let go of a sigh. "Like I told you, I don't know how it works. With my sister, I had my hands..." Helen raised her hands on each side of Kylie's head. "I was ... holding her head." She hesitated. "Do you want me to try?"

Kylie nodded, even though doing it made her pulse race. Helen placed a hand on each side of Kylie's head. Kylie watched the girl close her eyes. Her smooth forehead wrinkled and her mouth tightened in concentration. Kylie stood there staring and hoped no one stumbled upon them. She could hear the

rumors now. Kylie and Helen were making out behind the trees. Right.

Several seconds ticked by, and with each increment of time, Kylie felt more awkward. She was about to call it quits when her head began tingling. The tingles turned to heat. All at once, a comforting warmth radiated from Helen's palms.

"I'm doing it." Excitement rang in Helen's voice. "It's working."

The heat from Helen's hands eased inside Kylie's head. Kylie continued to stare at Helen, trying to read her expression. What was the girl seeing? Should Kylie be calling her mom and having her go out and start shopping for wigs? No way was Kylie walking around bald.

Slowly, the hold Helen had on her head lessened. The fairy dropped her hands to her sides. After two deep breaths, she opened her eyes.

"And?" Kylie blurted out. "Do I have a tumor? Do I?"

Chapter Twenty-three

“Hey, where have you been?” Miranda asked as Kylie dropped down on the bench beside her and Della in the dining hall fifteen minutes later.

“Talking to Helen.” Kylie brushed a strand of blond hair behind her ear, her nerves still jumpy.

“Who’s Helen?” Della held her glass of “juice”—that’s what Kylie had decided to think of it as—to her mouth.

“Helen Jones.” Kylie motioned to the quiet girl who had just sat down at another lunch table. While Kylie had invited Helen to join them, she’d declined, saying she’d promised to sit at the fairy table today.

Kylie watched Helen sit next to Derek and lean in to whisper something in his ear. Kylie didn’t need super hearing to know Helen had shared the no-tumor verdict. As if to prove Kylie right, Derek met Kylie’s gaze and smiled.

Kylie returned the gesture. While she was comforted that Helen hadn’t seen any black dots in her brain as she’d spotted in her sister’s, the answer moved Kylie closer to accepting that she was ... well, not all human. And that was not comforting at all.

Della leaned forward and whispered, “How did your interrogation go? Did you find out what they suspected you of?”

“What interrogation?” Miranda’s eyes grew round.

Kylie looked around at the crowd. “I’ll tell y’all later.”

Miranda nodded. “Oh, did you hear we’re getting a computer? They’re putting one in every cabin.”

“Cool,” Kylie said, only half listening. Instead her mind chewed on the

possibility of insanity explaining her odd brain pattern. For sure, there'd been times she felt crazy—these last few weeks topping the list.

“You’d better get your lunch before they stop serving,” Della said.

Kylie noticed that several of the campers were already stacking their trays and leaving. The tumor scan had taken longer than Kylie had thought.

“Yeah.” Kylie stood up.

“Oh,” Miranda said. “Perry was trying to find you earlier.”

Kylie frowned and leaned down. “What did he want?”

“Maybe for you to check his sex again.” Della snickered.

Kylie groaned.

Miranda chuckled and then got serious. “I think it was to apologize. He told me that he even tried to get away from you, that you were the one to bring him inside.”

Kylie recalled that the kitten, aka Perry in disguise, did try to resist when she brought him in. As he did when she pried his hind legs apart. “He still shouldn’t have been peeking in our windows.”

“True,” Miranda said. “But at least he’s willing to apologize. It takes a big person to do that.”

“Or a little twerp who’s afraid I’ll tell Holiday on him,” Kylie said.

“She has a point,” Della said.

Kylie walked to the lunch pickup window. The elf who had driven the bus stood behind the counter—all three feet of her, the tip of her head barely hitting the countertop. She cocked her head back and looked at Kylie, her brows twitching. “Have we figured out what you are yet?” The elf slid a food tray at Kylie.

“Not yet,” Kylie muttered, not liking the fact that everyone at the camp knew about her identity crisis.

“Does your friend need anything to eat?” the little woman asked, frowning.

“What friend?”

The cold brushed down Kylie’s right side—his presence as noticeable and as welcome as a paper cut. “You can see him, too?” A wisp of steam left her

lips with the words.

“Nah, just feel him. Don’t like it, either.” The elf backed away from the counter.

Go away. Go away. Closing her eyes, Kylie willed Soldier Dude to leave. When the chill faded as quickly as it had come, she wondered if it was really as easy as just wishing him away. One more thing she needed to talk to Holiday about. Nevertheless, the small victory offered Kylie a tiny sense of control. Real tiny.

Picking up her tray, she went back to join Miranda and Della. Admittedly, she didn’t search the room for any guys wearing army garb. Why look for trouble?

“Bad day?” Miranda asked when Kylie dropped her tray rather discontentedly on the table.

“Bad month.” Kylie picked up the sandwich and sniffed. “I hate tuna.” She felt her throat tighten and swallowed the knot of emotion, swearing she wouldn’t cry.

“You like peanut butter and jelly?” Miranda asked.

“Yeah.” Kylie looked at Miranda, thinking she was offering to swap. Instead, she was holding out her pinky and waving it at Kylie’s sandwich.

The sandwich in Kylie’s hand moved. Kylie looked at it, and her mouth fell open. Peanut butter and red jam oozed over the crusty edges of the bread. “Holy crap.” Kylie dropped the sandwich back on the tray.

“Wow.” Della leaned over. “Can you zap me up a second glass of blood? Oh, make it O negative. I hear that’s the best.”

Miranda made a face. “I do *not* do blood.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Della huffed.

Kylie shut out all talk of blood and shifted her gaze from her transformed sandwich back to the sandwich transformer. “I thought you said you couldn’t do magic?”

Miranda made a funny face. “That’s hardly enough to call magic. I’ve been replacing my lunch with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches since I was two. My mom tried force-feeding me liverwurst. Who in God’s name eats

that stuff?”

“I’d bet I would love it now,” Della said.

Kylie’s stomach growled and she pulled back the bread to give the sandwich a quick check. “Is it ... safe to eat?”

“You think I’d poison you?” Miranda asked, clearly offended.

“No, but it could be radioactive or something. I don’t know what happens to food when it’s ... zapped here.”

“I’ve eaten my sandwiches all my life,” Miranda said.

“Yeah, we see what it did to you, too,” Della added, her tone sounding more and more annoyed.

“Go suck a vein,” Miranda snapped.

“You got one?” Della countered, and bared her teeth.

“Please.” Kylie looked from one roommate to the other. “I beg you, don’t start this again.” Only when they both seemed resigned to stop bickering did Kylie revisit the idea of eating. Amazingly, she was starved. Getting one’s brain scanned must increase one’s appetite. Or maybe it was that her headache had finally taken a hike. Either way, she was hungry enough to take a chance and eat a sandwich that had been conjured up by Miranda’s pinky finger.

Picking up the sandwich, Kylie sank her teeth into the soft white bread. “It’s good,” she told Miranda, as she moved the bite around in her mouth, and tried to keep the peanut butter from sticking to the roof of her mouth. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Miranda said. “And in return, all I’d like is for you to put in a good word for me with Derek—since you don’t like him.”

Della made a snorting sound. “You are so blind. Kylie’s crazy about him.”

Miranda’s mouth fell open and she looked at Kylie as if waiting for her to rebuke Della’s claim. But the peanut butter got caught on the roof of her mouth and Kylie couldn’t have spoken even if she wanted to. Not that she was overtly ready to speak up. She didn’t know how to answer.

Frustrated at Kylie’s silence, Miranda addressed Della. “She said she

didn't like him."

"She lied." Della shrugged.

Miranda snapped her head around to Kylie. "Do you like him? If so, just tell me you like him."

"Who does Miss Don't-know-what-I-am like?" Lucas's girlfriend plopped down on the opposite side of the table.

Kylie's gaze shot to the werewolf. Strange. She couldn't ever remember having so much anger or dislike being lopped on her in one cold stare.

She managed to push the lump of sandwich she'd pried off the roof of her mouth to her cheek. "No one," she said, but it came out muffled.

"Really?" The werewolf's lips turned up in something that might have been considered a smile if the smirk accompanying it wasn't so evil. "By the way, my name's Fredericka. I thought you'd like to know the name of the girl who will kick your ass if you even try—"

"Ha. That's funny," Miranda said.

Funny? Kylie shot a look at Miranda and right then the blob of bread, peanut butter, and jam slid halfway down Kylie's throat. She covered her mouth and coughed, which only made the situation worse, because as the golf ball-sized lump of food tried to come up, it lodged between her tonsils. She gasped for air, but got none. Zilch.

"What's funny?" Fredericka's cold stare now focused on Miranda, which might have concerned Kylie if she wasn't slightly preoccupied about not being able to breathe. She started thumping her chest.

Can't breathe.

"You kicking her ass," Miranda shot back.

Hey. I can't breathe here. Kylie reached for her throat, the universal sign of choking.

"I mean, with all the help Kylie would have stopping you and all."

Seriously, I can't breathe. Oh, friggin' great, she was at a camp full of bloodsucking, meat-eating creatures, and she was about to die of asphyxiation from a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Fredericka leaned forward, getting closer to Miranda. "You think I'm

scared of your scrawny little butt?”

Still can't breathe here, guys.

Finally, Della—you gotta love an attentive vampire—reached around Miranda's shoulders and gave Kylie one extra hard thump between her shoulder blades. The clump of food dislodged from her windpipe. While it hurt going down, at least oxygen started passing.

“Me?” Miranda's voice came out squeaky. “You thought ... I meant ... No, no. I didn't mean help from me.” Miranda pointed a finger at Della. “She might take you on. She's got this whole vampire combative attitude going, but I didn't mean her, either.”

“But she's right,” Della said, half her attention on Kylie and the other half on Fredericka. “I'd help Kylie kick your ass in a heartbeat.” She curled her lips at the werewolf, showing off her canines.

Fredericka didn't appear concerned. Not that Kylie was certain of anything; she was still working on getting the needed oxygen to her brain, while giving the drama playing out in front of her a wee bit of attention. Hey, if she was about to get ripped apart by a werewolf, she wanted to know the reasons why.

“Then who are you talking about?” Fredericka leaned across the table and a low growl escaped her throat.

“I mean Kylie's ghosts.” Miranda said. “She's got like a dozen or so hanging around, or hadn't you heard?”

What? Kylie coughed—good thing the lump of bread had gone down and not up because she would have choked on it again.

“I don't know about you, but I'm not messing with the dead. Don't you remember last year when Holiday talked about the death angels?”

Death angels? Kylie recalled Miranda talking about the legend of dancing death angels at the falls on the bus ride to the camp. She gave up one more cough and then held up her hand. But right before she started talking, she noticed the fear in Fredericka's expression.

Not wanting to come off like a scared rabbit confronting a hungry wolf—even though that pretty much described exactly how Kylie felt—she looked

Fredericka directly in the eyes. “Stop.” Cough. “I don’t want to fight you.” Cough. “I don’t even know why you’d want to fight me. Or my ghosts.”

Hey, Kylie was no fool. She fully intended to take advantage of the fear she spotted in the girl’s eyes.

“Just stay away from Lucas,” Fredericka warned, but her voice lacked its earlier confidence.

“Me?” All the crappiness of the day, of the last few weeks, zeroed in on this high and mighty B with an itch, and the scared-rabbit feeling faded.

“You know what?” Kylie snapped. “Maybe you should go tighten the leash you have around your so-called boyfriend’s neck, because every time I’ve spoken to him was because he came up to me. Not the other way around.”

“You’d better watch your back,” Fredericka said.

“She doesn’t have to,” Della said. “Her ghosts do that for her. Didn’t you hear about the little incident that happened at our cabin last night?”

Fredericka shot up and took off.

Kylie pressed a hand to the table and stared after her. “What a bitch.”

“Yeah, she was like that last year, too. But we did good,” Miranda said, and placed her hand on top of Kylie’s.

“We rocked,” Della said, and put hers on top of Miranda’s.

“Thank you,” Kylie said, and looked from one roommate to the other. “Y’all didn’t have to stick up for me, and I appreciate it.”

“Hey, we’re friends,” Miranda said. “And that’s what friends do.”

Smiling at her two new friends, Kylie realized that coming to camp wasn’t going to be *all* bad.

Then, letting go of a heartfelt sigh and feeling her bravado kick down a notch, she met Miranda’s gaze. “Do death angels really exist?”

Chapter Twenty-four

“And oh, do death angels really exist?”

It was probably the seventh or eighth question Kylie had pitched at Holiday during their meeting thirty minutes later. The moment Kylie’s foot had stepped inside the office, the questions just started flowing.

“That’s ... a lot of questions.” Holiday smiled and motioned for Kylie to sit down.

Kylie set her phone down on Holiday’s desk and took a chair. When she’d left the dining hall, she spent the last five minutes talking to Sara, celebrating the fact that her pregnancy test was negative, but now Kylie was back to focusing on her own mission of finding answers.

“Yeah, and I’m only getting started,” she said. “I also want to know what else I could be. The other day you said—”

“Really?” Holiday’s brow arched. “So you’ve accepted that you’re one of us?”

The question bounced around Kylie’s head. “No. I just want to be prepared if ... that’s what I discover.”

The camp leader brushed her long ponytail of red hair behind her shoulder. “I heard you had Helen check you for a tumor.”

“Who told you?” Kylie asked, imagining the whole camp teasing her about it. Or even worse, teasing Helen. The girl seemed even shyer than Kylie and the last thing Kylie wanted was for her to get hell because of something Kylie had talked her into doing.

Holiday shook her head. “It wasn’t like that. Helen was excited that she

discovered how it worked and wanted to share it with me.”

Kylie nodded. She understood how Helen felt and didn’t begrudge her sharing the news with Holiday.

“But you still aren’t a believer, are you?” Holiday asked, meeting Kylie’s gaze.

“I could still be...”

“Crazy or schizophrenic.”

“Right,” Kylie said, relieved that Holiday understood.

Holiday sighed as if exasperated and Kylie’s relief evaporated.

“It’s just I don’t think either of my parents are gifted. And you said this is most likely hereditary. Plus, I can’t see into people’s head and see any patterns. Helen said she could always do it.”

“That’s Helen. Most of us with ghost whispering powers—it just appears one day.” Holiday sighed. “And there could be a hundred reasons why your mom or dad hasn’t shared this with you. You...” She held up her hands. “What am I doing? My job isn’t to convince you. It’s to help you find your own answers.”

Kylie almost apologized for disappointing Holiday because she honestly liked her, but how could Kylie just believe this without some proof?

“Let’s get back to your questions.” Holiday paused as if recalling the list. “Do death angels really exist? I’m assuming you heard about the legend of the name Shadow Falls.”

“Yeah,” Kylie said. “Is it true?”

“I’ve never seen the shadows. Of course, it wasn’t quite dusk when I was there.”

“I mean the death angels?”

“Well, I haven’t ever seen a death angel either. But I know several people who claim they have. Some think they exist only in the legends, but since all supernaturals are considered legends, it’s hard to say they don’t exist.”

“Are they known to be evil?” Kylie asked, her curiosity stemming from both Fredericka’s fear and Miranda’s hesitancy to talk about them later.

“Not necessarily evil. They are thought of as powerful ghosts who are ...

avengers. It's believed that they right the wrongs of the supernaturals. And stand judgment of them."

"Is that why everyone seems so scared of ghosts?"

"Yup, that would be the reason." A smile twitched Holiday's lips. "Frankly, we scare the bejeebies out of most supernaturals. Remember the FRU?"

Kylie nodded and inwardly admitted it scared the bejeebies out of her, too.

Holiday placed her right elbow on the table and then rested her chin in her open palm. "To be honest with you Kylie, death angels per se may not exist, but I see all my ghosts as being a lot like we think death angels are. I mean, I've actually had several protect me in different ways. Sure some of them need something from us, but more times than not they are here to either help us, or to help us help someone else. As scary as this all seems to you, you should know that it's a special calling. Very few supernaturals have this gift. It's said that it is bestowed on only those with worthy spirits, good hearts, and courage."

"But I'm not those things," Kylie said, pleading her case. "On Halloween, I wouldn't even go into the haunted houses."

Holiday chuckled. "I didn't say you were perfect, Kylie. Heaven knows that I have my faults as well. But our hearts want the good to win. We're still afraid, we still make mistakes, but if we listen to what our hearts want, we will find the right way." She rested her left hand on top of Kylie's.

Kylie looked at their hands joined together on the table. "Is being a ghost whisperer a common gift for fairies? And elves?" Kylie remembered the bus driver sensing when Soldier Dude had dropped by for a visit. "At lunch, the elf, the one who drove the bus that brought us here, she knew the ghost was there."

"Yes, there have been studies that say it is more common with fairies and elves. But it's not unheard of for others to have this ability. While certain gifts are bestowed to different species, each being can have less or more, depending on their spirits or their links to the gods and goddesses."

“So what else could I be?”

“This morning when I touched you and you sensed that I was trying to calm you ... the fact that you could feel that is ... well, unusual. Generally speaking, another fairy, depending on their level of power, may be able to sense it, but ... honestly, I’ve never heard of anyone sensing it through touch.”

“So assuming I’m not human, I’m also not fairy?”

“I didn’t say that. What I can say is that whatever species your gifts stem from, your lineage to the gods is closer than most. I think you are just coming into your powers and who knows what all awaits you.”

Kylie just stared. Holiday acted as though her words were supposed to make her feel better. “But do we know—if I *am* one of you—that I’m not like a vampire or werewolf?” Kylie held her breath as she waited for Holiday to answer.

Holiday shrugged. “I’m guessing if you were of that species, we would have seen some of the normal characteristics that are linked to them. However, there are a few of all species that are what we refer to as atypical. Their heritage is with one species and yet they lack certain characteristics, and are often gifted in other ways. The studies seem to conclude that, perhaps, these individuals are the very few that have combined genetics of two or more species. Not that it has really been proven.”

Oh, great. She could be a hybrid. Just like her sociology teacher’s car.

“So ... normally, you really don’t have half of one species and half of another? I thought Miranda said they’ve been mixing forever.”

Holiday smiled. “Yes. But generally, the species with the closer lineage to the gods is the one passed on in the DNA. Here again, the gifts of the child may vary, but the basic characteristics seem to remain true for each species, such as the transformation into a wolf, or the need for blood to survive—if the virus is active.”

Kylie’s mind was trying to wrap around all this information. “Isn’t there some blood test that could tell if I’m anything at all?”

“Regrettably, no. Oh, they are still trying, believe me. However, it’s

legend that the gods made our blood the same as humans, and unidentifiable as a matter of survival. If normals, or even one form of a supernatural, could test for certain species, they might be able to eradicate certain types.”

Kylie conceded that point. If she’d found out two weeks ago that vampires and such existed, she’d have been all for trying to eradicate them. But now, after knowing Della, Miranda, Derek, Holiday, Helen, and even Perry—the little twerp—Kylie would never agree to it.

Then she remembered she wasn’t the only one who didn’t know why she was here. “Is there any kind of supernatural that isn’t hereditary?”

“Well, as I mentioned earlier, in rare incidences it has been known to skip generations. Especially in the instances of vampirism. Then there are humans who are simply turned by either vampires or werewolves, but it’s suspected that even in those cases, the victims who survive being turned have been touched in some way by the gods. Or demons.”

Demons? Okay, Kylie wasn’t ready to deal with them just yet. “But you don’t think I’m a vampire or a werewolf, right?”

“I think it’s unlikely.”

Which basically meant, if Kylie wanted to get to the bottom of this, she’d have to go to her parents. And just how in the heck was she going to do that, assuming her parents were as clueless about this as she was? Knowing her mom, if Kylie started asking questions, she’d get herself pulled out of camp and stuck in a loony bin.

* * *

During the art hour later that afternoon, Kylie was paired up with Helen and Jonathon. The teen had removed all his piercings except his left earring. Kylie also noticed the way he carried himself, as if somehow becoming a vampire had given him a double shot of confidence. Even Helen seemed quicker to smile and totally comfortable with her new role as fairy/healer.

Kylie remembered Holiday saying how the camp would make most of them feel relieved because they always sensed they were different. Kylie saw

that relief in Helen and Jonathon—it was as if they’d finally discovered who they really were. It was just one of a dozen or more things that made her different from everyone else here at camp. She couldn’t help but wonder if this failure to identify with her supernatural self wasn’t another sign of her not being anything but human.

Their art assignment was to take a walk as a group of three, find a spot, and then sit and sketch the same thing. Kylie, her mind still stuck on seeing the falls, suggested that they take a walk to the waterfalls. She felt pretty sure she could find her way back to where Derek had taken her and then follow the sounds from there. Face it, she was curious, but both Helen and Jonathon refused to go, saying only that they preferred to stay away from that place. Instead, they walked down one of the trails and found an old tree that had been split in two from what she assumed had been lightning.

While Helen and Jonathon got into the whole sketch-a-tree thing, Kylie spent most her time trying to figure out how to approach her parents. Her mother already thought she was nuts because of Soldier Dude. What would she say when Kylie asked, point-blank, if her mom had any fairy ancestors, saw ghosts, or could transform herself into a unicorn.

Later, when Kylie met up with her hiking crowd, she almost bailed when she found out Lucas was leading the group. Then, afraid ditching would get her into trouble with Holiday, Kylie plastered a cordial look on her face that she didn’t really feel, and swore to ignore him. Fifteen minutes into the hike, she realized she didn’t have to ignore Lucas because he did a championship-winning job of ignoring her. Half an hour into the hike, and not once had he addressed her personally or even glanced her way. Not that she cared.

It was a downright shame Fredericka wasn’t around to see how unimpressed the two of them were with each other. Okay, the truth was, Kylie counted her blessings that she and Fredericka hadn’t crossed paths again. Somehow Kylie had to muster up some courage, or at least learn to fake some. Because sooner or later they were bound to come face-to-face again. Kylie’s hands began to sweat just from considering it.

And to think Holiday thought she had courage. Ha.

In the beginning of the hike through the woods, Kylie mostly hung with Miranda, when her roommate wasn't chatting it up with the five or six male hikers. Honestly, when it came to the opposite sex, Miranda reminded Kylie a bit of Sara. A little too out there. Then again, it might be Kylie was a tad jealous at how easily both of them could flirt.

Even though Kylie didn't consider herself unattractive, playing that whole giggly role didn't come easy for her. She was fortunate that Trey hadn't been turned off by her more subdued style.

Thinking about Trey reminded Kylie that he'd called again during art class. He'd left a message, too, but she hadn't listened to it yet. Hey, he'd have to get in line. She had her own issues to deal with. But even as she tried to push thoughts of him away, she remembered him saying in their first conversation, *I just want to see you. I miss you.*

Her chest tightened, because damn it. She missed him, too.

Kylie felt Miranda nudge her with her elbow.

"This is Kylie. We're rooming together," Miranda said.

Waving at the group of guys walking on the other side of Miranda, Kylie quickly went back to checking the trails for water moccasins and pretending she wasn't listening to Lucas's spiel about the camp.

According to him, real dinosaur bones were actually found here back in the 1960s. After a few more minutes, Kylie forgot about feigning disinterest and like the rest of the group—minus a few of the boys and Miranda—hung on Lucas's every word.

Lucas took them up to a creek bed where an archeologist had roped off some prehistoric footprints. Kylie found the whole story fascinating. And it had nothing to do with the fact that Lucas's deep voice sounded hypnotic. She'd always found archaeology intriguing.

"So, are they still excavating the site?" Kylie asked. "Couldn't there be even more dinosaur bones here?"

Lucas turned to her. "Not on camp property, they're not." His tone lost its earlier enthusiasm and his focus shifted back to the others so fast Kylie had no doubt that her being here annoyed the hell out of him. Surely he knew she

hadn't chosen to be on his little adventure.

If Kylie had any reservations about his attitude being a figment of her imagination, it died when Miranda whispered, "I don't see why that bitch Fredericka thinks he's into you. From what I can see, he barely tolerates you."

"I know," Kylie muttered, but even as the words left her lips, she recalled how he'd looked at her last night in her PJs.

"I've been thinking about Fredericka and I swear, she's so evil," Miranda whispered. "I'll betcha she wasn't born at midnight. Some supernaturals lie..."

Kylie nodded, only half listening, and that's when it hit. "Oh my God, that's how I can do it. Thank you." Kylie gave Miranda's arm a good squeeze, and for the first time she felt as if uncovering the truth was in her reach.

Chapter Twenty-five

That evening, Kylie stayed behind at the cabin when Miranda and Della went to the music get-together at the dining hall. Supposedly, some of the guys were going to sing and had brought guitars, and then, a little later, Holiday and Sky were bringing out some music CDs to play so everyone could dance. Kylie wasn't feeling in the mood to dance. Or even to listen to music. She had far more important things to do. Sitting at the small desk off the kitchen, she reread the e-mail she'd just written, wondering if she should click send or delete the whole thing.

Hi Mom,

We got computers in our cabin, so I thought I'd e-mail you instead of call.

Truth was, she figured she could lie better in an e-mail than over the phone.

You know how you are always fussing about me going over my minutes. Anyway, I'm doing okay.

Another lie. Nothing felt okay. Well, except her friendship with Miranda and Della.

I have a question. We're doing some crazy horoscope readings and it's partly done by comparing your time of birth to that of your parents.

And that was the lie that Kylie had been worrying about saying out loud, but she still felt it was clever.

Can you tell me what time you and Dad were born? And is there any way I could check and see when Nana and Papa were born? What about Grandma and Grandpa Galen? Don't we have like that family tree thing that Grandma filled out? Did she put the time of their births on it?

Thanks for your help.

Kylie

Kylie's finger hovered over the send button. She almost added, "please hurry," but decided not to push her luck. If she acted too anxious about it, her mom would start to ask questions. Best to play it cool.

Taking a deep breath, she hit send. Excitement shot through her. If this worked, she'd have her answer. Or at least, she'd be closer to knowing the truth.

She'd asked Miranda to clarify the whole midnight-born rule, and according to her, there were some humans who were born at midnight. And then there were some supernaturals who were not born at midnight. However, the latter were known as the untouchables—demons, born of the devil.

And while Kylie considered her mom cold, she didn't consider her evil. If one of her parents were part demon, she would have known. Right?

Then there was the whole probability that it had skipped a generation. Which was why Kylie had asked for her grandparents' times of birth. She

knew she was dreaming that her mom would have that info at her fingertips, but hey, Kylie wanted answers.

And she wanted them now.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie stood guard over the computer, obsessively clicking NEW MAIL, when her phone buzzed. She ran to the bedroom to find it. As she hurried through the door, she remembered she hadn't listened to Trey's messages yet. He'd called again during dinner, and she hadn't answered then, either.

She told herself it was because she was surrounded by people who could listen in, but she could have walked outside and taken the call.

She could have, but she hadn't.

Deep down she knew that meant something. She just wasn't sure what it meant.

Snatching her phone from the bed, she eyed the screen. Frowning, she took the call.

"Hello, Mom." Kylie fell on top of the mattress. "Didn't you get my—"

"E-mail? Yes, but I don't want to get an e-mail or text. I want to talk to you."

"Okay." Kylie listened as the silence filled the line. See, that was the problem with her and her mom. They really had nothing to talk about.

"Did you have a good day?" her mom asked.

"It was okay." Another awkward moment. "Did you read my e-mail?"

"Yes," her mom said.

"Can you tell me what time you were born?"

"It was late."

Kylie's heart stopped. "How late?"

"I don't know the exact time. Are they feeding you well?"

Kylie closed her eyes. "It's camp food, only slightly better than the school cafeteria. Do you have your birth certificate? That should have the exact

time.”

“I think it was around eleven. Just say eleven.”

“I need the exact time, Mom,” Kylie muttered. “I told you. It’s for a camp project.”

“My birth certificate is in the closet in that box with all those other important papers and old pictures. It would take me forever to find it.”

“Please?”

“Why is this important? You don’t even believe in horoscopes.”

There were a lot of things I used to not to believe in. “Like I said, it’s for a camp project. All the kids are doing it.” *Can’t you do that much for me?* “Do you have Dad’s birth certificate?”

“Have you spoken with him?” her mom asked, lowering her voice.

“No,” Kylie answered, and the feeling of abandonment swelled in her chest.

“You’re not angry at him, are you?” her mom asked.

Hell, yes. He left me to live with you. “Honestly, I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

“It’s not good for you to be angry, Kylie.”

Why not? You stay angry at him. Right then, Kylie realized something she should have realized long ago. Her mom was forever angry at her dad. Kylie just didn’t understand why.

Her mom sighed. “I need to know if he’s coming on Sunday.”

“Why are y’all doing this?” It was a question Kylie had never asked. She’d always assumed her mom, being her mom, had one of her temper tantrums and told him to get his stuff and leave. She’d even heard her mom tell him to get out a couple of years ago when she’d walked in on them fighting.

“Doing what?” Her mom asked as if she seriously didn’t have a friggin’ clue.

“The divorce. That’s what.”

Silence. “Kylie, that’s between your dad and me.”

“Like it doesn’t affect me? How can you even think this wouldn’t affect

me?” Tears filled her eyes.

“I’m sorry this is hurting you, Kylie.” Her mom’s tone came out hoarse. “I never wanted it to hurt you.”

Was the Ice Queen crying?

Kylie closed her eyes and felt a few tears slip down her cheeks. “Will you *please* look for your birth certificates?” she asked, trying to hold back the tears.

“Fine,” her mom said. “I’ll see if I can find them and I’ll e-mail the information to you. If not tonight, tomorrow.”

“Tonight would be better.” Kylie pulled one of her knees to her chest.

“I’ll see,” her mom said. Which meant Kylie could expect it to happen tomorrow. “Promise me you’ll call your dad about Sunday.”

“Bye,” Kylie said.

“Kylie. Promise me.”

The knot tightened in her throat. “Promise.”

Kylie hung up and stared at her phone. What was she going to say to her dad? Oh, hell, why not just do it and get it over with. She started punching in his number, only to realize she’d accidentally punched in Nana’s old number.

And just like that, it hit. The swell of grief. She missed her grandmother so much. Missed calling her whenever she had some crazy problem with her mom. Missed the way Nana would pat Kylie’s cheek and say, “It’s all gonna be okay.”

A knock sounded at her bedroom door. “Kylie?” Della’s voice echoed on the other side.

Kylie closed her phone and wiped her tears from her face. “I’m on the phone,” she said. “Can’t visit now.”

“But, I ... I have a surprise for you,” Della said.

“I don’t want a surprise.” Couldn’t they just leave her alone? For once?

“I’m opening the door. I hope you’re dressed.”

The bedroom door opened. “I said I...” Kylie’s words evaporated from the tip of her tongue, or maybe they crawled down the back her throat. That might explain her inability to speak. Then again, it was probably just the

shock of seeing who stood beside Della.

Chapter Twenty-six

“I found him sneaking into the camp. Better me, I suppose, than one of the others.” Della stared at Kylie. “Do you want to see him?” She gave Trey the up and down look. “He’s kind of cute. If you like his type.”

Kylie opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. So she just sat there with her mouth hanging open like an idiot, staring at Trey.

“Hey.” He pushed Della aside and moved into her bedroom.

“Not so fast!” Della yanked him back a good three feet and looked at Kylie. “You wanna keep him, or should I toss him to the wolves? I heard they’re hungry.”

Trey, looking stunned that Della—only an inch or so over five feet—could move him so easily, rubbed his arm where she’d latched on to him and stared down at her.

“It’s okay,” Kylie managed to say.

“Thanks,” Trey said, cutting Della an odd look, and Kylie wasn’t sure who he was thanking. Her for agreeing to see him, or Della for bringing him here.

“Okie dokie. Later.” Della leaned in. “By the way, no one knows he’s here but me. So you’re gonna have to sneak him out.” Della waved and then stepped out and shut the door.

Trey rubbed his arm one more time and stared at the door before he turned back to her. “That is one weird and strong bitch.”

Kylie’s shot her gaze to the door, afraid Della would storm back in and defend herself. “She’s not a bitch. She’s my friend. What are you ... doing

here?”

“What do you think I’m doing? I came to see you.”

Kylie shook her head. “You said it would be next week.”

“Yeah, but I have a cousin who lives a couple of miles from here. I talked Mom into letting me come up early so I could see you.” His gaze shot to the phone in her hands. “I called you at least twice and left messages. Didn’t you get them?”

Realizing what he’d done to see her, Kylie felt guilty for not taking his calls or even checking his messages. “I ... it’s been crazy.” A few lingering tears slipped from her lashes. She blinked them away and just stared at him. His sandy brown hair hung just a little longer than before and his bangs brushed against his eyebrows. He wore a dark green T-shirt and jeans. Her gaze lowered to his chest. The place she always loved to rest against. Oddly, she remembered him as being buffer. Or was she remembering Derek?

“You’re crying.” He moved in and concern, honest to goodness concern, filled his green eyes. “Are you okay?”

The compassion in his gaze sent a wave of emotion through her. She stopped caring about what he looked like and just wanted to feel loved. She nodded yes, but the truth slipped from her lips. “No. Everything in my life is falling apart.”

Trey moved in and before Kylie could stop him, he was doing what Trey did best, holding her. He’d joined her on the twin bed. Her cheek rested against his chest, and she listened to the steady pounding of his heart. Inhaling his familiar scent, she closed her eyes. She’d give in for a moment. Just a moment. Then she’d push him away.

“Is this about your parents’ divorce?” His hands moved tenderly against her back. His touch felt good. Familiar. Normal. Life the way it should be. Like the way it was less than a month ago.

“That and everything else,” she said, accepting that she couldn’t tell him about the camp and what was happening to her.

“You mean your grandma?” he asked. “I know you two were close.”

“Yeah.” She pulled back, wiped her eyes, and stared at him stretched out

beside her on the tiny twin bed. Silence and sudden physical awareness vibrated in the small room. They were alone. They were in a bed.

It wasn't as if they hadn't been in bed together before. He'd visited her several times when her parents hadn't been home. And they had met at Sara's house a couple of times when her parents hadn't been there. It was just ... those were the times that things usually went too far. When telling him to stop had made him mad.

"My camp is right next to yours," he said.

She nodded and then blurted out what she needed to say to him before she lost her nerve. "You shouldn't have come here, Trey. I have no idea what kind of trouble I'll get into if we're caught." She did know the number one rule posted: no normals allowed on camp property without permission. And here she was with one stretched out in her bed. It felt wrong. But it still felt right.

"I miss you, Kylie," he said, ignoring what she'd said to him. "Really miss you." He reached up and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She swallowed. "I miss you, too, but—"

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss beside her lips. Whatever she was about to say got lost in her head. She closed her eyes and even while a little voice inside her told her to stop him, she didn't want to stop this. She wanted him to kiss her, to make her forget.

Oh, yes, she wanted to forget.

His mouth touched hers, slow at first, as if making sure she wanted it, and then he slipped his tongue into her mouth. She loved it when he kissed her like that.

The next thing Kylie knew, Trey had his hand up the back of her shirt and if she didn't stop him, she knew what came next. He would undo her bra. He would touch her breasts, and it always felt so good when he touched her. There was even that one time that she'd let him take her shirt off.

She felt his hands on her bra hook. He deepened the kiss, as if to distract her. She decided to let him do it, too.

But then what? The question bounced around her head. She would stop

him, right? She always stopped him. That was the reason he'd dumped her, the reason he'd hooked up with that other girl.

That was when he'd broken her heart.

Opening her eyes, Kylie broke the kiss.

His eyelids fluttered open and she stared at his eyes, searching for a reason *not* to stop him this time. She wanted to lose herself in his eyes ... to see the gold flecks sparkle.

Oh crap! Trey didn't have gold flecks in his green eyes. Derek had the eyes that pulled her in. Shocked, she put a hand on Trey's chest and recalled how good it had felt to lean against Derek's chest just this morning—how she had felt safe and accepted. “I ... maybe we shouldn't—”

“Shh. Please don't say it.” He put his finger over her lips. “This feels so good, Kylie. And I want to hold you like this, I want to touch you.” His hand shifted around to her front and softly passed over her bra, making her breast feel tight. “What's wrong with us being together if we love each other? And you know that's how I feel, don't you? I love you.”

I love you. Those three little words played like a slow song in her head. He moved in again for another kiss. She wanted to be loved so badly. And it did feel good, Kylie admitted to herself. It helped her forget.

She let herself become lost in his kisses again. Lost in how his hands moved over her naked skin over her back up to the bra latch. Unlike before, he had her bra unclasped in seconds.

Probably because he'd had practice. Okay, that thought put an end to the warm emotions swirling inside her. Or was it the cold that suddenly invaded the room? Oh, gawd, Soldier Dude was back.

Here.

Now.

Watching her make out with Trey.

“Okay, sorry. I can't do this.” She pulled away and stood beside the bed, not looking anywhere but at Trey. *Go away*, she told the coldness, and squeezed her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, she felt the chill fade. She focused again on

Trey, stretched out on the bed frowning at the ceiling.

“Not again,” Trey muttered, and he sounded angry. He always got a little mad when she first stopped him. One time, he even dropped her off at her house without speaking to her.

Without wanting to, she found herself comparing him to Derek. Not just his body, in that Derek won hands down, but his attitude. For some reason, she didn’t think Derek would pressure her so hard to give it up.

And then pout like a spoiled brat when she refused.

A tiny ribbon of anger swirled around her other emotions, overpowering passion and hunger and even her fear. “Who do you think you are, Trey? You can’t just come into camp and expect me to have sex with you, especially after everything that’s happened.”

He sat up and brushed a hand over his face. “I didn’t come here expecting to have sex.” He let go of a deep gush of air. “I came to talk. Fine ... yeah, I want sex, too. And I don’t understand why you keep—”

“You want it enough that you’d break up with me and find someone who would give it to you?” Why she’d asked that she didn’t know, because it had already happened.

He frowned.

“Did you sleep with her?” Kylie asked. In her heart she already knew the answer, but for some reason she needed it confirmed.

He didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to. The confirmation was all over his face.

“Did you tell her you loved her, too?” The thought stung like a paper cut right across the heart.

Even more guilt filled his eyes, and then he shook his head and fell face-first into denial. “No, I didn’t sleep with her. And why would I tell her I love her, when I love you?”

Kylie didn’t have Della’s super lie-detecting skill, but she knew he’d just lied to her. Knew it with certainty and she wanted to throw something at him.

“Don’t lie, Derek.”

“Derek?” He sat up in bed. “Who the hell is Derek?”

“Trey,” she snapped.

“Who’s Derek?” Trey asked again.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. We ... you and I aren’t together anymore.”

“So you’re together with him?”

She shook her head. Then, realizing what a mistake this had been, she faced the fact that this was partly her fault. “I’m sorry. I should have just told you no when you asked if I would see you. I can’t see you now or next week.”

He looked so hurt. Just as she’d known he’d been lying about sleeping with that girl, Kylie knew the hurt on his face was real. Trey did care about her. He’d just cared about having sex more.

“Are you seeing someone else? Is that who Derek is?” He jumped off the bed and stopped right in front of her. “I know I screwed up, Kylie. But ... please, give me another chance. I really miss you.” He reached out to touch her.

She pushed his hand back. “I believe you miss me, Trey. I do. But I can’t do this now.”

“We don’t have to have sex. We can just talk, okay? I’ll wait until you’re ready, I swear. Let me take you out for a pizza or something. I drove my dad’s truck and—”

“I already ate dinner. Where did you park the truck?”

“At the front gate, but please...”

“I can’t,” she said.

“Don’t tell me you don’t care about me anymore. We dated for almost a year.”

“I don’t know what I feel.” She reached back under her shirt and rehooked her bra. “I’m confused about everything right now ... except that I know you hurt me, Trey. When school starts up, maybe we can ... talk. But right now I have to get you out of this camp before something bad happens.”

“Like what?” he asked. Something close to disgust crossed his face. “Is it true what they say about this place?”

“What who says?” she asked.

“My cousin and the other campers from last year. They say that all the kids who attend here are juvenile delinquents who were into really weird crap. Real freaks.”

Only a few days ago, she would have totally agreed with him, but now ... “Don’t believe everything you hear.” She reached down and found her phone on the bed. “Just trust me on this, okay? You’ve got to go.” She gave him a nudge toward the door.

She took him through the woods, staying a few feet from the trail back to the dining hall. Once there, she peered around a tree to make sure the coast was clear. The muscles in her gut relaxed a little when no one was hanging outside. She hurried Trey past the entrance and breathed a sigh of relief when they moved behind the gate to his truck.

He looked down at her. “I do love you,” he said.

She only nodded and motioned for him to go.

He reached out and she let him hug her. She even returned the embrace. Her emotions started zipping all over the place again. Deep down, she admitted that while she didn’t think she’d ever forgive Trey for dumping her, a small part of her still cared about him. And who knew, maybe by the time school started up again, she’d feel differently. But as for now ...

As he drove away, Kylie stayed in the parking lot until his taillights faded into the darkness. Standing there, she hated how alone she felt.

When she turned around, she realized she’d been wrong. She wasn’t alone. Just friggin’ great. Someone stood by the gate, watching her. Kylie couldn’t make out who it was, but she prayed it wasn’t Holiday or Sky. As she got closer, she recognized her lone watcher.

It wasn’t Sky or Holiday.

It was worse.

Fredericka.

Determined not to show any fear, Kylie walked right past her. She got almost to the dining hall when the girl whizzed by and came to a sudden stop in front of Kylie.

She managed to stop right before slamming into the she-wolf.

“So, Ghost Girl had company, huh?” Fredericka said in a condescending voice. “What have you been doing? Screwing in your cabin?”

Kylie wondered if being turned into a werewolf explained the girl being such a bitch, or if she had always been this mean.

“If I was, at least I did it in a bed and not in the woods like some people I could mention.”

Fredericka’s eyes went from black to a deep burgundy in a nanosecond. Kylie wasn’t up on werewolf color trivia, but she could guess that meant anger. That’s when she realized that pissing the werewolf off probably hadn’t been the best thing to do. Then again, Kylie also knew people like Fredericka preyed on the weak. She couldn’t let the girl know how much she really frightened her.

The she-wolf growled. “Do Holiday and Sky know you’ve been entertaining guests? Maybe I should I fill them in?” Her voice seemed to vibrate from her solar plexus.

Right then, Kylie saw Holiday step outside the dining hall. As badly as she hated the idea of Holiday knowing Trey had been here, Kylie refused to let this B with an itch have something to hang over her head.

Kylie hot-footed it past the she-wolf and stopped in front of Holiday. “Hi. I just had a friend stop by uninvited. I realize it’s against camp policy. I wasn’t aware he was coming, so I escorted him out and it won’t happen again.”

Holiday frowned and it looked as if she was about to read Kylie the riot act. Then her gaze shifted over Kylie’s shoulder. When her focus returned to Kylie, the look of anger faded. “Thank you for telling me. Make sure it doesn’t happen again. We only allow visitors on parents day. We can’t have normals poking their noses around here uninvited.”

Kylie nodded. “I understand.” And then she took off to her cabin, praying Fredericka didn’t follow.

* * *

By nine o'clock that night, Kylie had kept her promise to her mom and called her dad. It had been short, to the point, and hurt like a toothache. She didn't mention he hadn't come to see her before she'd been shipped off to the camp. She didn't mention that he hadn't come to get her at the police station, either.

And neither did he.

Basically, he told Kylie he loved her, he missed her, and he would see her Sunday on parents day at ten o'clock sharp. Oh, and he had to go, because he was out with a client.

Hanging up from the sixty-second call, Kylie remembered her mom always accusing her dad of putting his job before family. Kylie thought hell would be announcing a snow day before she agreed with anything her mom said. But right now, Kylie wondered how many inches they were predicting. Going into her bedroom, she dropped on the bed and hugged her musty-smelling pillow, but she didn't cry this time.

Maybe she was cried out, or just too angry at Fredericka. Maybe she was still in some kind of aftershock from her little make-out session with Trey—who she'd accidentally called Derek. Dang it, here she was afraid to like Derek, in case she only liked him because he looked like Trey. Now she was with Trey, and Derek came popping in her head. And don't forget the attraction/fear she held for a certain blue-eyed werewolf. Just how messed up could she possibly get?

Kylie heard the door to the cabin open and slam shut. She had her feet on the floor to go greet Della and Miranda when she heard the tone of the words being slung back and forth between her roommates.

"I called the computer first," Miranda yelled.

"I beat your little witch butt fair and square," Della responded.

"Listen here, you good-for-nothing vamp!"

Kylie stormed into the room. Della sat at the computer, her canines showing and growling. Miranda stood, chin held high, with her pinky finger held out in the air wiggling while her voice spewed something about zits.

"Stop it! I'm sick of this," Kylie yelled. "Can't you two fight like normal people?"

Miranda shot her gaze to Kylie. "Why would we fight like normals?"

"We're not normals," Della retorted. "Neither are you, and the sooner you accept that, the better off you'll be."

"You don't know that," Kylie snapped. "Fine, you two go ahead and kill each other. Just don't leave a mess, because I don't want to get stuck cleaning up any body parts." She swung around to go back to the bedroom when she recalled the reason she'd come out in the first place. She did another about-face. "By the way, if you hear me screaming bloody murder in the middle of the night, don't worry, I'm just having a night terror." She started back to her room.

Della called out. "Stop right there, Miss Smarty Pants! Don't you think for one minute that you're going to go into that bedroom without explaining first?"

Kylie swung back around. "I did explain it. They are just bad dreams."

"Not that. I mean the hot guy sneaking into the camp looking for you. Or did you forget about the little present I delivered earlier?"

Kylie wished she could forget. Seeing the questions in both her roommates' eyes, and knowing that Della could have gotten in a lot of trouble for delivering Trey, Kylie figured they both deserved something. She went to the kitchen table and dropped in a chair. "His name is Trey and he's old news."

"How hot was he?" Miranda asked, and sat beside Kylie.

"On a scale of one to ten, he was an eight," Della answered Miranda, and then looked back at Kylie. "Why is he old news?" She moved away from the computer and dropped in a chair across from them.

"Because he left me for some slut who would put out, that's why."

"Jerk," Miranda said.

"That piece of human shit," Della piped in. "You should have told me, I'd have roughed him up a bit."

Silence fell and the three of them sat there looking at each other. Miranda stretched her hands out on the table. "So if he left you for someone who would ... put out, does that mean that you've never ... you know?"

“*You know* what?” Della snapped. “What are you asking her?”

“I want to know if she’s done it,” Miranda said. “Are you a virgin, Kylie?”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Kylie looked at her new friends and wondered if she should share something so personal. While still a little perturbed at their “normal” remark, she felt a bond with these two. A bond she’d shared only with Sara.

“Yes, I mean, no. I haven’t ever done ... you know. Guess that means I’m not only a freak, but a virgin freak.” Kylie stared at her hands a minute and then added, “It just never felt right, okay?”

Miranda leaned forward. “Don’t be hard on yourself. I haven’t gotten there, either. Hey, don’t get me wrong. I came close, but as my uncle would say, this isn’t horseshoes, right?”

Both Kylie and Miranda turned to Della, who looked paler than usual.

Miranda slapped her palm on the table. “Spill it, Vamp. We did.”

Kylie gave Miranda a light nudge with her elbow. “Della doesn’t have to spill anything if she doesn’t want to.” Kylie leaned back in her chair and decided a change of subject was needed. “Fredericka caught me saying good-bye to Trey.”

“Oh, crap,” Della said, some of her color returning. “What did she do?”

“She basically threatened to tattle on me, and then Holiday stepped out of the dining hall right then.”

“Did she tell her?” Della asked.

“No, I decided to do it myself and not give that bitch the pleasure.”

“What?” Miranda asked. “You told Holiday you brought a normal into camp without permission? Did Holiday come unglued?”

“No. She told me not to do it again,” Kylie said.

Della cleared her throat. "Did you tell her I was the one who brought him to your cabin?"

Kylie rolled her eyes in grand Sara fashion. "I wouldn't do that, Della." She stood to go check her e-mail on some off chance that her mom had answered her.

"You know what I heard?" Miranda leaned in as if she had a piece of juicy gossip to share. "I heard Fredericka's parents were rogue. Someone had to do some serious arm pulling to get her in here."

"What do you mean by rogue?" Kylie asked, remembering Burnett of the FRU suggesting her parents could be rogue, as well.

"People who refused to adhere to the rules. For werewolves, it mostly means they hunted food that wasn't on the approved list."

"By ... not on the approved list, do you mean like ... humans?" Kylie asked, getting a chill.

"Or other supernaturals and livestock. Even pets."

Kylie's mind shot straight to Lucas Parker and his parents. Was that why Lucas and Fredericka were buddies? Because their parents were rogue werewolves?

Della stood and went to the fridge. "Want something to drink?" She glanced back.

"A Diet Coke, please," Kylie said.

"Miranda?" Della asked.

"Diet Coke sounds good."

Kylie stared at the "No new mail" message. "I asked my mom what time she and my dad were born."

"And?" Della set a soda beside the computer.

Kylie picked up her Diet Coke and went back to the table. "Mom couldn't remember, so she said she'd check the birth certificates. She's supposed to e-mail me. When she gets around to it." Kylie dropped back into a chair. "Knowing her, that could be next year sometime."

"Yeah, that's like when they say 'maybe' and they really mean 'no.'" Miranda moved to the desk to check her own e-mail.

Della dropped back in her chair, popped the top of the soda, and took a long sip.

“You can have soda?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah.” She frowned. “Why?”

Kylie shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I saw you eating pepperoni, but I thought vampires could only drink ... you know.”

“Blood?” Della finished, sounding annoyed that Kylie couldn’t say it.

“Yeah. Blood.” She pushed the word out of her mouth and tried not to turn green.

“No, I can have other stuff. It doesn’t supply my body nourishment and nothing tastes as good as it used to taste. Oh, and some things have really bad effects on me. Like broccoli.”

“What happens if you eat broccoli?” Kylie asked.

“Explosive, really bad gas.”

Kylie made a face. “I think that happens to everyone.”

“Nope.” Miranda looked over her shoulder. “She’s right. Nothing is worse than a vampire fart. Except...” She looked at the screen and started typing. “Except a witch’s fart after she eats a bean burrito.”

They all laughed. When the moment passed, silence rained down on them again. Della turned her soda can in her hands. “I did it.”

“Gross, you farted?” Miranda covered her nose.

“No,” Della said. “I had sex.”

There was like this reverent pause.

“And?” Miranda finally asked, and turned in the chair.

“It was nice. Really nice. Lee and I had been dating for a year. I loved him. It felt right.” Tears filled Della’s eyes, but even without them, the pain rang in her voice. “But then I turned into a vampire.”

“He couldn’t accept you?” Kylie’s chest ached for Della, and she remembered how hurt she’d been when Trey dumped her.

Della wiped her eyes. “I didn’t actually tell him. I was going to, but...” She bit down on her lip. “I went to see him after I was turned, and when he kissed me, he pulled away. He said I was cold and that I must still be sick and

he ... didn't want to kiss me until ... until I felt warm again."

"What a jerk," Miranda said.

Della inhaled. "How do you tell the guy you love that you'll never be warm again?" Della's chin trembled.

Kylie rested her hand on Della's. "Maybe you should have tried to tell him. Maybe he could have understood if he knew—"

"No." Della shook her head and her sleek black hair moved in a wave around her face. "I don't think so. He's a wonderful guy, but he's so straight-and-narrow second-generation Chinese—like his family and my dad's family. He almost broke up with me when he realized my mom was Euro-American."

"He doesn't sound so wonderful," Kylie said.

Della shook her head again. "It's not all his fault. It's his upbringing. We're raised to believe we're supposed to be perfect. Make the best grades, go to the best schools, get the best jobs. We're not..." She bit down on her lip. "We're not supposed to be monsters."

"You're not a monster," Kylie snapped, appalled that Della would say that. And yet deep down, hadn't Kylie considered Della that in the beginning? And even worse, wasn't Kylie afraid she might learn she was a freak of nature herself?

"She's right," Miranda said.

Kylie gave Della's cold hand a gentle squeeze. "If he doesn't love you, then you'll find someone else who will. You're young. You're beautiful. You've got the rest of your life ahead of you." The question formed in Kylie's head and before she could stop it, it spilled out. "Are you immortal? Or are you already..."

"Dead?" Della finished for her.

Kylie flushed with embarrassment. "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry. That was so rude. I'm trying to make you feel better and I ... It just slipped out."

"It's fine," Della assured her. "I'm not dead. Vampires' bodies function differently, that's all. Don't believe everything you read in those teen novels. We're not immortal; we only live to about 150."

"That's a pretty good deal." Kylie looked over at Miranda. "How about

witches?”

“Life expectancy is about the same,” Miranda said, never looking away from the computer.

“And other supernaturals?” Kylie wondered if she discovered she too was a supernatural, if she’d have an expanded life expectancy.

“Fairies live the longest.” Miranda talked while she typed something into the computer. “I think there’s one old dude that’s like five hundred or so.”

“Are you hoping you’re fairy, now?” Della asked.

Kylie put her right elbow on the table and dropped her chin in it. “No. Oh, hell, I don’t know,” she muttered, letting go of a pent-up sigh. “This just sucks. Why can’t my mom just answer me for once in her life? I hate not knowing anything.”

Kylie looked back at Miranda. “Can’t you help me out?”

“How?” Miranda asked, her concentration still on her e-mail.

“You are brave,” Della giggled, understanding what Kylie meant. “Don’t you remember she screws up her spells?”

“A gift for you.” Miranda shot Della a one-finger salute over her shoulder.

Della laughed harder. “At least it’s not your pinky.”

Kylie ignored Della and their gestures. “Can’t you do a spell that makes my mom find the birth certificates and e-mail me the info? Seriously, if you can make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich appear from nowhere, why can’t you do this?”

“Well...” Miranda continued to stare at the computer. “I tell you what. Touch your nose three times and say Miranda is a goddess.”

Kylie stared at the back of Miranda’s head. “Are you serious?”

“Serious.” Miranda turned around and she didn’t appear to be joking. “Come on, touch your nose three times and say Miranda is a goddess.”

“And you won’t turn my mom into a toad?” Kylie held her left index finger in front of her nose.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Della warned.

Miranda scowled at Della. “I pinky promise not to mess up.” She held out

her pinky.

“And if I do this, I’ll get my mom’s e-mail?” Kylie couldn’t believe she was considering this, but ...

“Yup.” Miranda grinned. “Or you could just come check the computer. Because you just got an e-mail from her.”

Kylie jumped up and literally pushed Miranda out of the chair. Holding her breath, Kylie reached for the mouse. She could be one click away from knowing for sure that she was a supernatural.

One click. God, she was so scared.

Chapter Twenty-eight

“Open it already,” Della shouted from behind Kylie.

Kylie looked over her shoulder, from Della to her right to Miranda on her left. Taking a deep breath, Kylie looked back at the e-mail and clicked open.

Hey hon, I was wrong. I wasn't born at eleven o'clock, it was ten p.m. Ten twenty-three to be exact. Your dad was born at nine forty-six a.m. Did you call your ...

Kylie stopped reading. Neither of her parents was born at midnight. Emotion did cartwheels inside her chest. Heavy emotion. Was this relief? It should be relief.

It meant she wasn't a supernatural.

“See, I told you guys. I'm not one of you.” Her chest clutched with a heavy emotion that didn't feel like relief. She didn't want to be one of them, did she? Or maybe what she felt was just disappointment for not fitting in. Again. Wasn't that the story of her life?

Deep down, you've always known you were different. Holiday's words played in Kylie's head. And for the first time, she admitted to herself that Holiday was right. Kylie had always felt different. Always felt like the outsider. But she wasn't ... different. Well, she might be different.

She just wasn't a supernatural.

This was the proof.

“I don’t believe it.” Della spoke up first.

Then Miranda piped in. “Holiday mentioned it does skip generations.”

“Only in rare situations,” Kylie said.

“Maybe your mom’s lying,” Della added.

Kylie looked back at the vampire. “Why would she lie?”

Della shrugged. “Maybe she’s just in a pissy mood because she’s getting a divorce. I don’t know.”

“Your parents are getting a divorce?” Miranda asked.

“Yeah,” Kylie said, not even the tiniest bit upset at Della for mentioning it. She may have only known them for a few days but she trusted these two.

“Sucky.” Miranda pressed a hand on Kylie’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Yeah.” Kylie stared back at the e-mail.

“Why are they divorcing?” Miranda asked.

“I don’t know. Mom’s so...”

“Bitchy.” Della tossed out the word.

Kylie almost nodded, then stopped. “No. She’s not really a bitch, she’s just ... cold, distant. About as warm as a popsicle. I actually heard my dad tell her that a while back.”

“So your dad’s having an affair,” Della said matter-of-factly.

Kylie turned in her chair and stared at Della. “No.”

Della made a face. “Believe me, if he accused your mom of being a popsicle, he’s found some young ‘warm’ thing to screw.”

“He’s not like that,” Kylie said with conviction. Right then she realized what she said about her mom being cold.

“And by cold, I meant ... emotionally, not—”

“I know,” Della said. “Don’t go thinking you’ve got to tiptoe around my feelings.” But her eyes said differently.

Kylie knew all about pretending to be tough. She’d had a crash course in it these last few weeks.

Kylie looked back at the screen. “Mom, she’s just ... hard to live with sometimes. I don’t blame my dad for leaving her.”

“So are you going to live with your dad?” Miranda asked.

The question took Kylie back to the day she'd stood in the driveway, begging her dad to take her with him. As much as it hurt to remember, she had to accept the truth—that day, it felt as though when he decided to leave her mom, he'd also decided to leave her.

“It’s late and I’m tired.” Kylie got up and went to the bedroom and unlike earlier, this time she was able to cry.

* * *

The next morning Kylie marched into her meeting with Holiday and placed a copy of her mother’s e-mail on the table in front of the camp leader.

“See, I told you so,” Kylie said. “Now maybe you can just call my shrink and have her tell my mom to bring me home.”

The idea of going back home wasn’t nearly as life-altering as it had felt a few days ago. There was even a part of her that didn’t want to go—but considering she wasn’t supernatural, she really didn’t belong here, either.

“What’s this?” Holiday glanced back at the note, and her eyes widened when she read it. Looking up, she met Kylie’s gaze. “Okay, I admit I’m surprised, but it doesn’t really change the facts.”

“Why not? You told me that only in very rare circumstances would it skip a generation.”

“What about the fact that you see ghosts? That you were born at midnight? Or that your brain doesn’t read like a human?”

Kylie dropped into the chair across from Holiday. “I could be crazy. Or like you said the other day, just a freak of human nature and dealing with a super-charged ghost.”

Holiday nodded and then leaned forward. “Or ... maybe the people you think are your parents aren’t really your parents.”

Kylie’s mouth dropped open. “Believe me, with the crap that is going on at home right now, I’d love to believe I was adopted, but I’ve seen pictures of my mom pregnant.”

Holiday opened her mouth as if to argue and then shook her head. “Like I

said earlier, this is your quest.”

“Was my quest. I completed it. I found the answer. I’m just a human.”

Holiday propped her right elbow on the table and rested her chin in her open palm. Kylie had begun to think of it as the camp leader’s trademark mannerism because she always seemed to do it when she was launching into one of her “Is this how you really feel?” speeches.

It reminded her of her shrink, Ms. Day, who did pretty much the same except hers was to lean back in her chair and nod.

The worst part was that tactic always worked on Kylie, too.

“Are you really sure of that?” Holiday asked. “Do you really want to leave Shadow Falls Camp?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” Kylie dropped her face into her hands for a second. “I mean ... right now, everyone is with their own kind. Miranda’s with the witches, Della’s with the vampires. And I’m ... well, I’m here with you because I don’t belong.” Kylie felt like a total outsider—a misfit.

“Is anyone making you feel unwelcome?” Holiday asked.

“It’s not that,” Kylie said.

Holiday let out a deep breath. “I saw Fredericka last night. If there’s a problem—”

“No problem,” Kylie said, not wanting the she-wolf to think Kylie had tattled. “This has nothing to do with her.” And that much of it was completely true.

Holiday looked back at the paper. “Look, I’ll make you a deal. Give me ... no, give yourself two weeks to think this over, Kylie. If you still want to leave then, I’ll personally talk to your mother.”

Maybe because deep down Kylie wasn’t looking forward to going back home to her mom—or, more likely, because she knew she’d miss Miranda and Della—she decided two weeks wasn’t such a big deal.

“You got it,” Kylie said.

“Great.” Holiday stood up. “And since I may only have two weeks, I think it’s time we get serious.”

“Serious about what?” Kylie asked as Holiday pulled two yoga mats from

the closet.

“Ghosts.” Holiday spread out the mats on the floor and then motioned Kylie to sit down. “You have to learn to deal with your ghosts, Kylie.”

“I just have one,” Kylie said.

Holiday arched a brow. “It starts with one. But believe me when I say others will come. As a matter of fact, they already have come. You just don’t remember.”

Kylie’s stomach began to twist into a knot. “What are you talking about?”

“I read in your files that you’ve been having night terrors.”

Holiday’s words sank in. “You’re telling me that the night terrors are ... ghosts?”

Holiday nodded. “Right now, they are coming to you when you’re asleep. But eventually, if it happens with you the way it did with me, they’ll start appearing when you’re standing in line at the movie theater, sitting in a classroom, even out on a date.”

Kylie recalled the nights she’d awakened feeling completely terrified, but clueless as to what had caused it. Chills crawled up her spine. “I just want to learn how to turn them off.”

A frown appeared on Holiday’s face. “That’s your choice. But let me put it to you like this. To reach the cut-off switch, you have to pass through a place where spirits like to hang out.”

“Is it like a one-time-only switch? Once I cut it off, I won’t be bothered again?”

Holiday shrugged. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On how badly a spirit wants to talk to you.” Holiday sat down on the mat. “Have you ever done any form of meditation?”

Kylie shook her head.

“Have you heard about out-of-body experiences?”

“No.” And she preferred to stay in her body, thank you very much. “So are you saying ghosts can just keep turning my switch back on even if I don’t want them to?”

“A powerful one can.” Holiday motioned for Kylie to sit on the mat. “Or you can just hear them out and see what they want. The latter works best for me. Now, let’s practice some meditation techniques.”

* * *

The next four days passed in a blur. Kylie tried to talk Della and Miranda into taking a hike to the falls, but neither of them wanted any part of it. It appeared that if Kylie wanted to see the falls, she was going to have to go by herself. There was only one little problem—the thought of facing dancing death angels by herself scared the crap out of her. So she decided to stop fixating over seeing the waterfalls. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have other things to fixate about. Things like Della and Miranda’s persistent bickering. They continued to fight at least once a day. And Kylie continued to break them up before one of them murdered the other.

Kylie spoke with her mom every morning and night, too. When Kylie didn’t call her, her mom took it upon herself to call Kylie. The fact that her mom did call made Kylie more aware that her daddy didn’t. She told herself it was simply a male thing, that most men didn’t call unless they had something to say.

Besides, she’d see him Sunday, which was tomorrow. A fact her mother had been a tad upset about. But please, her mom had been the one who told her to ask if he was coming.

And Kylie was glad she had. She really wanted—needed—to see her dad. And for some reason, probably because she missed him so much, the closer Sunday came, the closer Kylie was to forgiving her dad. Hopefully, by tomorrow her dad would have missed her enough that he would agree to let Kylie live with him when her two weeks were done at camp.

Kylie ate up about sixty minutes talking and texting Sara, who amazingly had completely recovered from her pregnancy scare and was now back in full swing with her new boyfriend—a nineteen-year-old cousin of one of her neighbors.

If Kylie read Sara's innuendos correctly, the two of them would be having sex in the near future. Kylie had come so close to reminding her friend what she'd just gone through, but at the last minute, she lost her nerve. That or she simply decided that saying it would accomplish nothing other than to push her best friend further away.

Sara never excelled at taking advice.

Trey had called twice with the same song and dance. He loved her, he was sorry. If she'd just give him a chance he'd prove how much he loved her.

Kylie suspected his "proof" would include their getting naked. And the more she thought about it, the more inclined she was to keep her clothes on. She'd even asked Trey if he could just be her friend for the summer. But then he'd freaked out when she'd said another boy's name. What would he do if she decided to move on and go out with someone else? Go off the deep end, she suspected.

Why couldn't Trey be more like Derek? She'd asked the half Fae to be her friend, and other than telling her he had wanted her to kiss him, he had stopped coming on to her.

Oh, he was nice. Always spoke to her, even asked about her problems with her parents. They also talked about Holiday's resentment at both of them for wanting to turn off their gifts. Most days, he would even come and sit with her for at least one of their meals. Nevertheless, everything about his behavior spoke only of friendship.

No more hot lingering gazes up close where she could see the flecks of gold in his eyes.

No more special smiles.

No more feeling his breath on her cheek.

No more touching.

Even when he sat beside her, he always seemed to make sure there was a good six inches of space between them.

The fact that she'd see him sitting shoulder to shoulder with other girls stung like a fire ant.

She ignored the sting and told herself it was for the best. She was leaving

in a little more than a week. And face it, the best things weren't always fun.

For example, learning how to meditate, trying to get to the off switch to cut off the ghosts, was turning into an all-time dreaded chore. Holiday had her hitting the mat three times a day. They'd tried burning incense, counting, music, and even visualization, but nothing seemed to help. Kylie's mind refused to find an altered state of any kind.

Holiday stayed forever hopeful, Kylie not so much. "It will happen, I promise," Holiday would say after each failed session.

For Kylie, it was just more proof that she wasn't one of them. Not that she really needed more proof, but still ...

The only thing that left the slightest bit of a question in her mind was that Soldier Dude wouldn't quit showing up. Kylie told Holiday to send him a message to quit wasting her time. Holiday gave Kylie the pat answer of, "It doesn't work like that."

Kylie had learned to hate that saying.

Almost as much as she hated the daily visits with the ghost.

Thankfully, he hadn't gone spastic on her with the blood games again, but just seeing him was starting to give her the heebie jeebies. The way he looked at her, the way he stood, it was eerily familiar. Kylie convinced herself that Holiday had been right. Her night terrors had probably been filled with images of him, hence the reason seeing him gave her an odd sense of déjà vu.

Holiday had even suggested Kylie try talking to him, but that idea totally creeped Kylie out. She got this mental image of him opening his mouth only to have worms or blood ooze out. Nope, she'd keep her mouth closed and pray he did the same.

Thankfully, the last few days she'd pretty much managed to stay out of Lucas's and Fredericka's way. But every morning when she waited to see who drew her name in the Meet Your Campmates Hour, Kylie would hyperventilate, worrying one of them would get it.

And today was no different. If they did draw her name, Kylie had already decided to fake a bad headache and beg off. Sure, Fredericka would probably accuse Kylie of being afraid of her. But best to have her accuse Kylie of it

than to have her know it for certain. And if Kylie had to spend an hour alone with the she-wolf, Fredericka would for sure smell Kylie's fear.

Kylie stood between Miranda and Della watching as the campers drew names and announced their companions.

Kylie knew Miranda was praying that Chris, a really cute vampire, would draw her name. Della never seemed to care who got her name, but yesterday Kylie had seen the way the sneaky vampire kept eyeing Steve, one of the shape-shifters.

When Kylie asked Della about it, she denied it, but Kylie noticed Della's cheeks had actually gotten a little color in them. Who knew a vampire could blush?

Derek walked up beside Kylie. "Hey." She smiled. And yeah, maybe her smile was a little wider than normal.

"Hi," he said rather matter-of-factly, and then focused on the campers drawing names. With his attention not on her, Kylie let her gaze move over him. He wore a light green T-shirt that fit tight across his chest. Kylie remembered resting her head against him. She recalled with clarity how good it had felt, and how when she looked up, his lips had been so close to hers.

Blinking, trying not to let her mind go there, she shifted her gaze away from his chest. He wore khaki shorts that hit almost to the knee. His legs were a bit hairy but not at all skinny. She was moving her gaze up when she noticed the Band-Aid on the middle of his elbow joint.

She reached over and pulled his arm closer. "Is this ... is that ... You gave the blood?"

"Yeah." His eyes met hers and for the first time in days he didn't instantly look away. They were having one of those moments that she'd missed.

She gently ran her finger over the Band-Aid. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You didn't do anything."

"Did it hurt?" she asked.

"No." He continued to gaze down at her and it felt like there was no one else in the world but them. She saw the gold flecks sparkle and darn if she didn't want to lean even closer.

“Derek!” a very hyper voice called out. “I got your name!”

Suddenly, Derek was yanked away. Kylie looked up and focused on the yanker—Mandy, a cute brunette fairy.

Kylie watched the girl wrap her arms around Derek’s neck and pull him down for a fast kiss. At first, Kylie waited for Derek to look shocked at the girl’s show of affection. Instead, he glanced at Kylie for a mere second and then refocused on Mandy, who then stepped up on her tiptoes and kissed the boy again.

And Derek didn’t look surprised at all. He looked ... he looked happy. Then he smiled at Mandy—the same “special” smile he shared with Kylie.

“Great. Are you ready?” Derek asked the too perky brunette.

“Tell me again where this spot is?” Mandy asked.

“How about I just show you instead,” Derek answered.

Was he taking her to the creek? Kylie’s chest grew heavy. At first, she didn’t recognize the emotion and then she remembered feeling it when she saw Trey with his girlfriend at the party. Thankfully, she managed to stomp it down before Derek turned back around.

His soft green eyes met hers. “See you later. Okay?”

“Yeah.” She forced a smile on her face that felt about as real as a smiley face. She and Derek were just friends; she had no right to be jealous. And yet ... why did it hurt so much?

She bit down on her lip. See, this was why she didn’t want to start having those feelings for Derek. Because it hurt. Then as if she wanted to punish herself even more, she turned and saw the two of them holding hands and walking away.

“Oh, crappers,” Miranda snapped. Kylie turned to look at her, realizing she’d almost forgotten her roommates were even there. Well, Miranda was still there. Della had already left.

“What?” Kylie asked. “Who got your name?”

Miranda made a face. “Not me. *You*.” She gave Kylie an elbow in her ribs. “Or are you telling me you didn’t hear who just got your name?”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Kylie swung around and touched her temple, thinking she might as well start faking the headache right now. “Who?”

“Me,” came a familiar male voice beside her.

Kylie turned around and faced Perry and then removed her finger. Perry was *not* worth faking it.

“Promise you won’t touch my ears,” he said, but in his eyes she saw his apology.

“Fine, but don’t go turning yourself into anything. It freaks me out.”

“You’re no fun,” he answered, but Kylie noticed he stared mostly at Miranda.

“Yes,” muttered Miranda, glancing back at Kylie. “Chris got my name. Wish me luck,” she said, and then reached up and let her hair down.

“Good luck,” Kylie said, and noticed the frown on Perry’s face.

“So where do you want to go to talk?” Perry asked, his gaze latched on Miranda and Chris as they walked away. Kylie had never seen such a sad-eyed shape-shifter.

“I don’t care where we...” The idea hit with the subtleness of a dump truck. It was wrong. Oh, so wrong, but she couldn’t help herself. “I know just the place by a creek bed.”

* * *

The next day Kylie stood in the dining room at ten o’clock sharp, waiting on her dad. She had her spiel practiced, knew exactly how she was going to

approach the subject of her moving in with him. And it was so much easier that she'd thought it would be.

Last night, her mom had announced that she'd been given a promotion, but it would require some travel. Hence, it simply made sense that Kylie would stay with her dad. Not that she'd told her mom. Nope, that could wait until later.

Derek walked through the dining hall doors. When he spotted her, he came over. Kylie felt her face flush remembering how she'd taken Perry to the rock expecting to find Derek and Mandy there, doing God only knew what. But nope, Derek hadn't been there. So Kylie had simply walked past the big rock and taken Perry into the woods another half mile before they stopped to visit.

Plain and simple, she hadn't wanted to taint the memories of where Derek and she had really gotten to know each other.

And while she'd felt loads better knowing he hadn't taken Mandy to their special place, Kylie wasn't stupid enough to think that it didn't mean he'd taken Mandy somewhere else to do ... God only knew what. Nor was she stupid enough to blame him for it. How could she when Kylie herself had been the one who'd asked to be just friends? And yet ...

"You're here early." Derek offered her a friendly smile.

Kylie couldn't help but wonder what kind of a smile he'd offered Mandy when they'd been alone. Had he kissed her? Had he ever taken her to the rock? "Dad said he'd be here ten o'clock sharp."

"So is your mom going to come later?" he asked.

"No," Kylie said. "Mom doesn't want to chance running into him. The world would end if they had to see each other."

"Sorry about that. That has to be tough." He said it with such concern that her heart dipped a bit. All last night she'd watched him and Mandy laughing, sitting shoulder to shoulder. She ached to go back in time and stop herself from telling him she just wanted to be friends. Then again, considering she was probably going home soon, maybe it was best.

"Is your mom coming?" Kylie asked, liking that he'd trusted her enough

to tell her his past. *Had he told Mandy anything?*

“Afraid so,” he said. “She’s a tad overprotective. Has been since...”

“Your dad left?” Kylie asked, and lowered her voice.

He nodded and right then, the front doors opened and in came several sets of parents, along with some more campers.

“There she is,” Derek said. “I’d better go.”

“Good luck,” Kylie said, and unable to stop herself she reached over and gave his hand a squeeze. Touching him felt right and ... wrong. The tingles traveling up her arm were not those that should come from a friend. He stopped moving away and stared at her.

His smile seemed extra warm. “You, too.”

Kylie watched him go and admitted that she was going to miss him. Heck, she was going to miss Miranda and Della, too. She wouldn’t miss their bickering, but she’d miss them.

Shaking herself out of the melancholy, she tried to find her dad in another group of parents as they flooded in.

Kylie didn’t see him, but she did see a set of parents that had to be Della’s. A Euro-American woman stood with an Asian American man, scanning the crowd. Knowing that Della hadn’t expected them for another hour and had stayed at the cabin, Kylie walked up to the couple.

“Hi, I’m Kylie. Are you Della’s mom and dad?”

“Yes, where is she?” the woman asked.

“She wasn’t expecting y’all so early. If you like, I can get someone to run to the cabin.”

“Is she still in bed?” the dad asked. “My God, I thought this camp was supposed to straighten her out.” He looked at his wife. “I’m going to ask for the results of the drug tests. If they don’t have them, I’m taking her out of here and placing her in a better facility.”

Kylie tried not to react to the harshness of the man’s tone. But on the inside, she gave thanks for her dad. So what if he hadn’t shown up at the police station, and maybe he should have come to see her before she was packed off to camp, but without a doubt, Kylie felt certain he was loads better

than Della's grumpy dad.

"Oh, she's awake," Kylie said, knowing it was probably a lie, but wanting to protect Della from his demeanor.

Giving the room another check for her dad, she said, "I'll tell you what, I'll run and get her."

She walked slowly to the door and took off in a dead run to get Della up and dressed.

* * *

An hour later, Kylie sat at the back of the dining hall watching everyone else visit. She'd gotten Della up and to the dining hall in record time. And on the way Kylie had stopped in the office to see Holiday and warn her about Della's father wanting to see drug tests.

Kylie gazed at Della now, sitting and chatting with her sister, while her parents sat stiffly listening in. From the distance, the visit didn't appear to be going well. Della had been tied in knots about seeing them, and after hearing her father's temper, Kylie couldn't say she blamed her.

Miranda's mom and dad showed up about twenty minutes after Della's. Kylie had never seen Miranda appear so insecure as she did around her parents. She sat with her shoulders slumped over and not smiling. Miranda always smiled and her posture wasn't that of the browbeaten child, but that's how she appeared in their presence. Kylie wanted to march over and tell both Miranda's and Della's parents how happy she was to have them as roommates, but for some reason, it seemed hokey.

Derek and his mom had gotten up to go take a walk. He'd actually brought his mom over to meet her. Kylie had to bite back a laugh when his mom brushed a strand of his hair off his brow and Derek blushed. Guys never liked it when their moms made a fuss over them.

"Hey." Holiday came over to where Kylie sat. "Your dad's not here yet?"

"Not yet. He probably misjudged how long it takes to get here. Mom always was the one who figured out the maps and such. And you know men,

they'll drive for hours before they stop and ask for directions."

Kylie knew she was close to babbling but she couldn't help it. Babbling was better than thinking about the possibility her dad simply wasn't going to come.

Holiday grinned. "Men. We can't live with them. And it's no fun living without them."

"Do you have ... someone?" Kylie asked, even though she didn't know if it was too personal of a question to ask her camp leader. "I don't see a ring or anything."

Holiday shrugged. "Well, sometimes no fun is better than putting up with them."

"So you're divorced?" Kylie asked.

"No, we never made it to the altar. I had the ring, had the date, and even the wedding dress. An hour before the wedding, I realized I didn't have my fiancé."

"That must have sucked," Kylie said.

"Yeah, it did."

"Did he ever tell you why?" Kylie asked.

"He said he met someone more compatible. Another vampire."

"Oh goodness, it's not Burnett, is it?"

Holiday's eyes widened. "No. Why would you think..."

"He likes you," Kylie blurted out. "Everything time you aren't looking, he's looking at you."

"Please, that man's so arrogant, I'd never..."

"He's good-looking," Kylie said.

"I know, damn it." Holiday sighed. "I hate him for it, too."

They both laughed.

Holiday looked over at Della and her family. "Thanks for giving me the heads-up. Her father is a real handful."

"I know," Kylie said. "It made me realize how lucky I am. Wait till you meet my dad. He's not like that."

"I'm looking forward to it," Holiday said.

Kylie knew Holiday was hoping she could take a look at her dad and pronounce him supernatural. Not that Kylie believed it. Her dad wasn't gifted. Well, he was, but not that kind of gifted.

Kylie sighed and looked up at the door and wished he'd hurry up. She needed one of his hugs in the worst way.

Her gaze shifted back to Della and she wondered if her dad ever hugged her. "Do you think Della should go live with other vampires?" Kylie asked Holiday.

Holiday sighed. "It's really hard for a new vampire to coexist with normals. Especially if they live with someone who is controlling. But Della really cares about her family, and leaving them is going to be tough, too. I'm afraid either path she chooses is going to be really hard."

"I hate that," Kylie said, her heart hurting for her friend.

Right then the doors opened. Kylie held her breath waiting to see if it was her dad. Instead, in came Lucas Parker with an older woman. Kylie watched how Lucas caringly held the woman's arm. "Who is that?" Kylie asked.

Holiday looked up. "Lucas's grandmother."

Kylie hadn't considered the probability of running into Lucas's parents. The last thing she wanted was for them to recognize her—especially since it was obvious that Lucas didn't. "His parents aren't coming, then?"

"Afraid not. His parents were killed right after he was born. His grandmother raised him."

"Not right after he was born," Kylie said, not thinking before she spoke.

"Yeah, it's terrible." Holiday said, misunderstanding Kylie's comment as heartfelt disbelief instead of an announcement of a fact. "I think the files state he was only a week or two old when it happened."

"Oh." Kylie looked away. Then she remembered what Miranda had said about kids born to rogues. Had Lucas lied about his parents because otherwise he'd have been judged? And was the saying true that if one was born rogue, they died rogue?

"Not again," Holiday said.

Kylie looked up and saw Burnett James walking into the room. He wore a

huge frown on his face and she didn't have to be supernatural to know something was very wrong.

Holiday pulled out her phone and dialed a number. She frowned and then dropped it in her pocket. "Why is it half the time when he shows up, Sky manages to be unavailable and I have to deal with him by myself?"

Kylie didn't think Holiday was expecting an answer so she just shrugged and didn't say anything.

"Excuse me," Holiday said. "Looks as if I have another battle to win."

Seconds later, Kylie watched Holiday and Burnett walk out of the room together. Checking her watch, Kylie considered giving her dad a call and making sure he hadn't had a flat tire or something. Of course, she knew her dad was completely capable of changing a tire, because he spent hours teaching Kylie how to do it.

My girl is never going to be stranded. Kylie smiled, remembering how they'd held a timed tire-changing contest. As the good memories played in her head, she decided she had to forgive him for his recent indiscretions. He'd been too good of a dad to hold a few slip-ups against him. She smiled again, knowing her father would totally agree that she should stay with him if her mom was going to be traveling.

Nevertheless, Kylie wasn't smiling an hour later when he still hadn't showed. With crazy thoughts like car accidents running through her head, she pulled out her phone and dialed his number.

He answered on the third ring. "Hello, Pumpkin," he said.

Her chest eased just hearing his voice. "Hi, Dad? How close are you?"

"How close am I to what?"

Kylie's throat tightened. She recalled his words. *I'll be there at ten o'clock sharp.* "Didn't you remember?"

"Remember what?"

The knot in her throat started crowding her tonsils and her sinuses stung. "It's parents day at the camp. You said..." She bit down on her lip and prayed he'd laugh and tell her he was right around the corner.

Only he didn't.

“Damn.” She heard him inhale. “Honey, I can’t come up there today. I’m up to my eyebrows in paperwork from the office. It’s been a crazy week.”

“But you said...” Kylie jumped up and started walking through the dining room before she completely lost it and broke down in the middle of a room filled with parents.

“I said what?” he asked.

“I gotta go.” Kylie closed her phone and shot through the doors seeking a place to be alone. Only she wasn’t alone. She felt the cold presence following her all the way to the cabin. Anger and hurt filled her chest so full, Kylie could hardly breathe. Hand on the doorknob, she paused. The cold seemed to press against her back, so she peered over her shoulder.

Not only was he there, but like her, he was crying. Only the tears rolling down his face were the color of blood.

Fear tried to find room in her chest, but her anger knocked it out of the way. “Go away!” she yelled at the ghost. “Leave! Me! Alone!”

Chapter Thirty

The next morning Kylie stepped out of her bedroom and was shocked to find Della typing at the computer. Della was never here in the mornings.

“You didn’t have an early morning thing to attend?” Kylie asked.

“Not really,” Della said. Her mood came off as somber. Actually, all three of them had been pretty somber since yesterday. They hadn’t even participated in their usual before-bedtime-chat at the kitchen table. No doubt, after parents day, they all had demons to deal with, and demon-dealing was usually best done solo. Not that Kylie had been alone for a big part of the night.

Soldier Dude had popped in and out all night. She hadn’t seen him exactly, but she’d felt his cold presence. She only hoped that she caught on to the whole meditation thing soon so she could put a stop to this.

Della’s hands paused on the keyboard and she looked over at Kylie. “I’m sorry if my dad was rude to you. And thanks for coming and getting me like that.”

“He wasn’t really rude to me.” It was you he was rude to, Kylie almost said, but decided Della probably already knew that about him and didn’t need to be reminded.

“Yeah, well, he’s hard to take sometimes. But believe it or not, he means well.”

“At least your dad showed up.” Kylie remembered how she’d walked a thin line between lying and changing the subject last night to avoid telling her mom that her dad hadn’t come. Her mom would have had a fit if Kylie had

told her about his no-show. And her mom's fits weren't pretty. Still, a part of Kylie almost wished she had.

After all, her dad had acted as though he'd never promised to be there.

"Do you want to check your e-mail?" Della asked. "I think you got one from your dad."

Kylie's chest gripped. "No. I'll ... check it later. *Or not.* Right now she wasn't ready to hear any excuses. Kylie looked around. "Where's Miranda?"

"She's outside. She's hoping to catch a glimpse of Chris but she said she'd wait for us. You ready to go?"

Kylie nodded. "Sure."

Seconds later, she and Della stepped out the door to find Miranda standing at the side of the cabin.

Miranda glanced toward them. "Hey guys, there's a baby bird that looks like it fell from its nest. Oh crappers, I think its wing is broken, too. Poor thing."

Della and Kylie hurried over to join her. Miranda, palms outstretched, had the small bird held up to her face. One of the bird's wings was hanging at an odd angle.

"Can't you just zap it well?" Della asked.

"I wish. But I'm afraid I would ... screw that up, too," Miranda said, her tone filled with a bit of self-loathing—no doubt a result of her visit with her mom.

Miranda looked at Kylie. "Do you think that girl ... the one who scanned you for a tumor ... might be able to heal it?"

"I don't know," Kylie said, and noticed how the bird's eye color had gone from black to blue. Then she noted how the bird stared at Miranda. Call Kylie suspicious if you want, but she'd seen that gaga-look before on a certain shape-shifter's face. She glanced at Della, who met her gaze and then rolled her eyes.

Oh, yeah. It was definitely Perry.

"I think the humane thing to do is break its neck," Kylie said.

"Oh, definitely," Della echoed.

Kylie edged closer. The bird turned his head to peer at her and actually flinched. *That's right, you little twerp, you'd better be afraid of me.*

"You're so cruel." Miranda brought the bird to her breasts, then tucked her chin down to talk to it. "Don't you worry, Miranda's gonna take care of you," she cooed.

"Why don't you check its sex to see if it's a boy or girl?" Kylie couldn't help but snicker.

Miranda's poor-thing expression twisted upside down as she finally caught on to what Kylie was saying.

Miranda glared suspiciously at the bird. "Perry, is that you?"

The sparkles started popping all around Miranda's hands. Miranda jerked her palms from beneath the bird. Landing right on his butt was a red-faced Perry.

"I was just flying by. I didn't ... I didn't do anything wrong. I wasn't even looking in the windows." His gaze shot to Kylie. "And don't you touch my ears or my neck." He got up and ran off.

"I should turn him into the rat he really is," Miranda said, apparently embarrassed she'd been fooled.

Kylie completely understood Miranda's feelings, then she remembered seeing embarrassment on Perry's face, and she knew why, too. The last person he wanted to look bad in front of was the girl he had a crush on. "You know he likes you, don't you?"

Miranda's mouth dropped open. "No, he doesn't."

Della snorted but didn't say anything.

"Yes, he does," Kylie said. "You should have seen him the other day when you ran off with Chris for the Meet Your Campmates Hour. He looked like a whipped puppy. And the whole time we were together, he kept asking questions about you."

Miranda stood there, her mouth agape. "If he likes me why hasn't he said something? We were even here together last year."

Kylie glanced at Della. "You wanna help me out here?"

"Nah," she said with a grin. "I think you're doing okay on your own."

Kylie turned back to Miranda. "I wasn't here last year, but..."

"But what?" Miranda asked.

Kylie shrugged. "I don't think he knows how to tell you he likes you," she said.

"Oh, please. He's not shy."

"He's not shy being a class clown or the class smart-ass. But when you get him alone, he comes off pretty tongue-tied. Honestly, he wasn't half as annoying, either. I personally think the downside of being able to change into anything is the fear that you don't know who you really are."

Kylie stopped and considered her own words. "Gosh, I actually sounded smart right then. Didn't I?"

They all laughed and started walking to breakfast. They were halfway there when Miranda swung around to face Kylie. "You really think Perry likes me?"

Kylie chuckled. "Yes."

Della raised her chin up and sniffed. "I smell loooove in the air."

"I'm not..." She paused and then said, "Did you smell it on him?"

"No," Della admitted. "But that's because shape-shifters don't put out the same pheromones. I'm not attuned to what a horny bird smells like."

They all giggled and then started walking again.

"He's cute, though, isn't he?" Miranda asked.

"In a way," Kylie said.

"Maybe a little," Della offered, and then asked, "so, what are you going to do about him?" She placed her hand over her heart to add drama to the question.

Miranda shrugged. "Wait and see if he makes a move."

"Why wait? If you want him, go get him. Don't be a wuss."

"Right." Miranda flipped back her hair and put it up with the band she had on her wrist. "I don't see you putting the moves on any guy."

"That's because I'm not pining over anyone here."

"Liar," Kylie said.

"Please," Della said. "Who do you think I got the hots for?"

“Steve, the tall shape-shifter with sandy-colored hair,” Kylie said matter-of-factly. “You couldn’t stop looking at his butt the other day.”

Della’s mouth dropped open and she rolled her eyes. “You are so wrong.” She fanned herself with her hand. “But the boy is eye candy to the max.”

They all chuckled. “What about you?” Miranda asked Kylie.

“I don’t have time to pursue anything.”

“You got the same amount of time we do,” Miranda said.

“No, I don’t.” Kylie stopped walking. She hadn’t told them about her two-week deal with Holiday, and for good reason. They weren’t going to like it. “I ... Holiday agreed to talk to my mom about my going home after two weeks.”

“Why?” both her friends asked at the same time.

“Because I don’t belong here. I’m not one of you.”

“Bullshit!” Della said. “You just don’t want to be one of us. You still think we’re freaks. I see it every time the word *blood* is mentioned.”

Okay, she might have had a point about the blood.

Kylie still shook her head. “It’s not—”

“You can’t go,” Miranda said, interrupting her. “Who’s going to stop Della and me from killing each other?”

“Oh, screw it,” Della said, frowning, and looked at Miranda. “Let her go back to her safe little world where the only thing she worries about is if her daddy loves her. If she doesn’t want to be friends with us, I certainly don’t want to be friends with her. Hell, I didn’t like the bitch anyway.”

Della shot off so fast Kylie didn’t see her go. Miranda stood there staring. “She’s just mad. She didn’t mean that.”

“I know.” Kylie bit down on her lip, but Della’s words still hurt.

Miranda twirled her ponytail. “I hate to say this, but I don’t blame her. I’m mad at you, too.” And then Miranda took off.

Just great, Kylie thought. On top of everything else, she’d managed to piss off her two new best friends.

* * *

When Kylie got to the dining hall, Miranda and Della were sitting at a different table from where they usually sat. Kylie got the message loud and clear. They didn't want to be near her.

Fine.

Picking up her food tray, Kylie moved to her normal table, feeling a tad self-conscious about being alone. The door opened and Kylie looked up just as Derek walked in. His lips spread into a warm smile, one of his special smiles, that made her heart swell with appreciation. He started walking toward her, and relief filled her chest. She could really use a friend right now.

She continued watching him, suddenly aware that his eyes and smile didn't seem fixed on her. Sure enough, he didn't stop at her table. Kylie counted to ten and tried to wipe the pain from her eyes before she turned to see where he'd gone.

Peeking over her shoulder, she spied Derek cozying up with Mandy, his shoulder fully against hers. Swinging back around, Kylie stared at her eggs and her emotions felt just as scrambled. She liked him, she didn't like him. What the hell was wrong with her?

Trying to decide whether attempting to eat was a mistake, Kylie heard Della's I'm-pissed voice. Kylie looked up expecting to find Della and Miranda going at it, but she was wrong. Della had her nose in the face of another vampire chick. Then the girl pointed a finger in Della's face and said something in a low voice that Kylie couldn't hear.

Kylie's first instinct was to march over there just in case Della needed reinforcements. Della had stood up for her against the she-wolf, but before Kylie got to her feet, Della took off.

After managing to down at least a half piece of toast, Kylie went out front to find Della. No Della. Instead, some of the other campers were drawing names. She was so not in the mood to chat with someone for an hour, but neither was she in the mood to go back to the cabin where Soldier Dude might appear. Deep down, she sensed that her talking to him yesterday had somehow made him more determined than ever to make contact with her.

She spotted Miranda standing by herself and walked over, hoping she

might have gotten over her anger. Unfortunately, Miranda cut her a cold look. Not giving up, Kylie leaned in and asked, “What was the problem between Della and the other vampire?”

Miranda shrugged. “Don’t know, she wouldn’t tell me. It appears that when she’s mad at you, she’s also mad at me.” Miranda’s name echoed from the front and she took off without another word.

Kylie was watching Miranda walk away when she felt someone step beside her.

“You ready?” The deep male voice made her stomach drop.

Kylie glanced up into Lucas’s blue eyes. “Ready for what?”

“I got your name.” He held up a piece of paper.

And I got a headache. Or PMS. Or bad cramps. Just been diagnosed with the flu. She had to come up with something to get out of this. But with his blue eyes focused on her, the words didn’t come out. She looked around the crowd to see if the she-wolf was sizing Kylie up for a casket. Fredericka wasn’t around.

“I know a place we can go,” he said. His hand came around her back to nudge her along.

She took a step, trying to get the words *I can’t* to slip out, but they wouldn’t come. And just like that she knew why. She wanted to know if he remembered her. Why it mattered, she didn’t know. But it did.

“You seemed interested in the dinosaur tracks.” He met her gaze. “I know where there are some more. Why don’t we go see them?” He guided her down the path that led toward the cabins, and she followed.

It wasn’t until he turned to go down one of the wood trails that Kylie sensed something was different. Then she knew what the difference was. She wasn’t afraid of him. When had she stopped being afraid of Lucas Parker? Maybe she was just getting immune to fearing supernaturals as a whole.

Questioning the logic behind her lack of fear, she recalled what she knew about him. He’d been raised by rogues. He’d killed her cat. Was it really smart of her to trust him?

She searched her instincts for anything resembling fear, and nope, it

wasn't there. What she did find was the memory of how tenderly he'd helped his grandmother into the dining hall. And then Kylie remembered how he'd protected her from the neighborhood bullies.

"You do know that if your girlfriend sees us together she's going to be pissed, right?"

"What girlfriend?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes at him. "The one who is usually attached to your hip."

The muscle in his jaw tightened. "Fredericka is not my girlfriend."

"Oh, so she's just the girl you make out with behind the office, then," Kylie said before she could stop herself.

His frown deepened. "I figured that's what you thought that day."

"So I was wrong?" Kylie purposely allowed the sarcasm to play in her voice. "Do I look stupid to you?"

He stopped walking and swung around so fast that Kylie bumped right into his chest. He caught her shoulders and set her back. The feel of his hands on the shoulder straps of her white tank top sent heat flashing through her chest. But it faded the moment she saw his angry expression.

"No, you don't look stupid," he said in almost a growl. "But you are making assumptions without all the facts, and that's not a sign of intelligence."

Kylie's mouth dropped open at his insult. "So what was she doing, showing you her new bra? Come on. She was buttoning up her blouse when I stumbled on you guys."

He frowned and pushed a hand over his face. "You're right. I'm sorry I said that." He moved his hand and opened his eyes. "I admit you had a right to jump to that conclusion, but you're still wrong."

She offered him another eye roll.

"She wasn't showing me her bra; she was showing me her tattoo. On her shoulder. She got a wolf tattoo and wanted me to see it."

He started walking again and Kylie followed. "Well, she obviously has a serious crush on you."

"I know." He sounded frustrated. "She and I ... we sort of hooked up last

summer at the very end of camp.”

“So she *was* your girlfriend.” Kylie stopped moving and glanced at him.

He shook his head ever so slightly. “It wasn’t even like that. We ... met up on a full moon, and ... it shouldn’t have happened. But it did.”

Kylie had visions in her mind of two wolves playing leap frog, but not quite leaping, and she felt her face flush.

“We haven’t even spoken since camp last year. But she shows up here acting as if we’re together. I tried discouraging her.”

Kylie pretended to be interested in a bird singing in a tree so she wouldn’t have to look at Lucas. “She obviously doesn’t discourage very easily, or you’ve done a bad job of discouraging her.”

“Probably both. I’ve even talked to Holiday about it, because she’s driving me crazy.”

Kylie started walking again. It wasn’t her place to ask, but ... “What did Holiday say?”

“That I’d probably have to be up front with her. But ... I don’t know, I guess I don’t want to hurt her.”

That or you just like having a girl hanging all over you and unbuttoning her shirt to show off her ... tattoo. Kylie knew her last thought might be unfair, but it applied to most boys she knew. Heck, even her dad had warned her that teenage boys were generally after one thing.

Not that she was exactly listening to any of his advice right now.

“If you’re that worried about hurting her, maybe you do care about her,” Kylie said.

“No,” he said adamantly, and then added, “okay, I feel sorry for her. She’s had a rough time of things at home, and people judge her too harshly for it.”

Kylie, knowing Lucas’s past, read more into his statement than he knew. Or did he know? Did he realize she remembered him and that she knew he’d lied to Holiday about having lived with his grandmother all his life?

It suddenly occurred to her that when he’d jerked her aside to ask about what the FRU had wanted with her, maybe he’d been afraid she was tattling

on him. Was he still afraid she'd tell?

The slightest hesitation about being alone in the woods with him wiggled through her mind, and that's when she realized they were deeper in the woods than she'd ever gone before.

Deep enough that nobody, not even her campmates with super hearing, could hear her scream.

She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Exactly how far away are these dinosaur tracks?"

Chapter Thirty-one

“Not too far,” Lucas said. If he was aware of her sudden insecurity, he hid it well.

“They’re actually in a creek bed right outside the property line of our camp,” he added without looking at her. “But there’s this part of the fence that’s been cut that we can slip through.”

“I didn’t think we were supposed to leave the campgrounds.”

His focus shifted from the trail to her. “It’s only a few feet off the property. Hey, it’s up to you.” He came to a complete stop. “You seemed interested the other day on the hike. I just thought...”

Kylie swallowed hard and glanced from side to side.

His nostrils suddenly flared as if trying to catch a scent. “You’re afraid of me again? Damn, I thought you got over that.”

“I have,” she stammered, and wondered when he noticed her lack of fear. “I just ... I’m remembering the snake the other day,” she lied.

The suspicion in his gaze faded, and he almost looked relieved. “Don’t worry, I can smell those things a mile away, and I’m faster than any water moccasin.” He started walking again.

She followed.

They walked without talking for a few minutes. The woods seemed to swallow their footsteps. His pace was fast, but not so fast she couldn’t keep up.

“Have you figured out what you are yet?” he asked.

“No. But there’s more than a good chance I’m just human.”

He stopped abruptly and looked back at her.

Kylie held her hand up in front of her forehead. "Don't do it. And don't say it. I know I don't read like a human. But frankly, I'm tired of everyone checking out my head. It's as bad as guys staring at my boobs."

The moment the last sentence spilled from her mouth, she wished she could suck it back in, especially when she remembered him checking out her boobs the night she'd passed out.

"Sorry. I guess I can understand how that might get to you. Having us ... stare at your pattern all the time." He grinned.

And damn if it wasn't the kind of smile that made a girl melt. They stood there studying each other and then it became downright awkward. He finally shook his head and started walking again.

They had walked another forth of a mile when she noticed a Band-Aid on his arm. "Did you ... give blood?" She pointed to his arm.

"Oh, yeah." He looked at the Band-Aid as if he'd forgotten it was there, ripped it off, and tucked it inside his jeans pocket. "I helped Chris with his drive."

"Chris, the vampire?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said as if it was no big deal. And she recalled Derek acting the same way.

"You don't find it ... strange?"

He arched a brow. "Strange?" He studied her as if he didn't get her question.

Kylie realized the stupidity of her question. Lucas turned into a wolf. Compared to that, drinking blood probably seemed like nothing.

Then he answered, "People donate blood all the time, Kylie."

"That's to save someone's life," she said, just to prevent the awkward silence.

"And vampires die if they don't drink blood."

Kylie wasn't sure if she'd known that, but hearing him say it had her head swimming. "Can't they survive on...?"

"Animal blood?" he finished her question. "They can and do drink animal

blood, but to maintain proper nourishment, they need some human blood in their diet. It's the same as donating to the Red Cross."

Without meaning to, she let her next thought slip out of her mouth. "Sick people don't drink it. It's injected into their veins."

"Does it really matter how it gets into their system? Personally, I don't see the difference."

She gave his analogy some thought and felt small and inconsiderate.

"Aren't you rooming with a vampire?" he asked.

"Yeah." But somehow in her mind she'd separated Della the friend from Della the vampire.

"And she hasn't asked you to donate yet?"

"No." And Kylie knew why, too. Della knew how Kylie and even Miranda felt about the whole blood issue. For some reason Della's angry retort from this morning rang in her head. *You still think we're freaks.*

"All the vampires are supposed to get someone to donate. If they fail, they don't participate in the rituals."

Kylie remembered Della hadn't gone to her regular early morning meeting today—then there was the argument Della had with another vampire. The memory of Della standing up to Fredericka flashed in Kylie head, then came the flash of how she'd protected Kylie from her cousin, Chan. Della had been willing to go the limit for Kylie, but Della hadn't even felt comfortable enough to ask Kylie for blood.

You still think we're freaks.

Della's accusation rang again in Kylie's mind.

Kylie didn't consider Della a freak, but in truth, she hadn't accepted her for who she really was, either. Sum it up and it meant Kylie hadn't been much of a friend.

The realization hurt like a punch to her stomach.

"Is it safe?" Kylie asked.

"What?" Lucas asked.

"Donating blood to the vampires. Is it safe?"

"Of course it is. Holiday wouldn't allow it if it wasn't."

Opening herself up to accepting Della took Kylie down other mental paths. “What’s it like?”

He shrugged. “It’s just like they do it at a doctor’s office.”

“Not that. I mean, changing into a wolf. I heard some others say it was...” She tried to think how to put it.

“Scary?” he asked, and arched a brow.

“And painful,” she answered, deciding not to try to sugarcoat it.

“I think it looks worse than it is.” He didn’t talk for a few minutes and then started again. “It’s sort of like a really sore muscle being massaged. It both hurts and feels good at the same time.”

“So it’s not like Perry when he changes?”

“No, it’s not like that. A shape-shifter’s body changes on a whole different cellular level and speed. When we change, you can see the process as the body takes on the new form.”

“It doesn’t sound fun.”

“But it is. It’s exhilarating.” His eyes lit up and Kylie didn’t doubt he was telling the truth.

“And what’s it like afterward? When you’re changed, do you ... are you still you?”

“Am I still me?” he asked, not understanding.

“Do you think like a human, or do you think like a wolf?”

“I’m not human, Kylie,” he answered. “I’m a werewolf.”

She felt her face flush. “I just meant—”

“I know,” he said, and let go of a deep breath. “When I turn, I have very heightened senses and instincts. To hunt. To mate. To protect what’s mine. They could be called very humanlike instincts. However, in werewolf form the instincts are harder to deny.”

So maybe his killing her cat hadn’t been out of meanness, but more from his instinct to hunt. Until that thought hit, she hadn’t realized she’d been trying to find a way to forgive him.

The silence grew awkward.

“And when you’re not turned, what are your gifts?” she asked.

“Heightened hearing, smell, strength, and agility.”

“So it’s the same as a vampire?” She recalled Della pointing out that vampires were the more powerful species, not that Kylie honestly believed her. Della was biased. Then Kylie suddenly remembered one of Della’s gifts. “Can you hear my heartbeat?” *Could he also tell if she was lying?*

“Depends. Our strength and senses increase the closer we get to a full moon. But for the most part, our hearing is tuned to listen for intruders moving in and not so much for things such as heartbeats.”

She recalled he’d jumped out of the tree the night of the campfire. It struck her as odd that he could do that but a wolf couldn’t. Then again, she supposed there were lots of benefits to having fingers and thumbs.

“The fence is right here.” He pushed the loose edge of the barbed-wire fence back, and motioned for her to slip between him and the opening of the wire. “Be careful not to get your shoulders cut.”

The gap was small. Kylie squeezed by him and her breasts brushed up against his chest. The warm and tingly sensations shot through her so fast that she started to jerk away.

Before she moved, he must have sensed her tension and he pulled her against him. “Careful.” His head lowered and his gaze met hers. They were so close that his nose brushed up against hers. “You’re going to cut yourself on the wire.”

She nodded and slipped through. The fence could have been wired with electricity for the tingles running through her body.

As soon as she was clear, he stepped through and dropped the wire. Their gazes met again. Somehow, she knew he was thinking the same thing she was—about how close they had been to each other. She could still feel the blood flowing to her cheeks.

“It’s this way.” He motioned her along, but she saw him take in her face—no doubt she was blushing. In just a few minutes, they got to the creek bed. He studied the water. “The water’s up a bit,” he said. “Usually, it’s only trickling down. The tracks are right across the stream. It’s only a foot deep, but you might want to take your shoes off if you don’t want them to get wet.”

Kylie sat down and removed her tennis shoes and socks and rolled up her jeans. He stood over her and watched. She looked up. "You're not going to take yours off?"

"Wet shoes don't bother me."

She stuffed her socks in her shoes and set them away from the water. The splashing sound of water filled her senses. Looking toward the stream, she asked, "Is the waterfall close to here?"

"It's a mile, but on camp property."

"Have you ever been there?" she asked.

"Once," he said.

"Was it as scary as everyone makes it sound?"

"A little," he said. "But I didn't see any shadows." He chuckled.

Was that because he couldn't see ghosts?

"You ready?" he asked, when she sat there thinking.

"You bet." Standing up, she dipped her toes in the creek. "It's cold." She smiled.

"Yeah, but in the afternoon when the sun is at its hottest, it feels great. Up about a half a mile there's a place that's deep enough to swim in. I try to go there at least once a week."

She got a vision of him swimming, and remembered her dream.

He stepped into the water and reached back and took her right hand in his. She looked down at his fingers locked around hers, her mind still trying to push the image of the two of them standing in waist-deep water, her breasts pressed against his chest.

"The rocks are slippery," he said, following her gaze.

"I think I can handle it." She pulled her hand free.

"When you fall on your ass, you'll be sorry."

"I won't." She smirked at him. But on her very next step, her foot and her pride hit a slick spot and without warning her legs slid out and up and she landed on her butt with a big splash.

"Crap." The cold water soaked through her jeans to her butt. Laughter, very deep and very contagious, rang out. He stood over her, his arms crossed

over his wide chest, his blue eyes dancing with humor.

“Stop it.” Almost laughing herself, she cupped her hand, caught a handful of the water, and tossed it at him.

He laughed harder, but then offered her his hand. She took it this time.

She was on her feet and went to take another step when she slid again, only this time she didn’t go down alone. She landed on top of him, her face buried in his shoulder. She raised her head, and watched the cold water rush over his shoulders. Then she saw him looking down at her, still smiling. And looking good doing it, too.

“That’s what you get for laughing at me.” She grinned.

His chest expanded beneath her as if he took in a deep breath. And suddenly she didn’t even feel the chill of the water—all she felt was the warmth of his body against hers.

“And this is what you get for laughing at me.” He pulled her up a few inches until his lips touched hers.

She didn’t try to stop him. Oh no, she actually climbed up higher on his chest so the kiss wouldn’t be awkward. His hand moved up to the back of her neck. He shifted her head slightly so her mouth was more accessible to his. The slightly rough texture of his shaven cheeks felt wonderful. His tongue moved inside. Slowly at first, then without hesitation. Warmth built inside her and she couldn’t seem to get close enough to him. Everything felt different from the kisses and caresses she’d experienced with Trey.

More, her instincts seemed to scream. She wanted more.

She ran her fingers through his damp, dark hair, loving how the strands felt. Loving all the emotions swirling through her, over her, making her feel so alive, so new.

Her breasts pressed against his chest felt fuller, and maybe it was the dream driving her, but she wanted to feel him touch her. It wasn’t until she heard voices nearby that she came to her senses. She pulled her mouth from his and pushed up a few inches off his chest. His eyes opened and he stared at her with a hooded gaze. She saw the wildness in his eyes, a hunger like she’d never seen before. More than anything, she wanted to be the one to feed his

hunger and taste the wildness. Then the voices drew closer. And right then, everything she felt was just too much.

She moved off him, as unsure of these new emotions as she was of her ability to stand up on her own two feet. “We should ... I heard...” She stood.

“They’re not coming this way,” he said. He sat up and glanced up at her through his dark lashes. Exhaling, he scrubbed his palm over his face. “Damn,” he muttered, then looked back up at her. “I probably shouldn’t have done that, should I?”

“Probably not,” she agreed, even though she wouldn’t give the moment back for anything.

He slung back his wet hair, sending the drops of water reflecting off the sunlight spinning out. “Then forget it happened, okay? Just forget it ever happened.”

“I don’t think I can forget.” She’d be remembering this kiss and this moment years from now. Because as much as she liked kissing Trey, it was as if this was her very first grown-up kiss. Her first real taste of passion. This kiss, the thing she’d felt was somehow more. And God help her, because while she wasn’t ready for “more,” she still wanted it. And that, she supposed, was the true meaning of passion.

Aware of the awkward silence building between them, she looked around. “Where are the tracks?”

“There.” He pointed her to the edge of the creek.

She moved over there, slowly. Staring down at the prints, she pretended an interest in them. He suddenly stood beside her, casting a long shadow. When she looked up, she caught him staring at her chest.

She glanced down and saw that the water had made both her satin bra and white tank top practically invisible. Her nipples, still tight and tingling, pushed against the fabric.

She crossed her arms.

“You should wear my shirt.” He tugged his wet blue T-shirt up. Kylie watched as his shirttail shifted upward, exposing a very hard abdomen. The hem of his shirt inched higher, and she took in the cutest innie belly button

she'd ever seen. And then his chest. Solid. Hard. A few drops of water glistened against his skin. Her heart beat to the sound of passion again.

Realizing she stared, she turned away. "Maybe you should just promise not to look and keep your shirt on."

"I *might* be able to do that. But the six guys that are about to arrive in less than thirty seconds might not be so cooperative. Then I'll have to teach each of them a lesson."

"I thought they weren't coming this way?"

"They turned around." He started putting the shirt over her head. She raised her hands and helped him. With the shirt in place, he offered her half a smile. His gaze lowered to her chest.

"Much better." He reached out and brushed a wet strand of hair off her cheek. "You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

The voices were at the bank of the creek now. Not that Kylie cared. Every instinct she had was zeroed in on the man standing in front of her and the compliment he'd just given her.

He made her feel beautiful. He made her feel sexy.

"You ready to head back?" Lucas asked.

She nodded, but right before she turned, she heard her name.

"Kylie?"

Damn if she didn't recognize the voice, too.

She looked back to the bank and found herself staring at a very puzzled-looking Trey.

Chapter Thirty-two

“Do you know him?” Lucas asked, his bare arm brushing against hers in a protective manner.

Too stunned to speak, Kylie managed to nod. And then Trey started over, splashing through the water.

“Everything okay?” Trey asked.

He didn’t look at her. Instead, he kept his gaze riveted on Lucas. Or rather, on Lucas’s bare chest.

“Yes,” she said, finally finding her voice. “We ... we were just looking at the dinosaur fossils.”

“Is this Derek?” Trey’s tone was full of accusation. Not that he had a right to accuse her of anything, considering everything that had happened between them. But the hurt in his eyes was genuine and it tugged at her heart.

“Trey, this is my friend, Lucas. Lucas, this is Trey.”

Both boys stared at each other. Instead of exchanging handshakes, they offered each other cold, unfriendly nods.

“We should go,” Kylie said to Lucas, and nodded a good-bye to Trey.

She started walking across the stream. Lucas fell in step beside her. She almost slipped again, but Lucas caught her, bringing her fully against his chest as Trey watched from the other side of the stream.

“Boyfriend?” he asked, releasing his clasp on her waist.

“Ex.” She got to the other side and sat down to put on her shoes, but she could still feel Trey watching her. She knew all too well how he felt. The same way she’d felt seeing him and that girl at the party. Poetic justice, just

dues, turnabout was fair play—a bunch of emotional qualifiers skipped around her head, but truth was, she felt none of them.

“Why did he ask if I was Derek?” Lucas asked.

“It’s a long story.” And one she didn’t want to share right now. As she tied her shoes, guilt tied knots in her chest. She shouldn’t feel guilty.

But she did.

Shoes on, she stood up and started walking, never looking back. Her emotions ran like wild horses in her mind.

Lucas held out the fence again and she slipped through—without brushing up against him this time.

As soon as she knew Trey couldn’t see her anymore, she stopping thinking about him and started thinking about the kiss. Needing to feel grounded, she started putting it into perspective. Yes, it had been a good kiss, but it hadn’t been more than a kiss.

Right?

They hardly spoke on the walk back. And she hardly looked at him, because seeing him without his shirt was ... making it hard to think. When they had almost gotten to the camp trail, Kylie realized she hadn’t gotten the one answer she wanted from him. Did Lucas remember her?

She tried to find a way to ask without it sounding as if she wanted him to remember her. As if she thought what they’d shared as children had connected them. It didn’t.

How could it, when he’d even suggested she forget the kiss? Her chest began to tighten just a little. God, why did his saying that have to hurt so much?

She took a deep breath. Just add that question to the growing list she’d started since coming to Shadow Falls.

While the rest could probably wait, this one couldn’t.

She wanted to know—needed to know—if he remembered her.

Just blurt it out. Just blurt it out. She saw the clearing in the woods ahead and knew her time with him was short. She might not talk to him again before she left.

“You know, you kind of remind me of someone,” she said.

“Do I?” He didn’t look at her.

“Yeah.” She waited for him to ask who.

He didn’t ask. Instead he said, “I get that a lot.”

They came to the clearing and stepped out on the trail. His gaze met hers. “I have to go. I’m leading another hike.” He turned to leave.

“Lucas?” she called after him, and he swung around. She pulled off his shirt and handed it to him. He took it.

She pulled her damp shirt away from her bra. It wasn’t completely dry, but no longer as transparent.

She saw his gaze lower to her chest briefly, then he met her eyes.

Do you remember me? “Thanks for ... showing me the dinosaur tracks.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome.” He hesitated, and then said, “I’m sorry, Kylie.”

She knew he was apologizing for the kiss. First, he tells her to forget it ever happened and now he apologizes for it. Her chest clutched.

Then he took off again and Kylie stood there with one thought running through her head. *She wasn’t sorry. She wasn’t thrilled Trey had stumbled upon them. But neither was she sorry.*

* * *

Kylie had just put on some dry clothes when she heard someone come into the cabin. Stepping out of her room, she spotted Della standing by the open fridge drinking ... something.

Blood. Kylie forced herself to accept it. Her friend was a vampire and vampires drank blood, had to have it to live. It was time for Kylie to face things. “Hey.”

“I’m not talking to you.” Della screwed the top on the bottle and placed it in the vegetable bin as if to hide it.

“I don’t blame you. I haven’t been a very good friend.”

Della turned around. “Is this your way of saying you’re not going to

leave?”

Kylie tried to think how to answer that. “I don’t know yet. I told Holiday I’d give it two weeks. So I guess I shouldn’t say one way or another until then.”

Then, before she lost her nerve, Kylie moved in and stretched out her arm, rubbing a finger over her vein in the crease of her elbow. “Do you have the stuff to do it?”

Della’s brow wrinkled. “To do what?”

“To draw blood. Derek said that you guys were trained.”

“I didn’t...” Her eyes widened. “I never asked...”

“I know, but you didn’t ask because you knew I’d say no. Right?”

“That’s part of it.” Della continued to study her.

“And the other part?” Kylie asked.

“Because you just stopped being afraid of me. I didn’t want you to look at me like a monster.”

“You’re not a monster,” Kylie said. “You’re just a vampire.”

“And you don’t see that as a monster?” Della asked.

“Not when I realize it’s you.”

Della hesitated. “My parents would think I was a monster. Lee would think I’m a monster.”

“Screw what they would think,” Kylie said. “You’re not a monster.” She held out her arm. “You need blood to live.”

“I can survive just drinking animal blood for the summer,” Della said.

“Why should you when I’ve got extra?”

“You’d really do it?” There was a catch in Della’s voice.

“Well, I heard that once you agree to it, you can’t take it back,” she teased.

“I wouldn’t hold you to it.”

“I was joking. I want to do it.”

“Do what?” Miranda asked, stepping into the cabin.

Kylie looked back. “I’m giving her some blood.”

Miranda’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

Kylie nodded. “She offered to fight Fredericka for me. I owe her that much.”

Miranda made a face. “Oh, hell, if you’re gonna do it, then I’ve got to do it.”

“No, you don’t,” Della said.

“Yes I do. Because we’re a team. All of us.”

Della’s eyes grew moist. “I don’t allow witches on my team.”

“Tough titty, vamp,” Miranda said. “Because you got one.” Miranda held out her arm. “Let’s do it. But it better not hurt. I hate needles.”

“I can’t do it until we get it cleared with Holiday or Sky.”

“Then let’s go get it cleared,” Miranda and Kylie said at the same time.

Right then, a toad, aka Miranda’s piano teacher, plopped down at her feet. “Not again,” she seethed, and eyed the toad. “Won’t you ever learn?” Miranda pointed her finger at the amphibian. “Keep this up and I swear, I’m reporting your butt to the police.”

“Maybe you should,” Kylie said.

Miranda looked at Kylie. “Yeah, but he never ... All his offenses could be explained by accidents—trying to show me the right keys on the piano, that kind of thing. The only way I know he was really doing it was because of the spell.”

“I’m telling you,” Della said, “we should cook his horny ass. Or give him to the werewolves. I heard they love toads.”

The toad jumped across the room and then faded into thin air. Kylie got curious. “When he pops in here, is he disappearing from wherever he is?”

“Yup,” Miranda said. “But except for the first time, it’s happened when he’s alone. Or at least that’s what I think when I peek into where he ends up when he goes back. I think he gave up teaching piano lessons.”

“Well, at least that’s good,” Kylie said.

Miranda’s eyes grew round as if she just remembered something. “Is it true that Lucas got your name this morning?”

“Yeah,” Kylie admitted.

“Oh, shit.” Della pushed Kylie into a kitchen chair. “Start talking. What

happened?”

Miranda dropped into a chair. “Yeah, spill it.”

Kylie did spill it. It all rolled off her tongue so fast she couldn’t stop it. And not just about the kiss. She told them about Lucas living next to her, about her cat. She told them about the amazing kiss and about the whole mess with Derek and Trey—including her mixed-up feelings for Derek after he’d moved on without giving her so much as a second glance. When Kylie finally shut up, Della and Miranda sat there, their eyes wide and their mouths hung open in disbelief.

“Damn,” Della said.

Miranda leaned back in her chair and sighed. “I wanna be kissed like that. I’m so ready to be swept off my feet.”

“That’s easy,” Della said. “Why don’t you go find Perry and lay one on him?”

Miranda shook her head. “Please, if the guy doesn’t have the balls to even tell me he likes me, he’s not going to have the balls to kiss me.”

“Then put a spell on him to make him grow a pair,” Della said.

They all laughed. And then Kylie’s phone began to ring. She glanced at the caller ID and saw her dad’s number on the screen. Her laughter faded into a frown. And then, just because she didn’t want to let anything ruin the mood, she reached down and turned off the ringer and then slipped the phone back in her pocket.

* * *

The next day and a half flew by. It helped that there were no more bouts of drama—no surprise visits from Trey, no confrontations with Fredericka, not even any arguments between Miranda and Della. They had donated blood and it felt right.

And then night fell.

Kylie woke up in a cold sweat. She sat up in her bed, knowing the ghost was here. Then Kylie realized she wasn’t in her bed. She wasn’t even at

camp.

Her heart raced as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. She knew she wasn't in Texas anymore. Not even in the United States, for that matter. It felt ... foreign and yet somehow familiar, like images she'd seen in the Gulf War movies her mom loved.

Kylie stood outside of a small house on a plot of land devoid of trees and grass. It was hot. Not Texas hot, more dry desert heat. The sun had set and the time seemed caught between light and dark. The smell of burning rubber and wood, of devastation, filled her nose. Plus there was noise. So much noise. It was as if someone suddenly turned up the volume because the noise around her was deafening—there were screams and loud pops—bombs echoing off in the distance. Gunshots. Someone was yelling for her to follow them. "It's not our problem," the male voice screamed.

What's not my ... She heard the wailing—a woman, Kylie realized. A woman screaming for help, screaming in pain.

Fear climbed up Kylie's spine and she knew whatever was happening to the woman was terrible. And unjust. Kylie didn't want to be a part of it. Didn't want to see it, didn't want to know about it. Too ugly. *Not my problem.*

What was not her problem? Confusion filled her mind.

It's a dream. Just a dream. Wake up. Wake up. She tried to remember how Dr. Day had taught her to stop the dreams, but she couldn't. She closed her eyes really tight and opened them, hoping she'd be back at her cabin.

She wasn't. Somehow she'd moved closer to the house and to the screams. The woman was in the house. Someone hurt her. Who? Why? What did it all mean? Why was Kylie here? Why was she stuck in a war movie? Or was it a movie? No, a dream.

Her mind tried to compute the questions. *No time*, a voice deep inside her demanded, *only time to feel, to understand.*

Why did she need to understand?

Her questions faded and she felt completely present in the dream again, in the havoc, in the ugliness of war. She felt an enormous guilt for not wanting

to be involved with the woman. If she ran, if she ran right now, she knew she could catch up with the others and get away.

Choices ran through her head. She could live if she left now. But could she live knowing she'd allowed this to happen to the woman?

No. She couldn't. She glanced down at an assault rifle in her hand. Just like the ones from the war movies. She had to stop whoever was hurting that poor woman.

Kylie kicked in the door and aimed her gun at the man hunched over the woman. "Stop it!" Kylie screamed, but it wasn't her voice making the demand. It was a man's voice.

Kylie froze for a second, then she saw that the man had a knife. She saw the woman, her clothes ripped, and blood covering her face and hands, as she scrambled away from her assailant.

The man swung around to face Kylie. He rushed forward, his bloody knife held high. Her finger on the trigger tightened. She saw him fall and felt no remorse for shooting him. He was evil, she knew it.

A young boy came running in the front door. His dark hair and eyes seemed haunted and older than his years. "No!" he screamed when he saw the bleeding woman huddled against the wall. He fixed his eyes on Kylie.

He started yelling something in a language Kylie didn't understand. He pulled a gun from his pants pocket and aimed it. Aimed it right at Kylie.

Pop. Pop. Pop. She heard the shots. She didn't feel them, but she knew she'd been shot—she also knew when she fell to the floor she was dying.

Suddenly, she stood in the corner of the room looking at the boy and the woman. Her gaze shot to the body lying in a heap, the body she'd just left—the person she had been. Soldier Dude. Blood streamed down his face. He reached inside his uniform and pulled out a letter. He brought it to his lips and with his last breath, he kissed the envelope.

Kylie's heart ached for the loss. She didn't know him, but she cared. Cared that he had died. Cared that he had died trying to save someone.

The woman sat up, looked at the dead soldier, and started screaming again, and so did Kylie.

When she woke up, she was still screaming, standing with her back against the kitchen wall in her cabin. Miranda and Della, dressed in their pajamas, stood in front of her, staring.

Kylie let go of her tension and felt herself slide down the wall. Her throat felt raw, her heart raced.

“She’s having a night terror,” Miranda said from far away.

Kylie wanted to believe it, but no. She’d never remembered the others. This time she remembered. Somehow she knew that this had been more than just a dream. This was how Soldier Dude had died.

* * *

Kylie sat there for a good ten minutes, assuring Della and Miranda she was fine. When they finally went back to bed, Kylie returned to her bedroom. Realizing she couldn’t sleep, she got dressed and went to see Holiday. The camp leader had told Kylie if she ever needed her, night or day, she could come to her cabin. Kylie was about to find out if Holiday really meant it.

Moving down the path toward Holiday’s cabin, Kylie couldn’t help but notice how the night seemed void of noise. Not a bird, not even the shuffle of a raccoon. In her mind, she heard the woman’s screams again and saw the soldier take his last breath. Tears dampened Kylie’s face. She brushed them away, not wanting to be crying when she got to Holiday’s cabin.

Suddenly, the dark silence shattered. Kylie heard arguing in the woods. The voices were gone just as quick as they’d begun, though. The hairs rose on the back of her neck. She ignored the fear of the unknown and focused on what she knew. The soldier was dead. He’d died trying to save someone. She kept walking. Holiday’s cabin was only another five minutes away.

She took another step, and that’s when she felt someone move into place behind her.

That’s when she felt the hand grab her arm and jerk her back.

“You shouldn’t be out now,” the eerily familiar voice snarled.

Chapter Thirty-three

Kylie swung around. It felt as if her heart jumped up and slammed against her tonsils. As soon as she saw it was Sky, Kylie breathed a sigh of relief.

“You scared me,” she said.

When Sky’s hold tightened, Kylie’s relief started to vanish. “I ... I need to speak to Holiday. She said if I needed her, I could come. It didn’t matter what time.”

Sky continued to stare, but her grip finally lightened. “What do you need to see her about?”

“I had another bad dream. Only I remembered this one. The ghost was there.”

Sky dropped her hold and then stepped back as if she wanted no part of Kylie’s ghost. “Do you know which cabin is hers?”

Kylie nodded. Sky motioned for Kylie to continue, and she did. Even so, Kylie felt Sky watching her as she took each step. Kylie wasn’t sure why and then it finally hit her that Sky probably thought Kylie was going to or coming from a hookup with a boy.

Kylie stopped in front of Holiday’s cabin door and knocked. A few seconds later, the camp leader, wearing a big night shirt, opened the door.

“Kylie?” Layers of concern filled Holiday’s voice. “Is everything okay?”

The distress in Holiday’s voice opened up Kylie’s floodgates again. Tears formed in her eyes and her throat grew tighter. “No.” Kylie shook her head side to side. “It’s not okay.”

Holiday pulled Kylie inside and wrapped her in a solid hug. Kylie

allowed herself to be held by someone who seemed to understand. When the hug ended, Kylie told her, “I think I know what the ghost wants from me.”

* * *

When the sun rose, Kylie still sat on Holiday’s sofa, going over and over the dream. The camp leader confirmed what Kylie had suspected. It hadn’t been a normal night terror, but an out-of-body experience. The ghost had brought Kylie into his last memories. Holiday agreed that Kylie could be right, that the ghost might have been accused of committing the crime he’d died trying to stop, and now he wanted someone to let the world know he wasn’t the villain. Nevertheless, Holiday also said that it was seldom that easy.

“Do you think he’s going to try to do this again?” Kylie asked, hugging her knees. While she wouldn’t deny that she had a newfound respect for the man, even found her heart grieving for him, she didn’t want to do this again. Every time she remembered that woman’s screams, remembered pulling the trigger to kill the woman’s attacker, she felt sick.

Holiday squeezed Kylie’s hand. “I don’t think ghosts realize it’s as hard as it is on us. They can be relentless at times.”

Kylie shook her head. “I can’t do this, Holiday. I’m not brave enough.” Her insides started shaking again.

Holiday sighed. “You’re doing fine. And I’m here whenever you need me, Kylie. Why don’t you go to your cabin and get some sleep? Take the day off and just rest.”

“What if it happens again?”

Holiday reached for a pad of paper. “I’m giving you my cell number and if you need me, I’m just a phone call away.”

Isn’t that what her father had said? But another hug from Holiday and Kylie almost believed her.

* * *

Around noon, Miranda and Della brought Kylie some lunch. “You didn’t

have to do this,” Kylie insisted, and picked at the pizza.

“You donated blood. I’m obligated to you for life,” Della teased.

“What about me?” Miranda asked. “I gave blood, too.” She held up her arm to show off the Band-Aid.

“Yours wasn’t that good,” Della teased, and then she looked at Kylie again. “Derek asked about you at breakfast this morning. He said he needed to talk to you about something.”

Kylie sighed. With everything else, did she even have it in her to start thinking about Derek? “Did he say what it was about?”

“No, but he looked serious.”

“Oh,” Miranda added, “you missed the excitement, too. You know Chris, the vampire? He and that blond werewolf—I think his name is Nathan—they got in a fight. Sky had to break it up.”

“There was blood all over the place,” Della said. “And it smelled so good.”

“Why were they fighting?” Kylie popped a piece of pepperoni into her mouth.

“A reason?” Miranda asked. “Everyone knows vamps and wolves don’t get along. Especially the males.” Miranda shot a glance at Della, who was already frowning.

“Not true,” Kylie said. “Lucas even gave blood to Chris. They’re roommates.”

“And some of the vampires didn’t want him to take it,” Miranda said.

“Why not?” Kylie asked.

Miranda shrugged. “Stupid prejudices. One of them said they didn’t want to be indebted to a dirty dog.”

“That’s just a stupid rumor,” Della said. “I don’t know if anybody really said that.”

“Yeah, but that’s what everybody’s saying happened. Oh, and guess what else you missed?” Miranda started twisting in her chair. “Guess who sat at our table?”

Kylie saw the twinkle in Miranda’s eyes. “A bird with a broken wing.”

Miranda grinned. "How did you know?"

"Because you've got that goofy grin and started dancing, stupid." Della laughed.

"I don't have a goofy grin," Miranda snapped.

"No fighting. I'm trying to digest my food." A minute later Kylie asked, "Anything else happen?"

"The FRU showed up again," Della said, her voice more serious this time, and then she rose and walked to the computer. "I didn't hear anything, but that tall dark guy was all over Holiday, reading her the riot act about something."

Kylie took a drink of her diet soda and told Della and Miranda what she knew. "So, something is going on, guys. And whatever it is, it's serious. On the second day at camp, Burnett told Holiday that if 'something' didn't *stop* happening, they would close the camp down."

"Close it down?" Della swung around from the computer. "They can't do that. This is what keeps us sane and keeps us from killing each other."

The computer let out an e-mail-alert beep. Della glanced at the computer and then back at Kylie. "You got another e-mail from your dad."

Kylie dropped her pizza, suddenly not hungry anymore. She still hadn't spoken to him. Kylie knew she was wrong to keep dodging him, but so was he. He'd told her he would come to the parents day. Add the fact that Kylie felt he'd also stopped loving her, and the whole daddy subject was just another demon she needed to tame. And she intended to do it. Sometime later. When it didn't hurt so darn much to think about.

"Holiday didn't look happy," Della added. "Especially when they brought Lucas into the office."

Kylie's gut clenched. "They talked to Lucas? What did they say?"

"I don't know," Della said. "But he looked mad enough to kill."

When Miranda and Della left a short while later, Kylie lay back down. But sleep evaded her. And not just because she was afraid a certain ghost would snatch her up for another trip down memory lane. She thought about Holiday and wondered about the mess with the FRU. She wondered about

Lucas. Did they find out his parents had been rogue? Did Lucas think she was the one who said something?

Her mind raced and she didn't know which problem to give herself over to, or how to stop thinking about it all.

She'd already logged in about forty minutes talking to Sara this morning, listening to her go on and on about Phillip, the new guy she was seeing. Then Kylie had spoken to her mom and lied like a big dog. *Everything at camp was just peachy*. When Kylie heard a knock on the cabin door, she was thrilled over the distraction.

But not so thrilled when she opened the door and found Lucas standing there. Okay, she was thrilled he was there, but why couldn't she have looked better? She looked like she'd just crawled out of bed, which she had, while he looked ... great. He stood in her doorway, with one hand behind his back.

She opened her mouth to say something but couldn't even get out a normal greeting. It wasn't just lack of sleep, either. No, it was remembering their kiss.

And how he'd told her it had been a mistake.

"Hi." He grinned as if he knew she was tongue-tied. "Your roommate, the one with the tri-colored hair, said you weren't feeling good."

"Yeah, but I'm feeling better now," she managed to eke out, and then said, "I heard the FRU talked to you?"

He nodded. "It was nothing."

She sensed that was a lie.

"I got you something." He shot her his killer smile.

And darn it if she didn't just melt into a puddle. Holding on to the doorknob, she asked, "What did you get me?"

"I went to town to pick up some stuff for Holiday and ... I found it." He suddenly looked guilty.

He pulled out his arm, and Kylie expected to see a bouquet of some inexpensive flowers. Not a wiggling, mewling black and white kitten.

Her breath caught.

"I think you should take it. It doesn't like me too much."

Kylie took the kitten and cuddled it against her chest. The thing was so small it almost fit in the palm of her hand. She stroked the feline's forehead and heard the tiny thing purr. Was she dreaming? She had to be, because the kitten had the exact markings of her cat, Socks. The cat he'd ...

Her gaze shot up to his. "You remember?"

He nodded. "Of course I do." There was a minute of silence. "I should ... go." He started to walk away and then turned back around and came back to the door. He leaned his arm against the frame and met her eyes. Something about his posture told Kylie whatever he was about to say was serious. "Kylie, I swear, I tried to stop him. It was the first and last time we fought."

"Stop who?" she asked.

"My dad. He was bigger and a heck of lot faster than I was then. But I tried." He took another step back and then pointed to the side of the porch. "The litter box supplies and cat chow are there."

Kylie just nodded. His admission about his dad having been the one who killed Socks had sent a shock through Kylie's system. All these years she'd assumed ... "Do you want to come in? Help me set it up?"

For a second, she thought he was going to say yes. Then he looked deeper into her eyes and she saw some of the wildness of desire she remembered from the kiss. "I'd better not."

"Why?" she asked, knowing his refusal wasn't just about coming inside. He was saying no. No to the possibilities running through her mind each time she thought about him. No to the possibilities of more kisses, and their getting to know each other for real.

"It wouldn't work." he said. "There's some things going on in my life right now. It's not a good time, believe me."

She couldn't accept his dismissal, not without trying. "You know what they say about waiting for the perfect time, don't you?"

He closed his eyes. "I can't drag you into this, Kylie."

"Drag me into what?"

Opening his eyes, he reached out and passed a finger over her lips. "You are so innocent. And I am so tempted." He dropped his hand. "But I can't."

Take care of yourself, Kylie Galen.”

His final words sank in and they sounded a lot like good-bye. She reached out and grabbed his arm. “Are you leaving?”

His gaze met hers. He didn’t answer her, he didn’t have to. She saw it in his eyes.

“Is this about the FRU?” she asked.

He let go of a deep breath. “I can’t...”

She dropped her hand. “I never said anything about you to them or Holiday. I swear it.”

He smiled but it was the saddest smile she’d ever seen. “I know.” Tucking both his hands into the tips of his jean pockets, he looked at her. “You know, I didn’t think you could get any cuter than you were when you were six. But I was wrong.” He leaned down and his lips lightly touched hers. It happened so fast, she barely felt it.

She wanted so much more than that quick compliment and chaste kiss. “Are you leaving?” she asked him again.

He didn’t answer. He’d moved off the porch. Kylie stood by the door and watched him walk away. And although he never told her for sure, she knew. She knew Lucas Parker was going to disappear from her life again.

* * *

Less than an hour later, Kylie heard someone knock again, or make that pound, on the cabin door. She’d just made it into the living room when the cabin door swung opened with such force it slapped against the cabin wall.

Kylie saw Burnett first, followed by a very unhappy Holiday.

“You don’t walk in uninvited,” the camp leader seethed.

“He was here. I can smell him.” Burnett glared down at Holiday.

“I don’t care. You respect my wishes, or I’ll take it up with your boss.”

“You already have.” The vampire’s eyes tightened with anger.

“Well, I’ll do it again,” she said.

“I have to find that kid,” Burnett growled. “I don’t have time to play

nice.” The vampire focused his gaze on Kylie.

“Sorry we barged in,” Holiday said.

“What’s wrong?” Kylie asked. She didn’t have to ask who they were looking for.

Burnett took a step toward her. Holiday grabbed him by the arm to yank him back, but he didn’t budge.

“Where is he?” Burnett demanded.

“Kylie, have you seen Lucas Parker?” Holiday countered in a calmer voice.

Kylie swallowed. “He came to check on me about an hour ago. But he left.”

Burnett leaned his head to the right as if listening to her heartbeat. “Did he tell you where he was going?”

“No,” she said. And she was so glad he hadn’t. “Why? Why are you looking for him?”

Burnett just stood there staring.

“He’s not a bad guy,” Kylie said.

Burnett swung around and walked out. Holiday took one step after him and then glanced back at her.

“He’s not a bad guy,” Kylie repeated to Holiday.

“I have to go,” Holiday said. “I’ll come by in a little bit.”

Holiday shot out, trying to catch up with Burnett. Kylie stood there in the living room and remembered again the day Lucas had popped his head over the fence and told her to make sure she didn’t leave her new kitten outside. All this time, she’d considered his words to be an admission of guilt. She’d blamed him unjustly, painted him as some evil individual.

And Kylie wasn’t doing that again. In her heart, she knew whatever they were accusing Lucas Parker of, he hadn’t done it. And if he had, there had been a damn good reason.

Chapter Thirty-four

“Change back or I’ll neuter your ass right now!”

Miranda’s warning jarred Kylie awake shortly before three that afternoon.

Not that Kylie wanted to wake up now. For all she cared, Miranda and Della could duke it out this time. Kylie pulled a pillow over her face when Miranda’s threat repeated itself in her head.

Neuter? Della didn’t have a pair of balls to remove. So who was Miranda threatening?

Oh, no. Socks, Jr.?

“Fine,” Miranda’s voice rose again. “You asked for it.”

“Stop!” Kylie screamed, and shot out of bed just in time to see Miranda holding the kitten and wiggling her pinky at it.

“You were so wrong,” Miranda snapped. “It’s not me he likes. He was in bed with you.”

“No, no.” Kylie pushed her hair back and tried not to laugh. “That’s not Perry.”

“Then who is it?” she asked.

“It’s not anyone. It’s a real kitten.”

“He fooled you again.”

“No. He’s not fooling me. That’s a real kitten. Lucas gave it to me.”

“Lucas?” Miranda’s eyes widened. “That’s what I came to tell you. He’s missing. The FRU have been looking everywhere for him.”

“I know,” Kylie said.

“How do you know?” Della asked, popping into the bedroom.

The kitten let out a pathetic meow. Kylie took the scared feline from Miranda. "Holiday and Burnett came here looking for Lucas earlier today."

"Was he here?" Miranda asked.

"No, he'd already left." Kylie hesitated. "What do they think he did?"

"Beats me," Miranda answered.

Kylie hugged the kitten closer.

"Whatever it is, it must be pretty bad," Della said. "They even brought human cops out to talk to Holiday. He's up to his eyeballs in trouble."

* * *

After Della and Miranda left, Kylie sat in the living room floor playing with Socks, when Helen knocked on her door.

"Hey," Kylie said, and asked her to come inside.

"I heard you weren't feeling well."

"It's nothing," Kylie said, wondering if Helen had come to offer her healing powers. And then she noticed something amiss in the girl's posture, as if the girl wanted to say something but couldn't spit it out. At first Kylie almost worried she'd had second thoughts about Kylie having a brain tumor.

"What's wrong?" Kylie asked.

"It's stupid, really." Helen said. "But ... I needed some advice."

"From me?" Kylie asked.

Helen nodded. "You see, I kind of like Jonathon, but I don't think he knows I like him. And I've never been good at things with guys. I was hoping maybe you could ... you know, tell me how to do it."

"Me?" Kylie said, and almost laughed. "Seriously, I'm not the person to come to with this."

Helen looked disappointed. "But I've never even had a boyfriend. And I don't know anyone else I could ask."

Kylie stared at Helen and remembered the girl had gone the extra mile to help her. "I've only had one real boyfriend. And because I'm not ... flirty, I just went for honesty."

“Like what kind of honesty?” Helen asked. “Because I don’t see myself as flirty either.”

Kylie shrugged. “It sounds dorky, but I just asked him if he had a girlfriend. When he said no and asked why, I just said that I was sort of thinking that I liked him. I mean, I know so many girls who do the whole flipping hair, giggly thing, and maybe that works best. Then again, honesty worked for me once. Maybe it will work with Jonathon.”

And maybe Kylie thought, if she could just figure out what she felt, maybe she would give honesty a try again.

* * *

The next few days were something of a blur. And not a good blur, either. Kylie and Holiday weren’t getting anywhere with the meditation. Della and Miranda’s bickering was at an all-time high. Trey was calling and leaving long messages on Kylie’s phone. Kylie couldn’t stop thinking about Lucas. Oh, and her dad had called her mom and told her that he hadn’t visited Kylie the last week and that Kylie wasn’t answering any of his e-mails or phone calls.

Her mom gave her hell for it, too.

“You lied to me,” her mom had accused.

“No, I just let you believe he came.”

“Same thing. And ... and ... you can’t get mad at your dad,” she insisted.

“Why?” Kylie asked. “You’re always mad at him.”

Then her mom got her panties in a wad because Kylie’s dad insisted on coming out this weekend. At first, Mom had said she wouldn’t come. Now she was back to being furious, and saying she was coming and that they were just going to take shifts visiting.

Guess who she expected to take care of all the scheduling?

Right. Mom expected Kylie to do it.

The only positive thing happening was that Soldier Dude hadn’t returned. Kylie wanted to believe he was gone for good. Holiday wasn’t convinced,

though. Then again, Holiday wasn't in the best of moods lately. When Kylie asked what was going on, Holiday just shook her head and said it would work itself out.

Kylie had also asked Holiday about Lucas. The camp leader let out a big sigh of frustration and said she couldn't talk about that. Kylie had to bite her tongue to keep from telling Holiday that trust was a two-way street. It would be nice if Holiday wouldn't be so secretive.

The tension Kylie saw in Holiday seemed even more pronounced in Sky, which struck Kylie as odd. Because so far, the werewolf leader seemed immune to the frustration brought on by the FRU's constant visits. Kylie got the impression that Holiday and Sky were having problems.

If that wasn't bad enough, the tension from the two leaders seemed to be having a bad influence on everyone else. There had been another fight, this one between a witch and a fairy.

"Told you witches and fairies don't get along," Miranda had said the day she, Kylie, and Della stumbled upon the fight being broken up by Holiday.

"What are you going to do if I discover I'm part fairy?" Kylie asked Miranda.

"Damn," Della said. "Did you just say what I think you said?"

"What?" Kylie asked, clueless.

"Are you finally admitting that you're not all human?"

With everything else going on, Kylie hadn't given the whole human or not human issue a lot of thought. And strangely enough, it didn't even seem to matter anymore. Okay, that wasn't true. She still wanted to know, but if she did find out she was supernatural it wasn't the end of the world. As a matter of fact, it was the idea that she might not be "special" that seemed to bother her more.

"So?" Miranda asked her.

"I am whatever I am," Kylie said.

Miranda started to say something and Della held up her hand. "Shh."

Kylie and Miranda paused and listened. All Kylie could hear was the background noise from the wildlife park.

“What do you hear?” Kylie asked, almost worried Chan had returned.

“The animals,” Della said. “They are seriously pissed.”

“At what?” Miranda asked.

“Like I would know,” Della said. “But I’ve never heard them so ... angry.”

Right then, Helen came up beside Kylie and leaned in to whisper, “It worked. I asked if he had a girlfriend and it was just like you said happened to you. He asked me why and I told him I was thinking I might like him. And now, we’re going to go on a picnic tomorrow, just to get to know each other better. Thanks.”

Kylie gave Helen’s arm a squeeze. “That’s great. Come by before the date and Miranda can fix your makeup. Won’t you, Miranda?” Kylie looked over at her friend.

“I’d love to,” Miranda said.

“Thanks,” Helen said, and ran off.

* * *

Saturday morning, Kylie stood back from the crowd waiting to hear who they’d be paired with for an hour and finished her conversation with her dad. She’d finally given in and called him on Friday. He’d acted like nothing was wrong, never even said anything about not coming last week, or about her not answering his calls or e-mails. He told her he was looking forward to seeing her on Sunday and then he started talking about a trip he was taking to Canada in a few weeks.

Kylie explained that her mom was also coming tomorrow and that they would have to take shifts. Kylie was positive that her dad would tell her that whole shift thing was stupid, that they could both just visit her.

Maybe deep down, a tiny part of her hoped they would both come at the same time, and then, miracles of miracles, maybe they would take one look at each other and decide they’d missed being together.

That’s the thing about miracles. They didn’t happen that often. Her dad

didn't call the shift thing stupid. As a matter of fact, he seemed just as adamant not to see her mom as her mom was not to see him.

"How about I show up after lunch?" he asked. "And I'll call first to make sure she's not there."

Kylie bit her lip to keep from asking him where her real dad was. Every since a divorce had been mentioned, her father had changed. Completely, wholeheartedly. Parents weren't supposed to do that to their kids. She was certain it was written in the parents' rulebook.

"Fine," Kylie said. *And if you don't show up, don't worry. I don't think it will hurt as much the second time.* "Later, then," she said, and closed her phone.

"You ready?" a male voice said from behind her, leaning in close to her ear. "I got your name."

Kylie recognized Derek's voice. She'd managed to evade him all week. Not to be mean, but out of a basic need for sanity. Her life was already a friggin' mess. She didn't need to add anything else to it. Besides, he had a girlfriend who was probably more than happy to spend time with him.

She turned around. "You already had my name," she said.

"I got lucky a second time." There was something about his voice, as if he worried she wouldn't believe him.

She didn't. "You did it again, didn't you?"

"Did what?" he asked, but she knew darn well that he understood exactly what she meant.

"You traded some more blood for my name, admit it."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't have to if you'd quit avoiding me."

"I haven't been—" She didn't want to lie to him, so she just shut up.

A couple of people walked past and he leaned in. "If you really don't want to go, you know I won't make you."

She looked up and saw the total honesty in his gaze. He hadn't touched her, so she didn't think he'd altered her emotions, and yet ... everything inside her shifted. How could she have such strong feelings for Lucas and still be angry with Derek because he'd hooked up with another girl? It didn't

add up.

Then again, why should it? Nothing in her life made a lick of sense lately.

"I've been worried about you," he said, and his voice sounded so concerned ... and so warm.

"You mean when you weren't with Mandy?" she asked. And then she wanted to kick herself for acting as if she had a reason to be jealous.

He looked a little uncomfortable. "That's sort of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I don't do relationship advice," Kylie said.

"I heard you do. Helen said she talked to you about her crush on Jonathon. Miranda mentioned talking to you about Perry. And what's that other vampire's name...?"

Kylie let out a breath. "Fine, for some unknown reason people think I'm Cupid." But she didn't want to play Cupid for him and Mandy.

"Maybe you're related to him," he said, sounding serious for a moment.

Kylie's heart did a tight squeeze. "Could I be?"

"Some supernaturals are descendents of the gods," he said.

"Would my parents have to have been born at midnight? Or is that one of the instances that it could skip a generation?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know. But I bet Holiday would. You want us to go find her?" he asked, apparently willing to give up part of his hour to help her get an answer.

"That's okay. I'm meeting with her after lunch."

"So, my possible goddess." He did one of those old-timey bows. "Can I have the pleasure of your company for an hour?"

She grinned at his antics. "If you promise to behave." Or did she want him to?

"That takes all the fun out of it, but I promise." He shot her a sly look and she saw that his eyes were twinkling.

They started walking and he hesitated. "Same place? Or does the thought of the snake scare you?"

"Same place is fine." A nervous tickle did a slow dance down her spine. It

wasn't about the snake, but about the memory of how close she'd come to kissing Derek that day.

They walked down the trail in silence. The sun did its magical thing again of casting sprays of light through the trees. Kylie couldn't help but wonder what it was about being with Derek that made everything feel ... enchanted.

"Is it you?" she asked as they got to their spot.

"Is what me?" he asked.

She eyed him with skepticism. "Are you the reason that everything feels ... magical and so vivid? The colors, the smells, the way sun streams in."

"Oh, that's just my charm." His tone came off teasing.

"Seriously?" she asked. "Are you doing this?"

He laughed.

"Stop laughing," she insisted.

He stopped, but he didn't stop smiling. "Okay, seriously, I don't know what you mean. I'm not doing anything. It's just pretty back here."

He jumped up on the rock and held his hand down.

She hesitated and looked at his hand.

"I promised to behave," he said.

She took his hand and he lifted her up. She sat beside him, but not too close.

He pulled a knee up to his chest. His jeans looked well-worn but comfortable, and his T-shirt was a dusty green. It wasn't tight, but snug enough that it showed off the width of his shoulders. It might have been the shirt he'd been wearing when she met him. He looked really good then, and still did. Right then, Kylie wondered how she could have ever compared him to Trey. Derek was so much hotter than her ex-boyfriend.

"So you and your girl are having problems?" Kylie blurted out, trying to change the course of her thoughts.

"You could say that," he answered in a sly voice, and she watched him run a finger across his chin. Her gaze studied his lips and she wanted to taste him.

“What’s wrong?” She blinked, ignored the slyness in his tone, and hoped hearing him talk about Mandy would chase off her thoughts of kissing him.

“Well, she thinks I have a thing for another girl.”

Kylie felt her stomach tighten. “Do you?”

“No.”

Okay, that hurt, but she tried to deny it. Oddly enough, the advice she’d been giving to everyone else, to be honest, seemed almost impossible for herself. Maybe in part because she wasn’t even sure what she felt.

“But,” he continued, “I think I sort of led her to think that.”

“Why?” Kylie asked.

“I hoped she’d be jealous. Maybe appreciate me a little more.”

“And how did that work for you?” Kylie asked, believing those kinds of games didn’t end well.

“I don’t know. Did you get jealous?”

Kylie looked up at him. “I ... you mean, me?” She shook head. “But you and Mandy are—”

“Friends,” he said.

It still wasn’t fitting together. “But you ... she kissed you.”

“You obviously haven’t ever noticed her in a crowd. She’s a serial kisser. I think her parents are French.”

Kylie tried to digest what he was saying. Harder yet was digesting what she felt. She liked Derek. Really liked him. And she was attracted to him. Maybe it wasn’t the same intensity that she’d felt for Lucas at the creek, but it was real. And in some ways even more real than the explosive attraction she felt for Lucas.

And Derek hadn’t left, the little voice in her head said.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yes. No.” She shook her head. “I’m just befuddled.” Okay, there. She’d given honesty a shot.

“I know,” he said.

She remembered he could read her emotions and really wished he wouldn’t. The fact that he figured things out before her didn’t feel right. A

breeze stirred her hair and a strand got caught in her lips.

He gently brushed the strand back. "I'm just relieved you're not mad at me."

"Give me a few minutes," Kylie said. "It could change. My emotions are all over the place lately."

He grinned.

She felt herself being lured again by his smile. She shook her head. "Derek, I just—"

"Kylie, I didn't tell you this to pressure you. I'm telling you this because I realized how stupid it was trying to make you jealous. It occurred to me that it could totally backfire. What am I saying? It did backfire, because you wouldn't even get within ten feet of me."

She bit down on her lip. "I'm sorry. It's been a crazy week."

"You're going through a lot. That's another reason I wanted to see you. I sensed you're stressed."

What all could he sense? Kylie wondered. Did he sense her stress involved Lucas? Had he sensed she was jealous? Kylie remembered the day she'd seen Mandy kiss Derek.

"You're right. I was jealous of you and Mandy. But I still don't know if ... I don't think—"

He held up his hand. "I'm fine with being your friend. But I'm not going to lie to you this time. I'm hoping it becomes more. But until it does, I'll respect your wishes."

She looked at him and found herself falling for him a little more. "You can do that?"

"You bet." He leaned back on the rock and put one hand behind his head. The position did wonders for his arms and chest. "Especially now that Lucas is gone," he said, and from his tone, Kylie somehow knew that Derek suspected a lot more than she wished he did.

Chapter Thirty-five

Oh, God. Did Derek somehow guess that she'd kissed Lucas? Could her emotions give that much away? Kylie didn't know. But neither did she want to ask.

So she lay back on the rock and looked up at the trees. The sound of the nearby waterfalls seemed to stir in the trees. Her mind went to the legend for a second, but then Derek's nearness was a much more intriguing thing to think about.

They didn't talk. Derek shifted his arm closer until the back of his hand brushed up against hers. That little touch sent tingles coursing through her body.

"Your mom coming tomorrow?" she asked.

"Of course. She never turns down an opportunity to embarrass me."

Kylie giggled, remembering how Derek had blushed when his mom had straightened his hair. "She loves you."

"She treats me like I'm three." He paused. "Your mom or dad coming?"

"Both," Kylie said. "Or so they say." Her dad had lied once. "Did you know the world might end if they accidentally have to be in the same room together?"

"Is that what's got you so stressed?"

"Some of it."

He turned his arm over, slipped his hand into hers, and offered her a gentle squeeze. "I care about you. I don't like seeing you upset." His warm hold on her hand tightened again. He'd promised to behave, but she supposed

he didn't see holding hands as misbehaving.

She wasn't sure she could call it that, either. She did know it felt good—sort of like a hug. His palm felt warm, not unnaturally warm, but just one person reaching out to another. “I care about you, too.”

“Good,” he said, and she could almost hear the smile in his voice. They didn't talk for the next few minutes, and then he asked, “Is the ghost another part of what's stressing you out?”

“Yup.” Feeling safe with him, she told him about the dream she'd had of the ghost, and how she thought the ghost wanted her to help exonerate him of a war crime he didn't commit.

Derek listened as she rambled. Realizing she'd done most of the talking, she asked, “Do you still want to turn your back on your gift of communicating with the animals?”

“Yes. I'm getting really good at tuning them out. Holiday says if I keep this up, soon I won't even notice them. Of course, she says that as if it's a bad thing.” He paused. “What about you? You still want to kick your gift back?”

The fact that Kylie had to stop and think about her answer left her a little surprised. “It scares me,” Kylie said. “I don't think I'm brave enough to do it. But since the dream, I just keep thinking about the soldier. How brave he was. He knew when he went back to save the woman that he wouldn't live through it. I wish I knew his name so I could find out if he was accused of doing something he didn't do. And if he was, then I want to find a way to make it right.” She closed her eyes for a second. “But you know what's weird?”

“What?” Derek's fingers wiggled in her hers.

“Every time I see him, he looks familiar. Like I know him from somewhere.”

“Maybe you do.”

“Maybe,” Kylie said. “But I've even asked my mom if we had anyone in our family who ever served in the military and she said no.”

Derek shifted beside her. “Did Holiday say how a ghost picks the person they attach themselves to?”

“She said it could be all kinds of ways. I could have passed by somewhere his spirit was, or it could be personal.”

Derek raised his arm to check his watch. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but our hour was up thirty minutes ago.”

“That is bad news.” She closed her eyes. “Derek?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For everything.” She rolled over and looked at him. And heaven help her, but she wanted to kiss him so bad she could scream. And if the look in his eyes was any indication, she wasn’t the only one wanting.

He moved in just an inch. She could feel his breath on the corner of her mouth. He was so close, she could count his lashes, but it was his lips that tempted her.

“Kylie.” The way he said her name made her melt a little more.

“Yes,” she managed.

“You’re making it hard for me to keep my promise.”

“I’m sorry.” She almost kissed him then. Almost. But knowing it wouldn’t be fair to him, or herself, she didn’t do it. Not yet.

* * *

The next morning Kylie sat with her mom and watched her check her watch for the tenth time. Kylie couldn’t help but wonder if her mom hated being with Kylie so much, or if it was the thought of her dad showing up that made her mom so eager to leave. Probably both.

“I’m so glad it’s working out here,” her mom said, straightening her tan suit jacket. The color did nothing for her olive complexion and dark hair. It only enhanced what looked to be dark circles under her eyes.

“Your friends seem nice, too.” Her mom glanced over to Della and her parents at the table in front of them.

Kylie had introduced her to both Miranda and Della when she arrived.

Her mom leaned in. “The hair is a bit much on that one girl. But if you tell me she’s not too wild, or doing drugs or anything, I guess I have to believe you.”

“She’s not wild, Mom,” Kylie muttered. Silence followed, and Kylie knew what it would be like living with her mom, dealing with her mom’s prejudices and awkward silences. Kylie could feel the chill from across the table. Not a ghostly chill, either.

Or was it?

Kylie shifted her gaze across the room and saw him standing in the corner, staring, crying more tears of blood. Her heart gripped and Kylie really wished she knew his name so she could help him.

“Are you sure we don’t have any family in the military?” Kylie asked her mom again.

“Positive, dear.” She looked at her watch again. “Your camp leader—what’s her name? Holiday? She seems nice, too.”

“Holiday is nice,” Kylie said, remembering how she’d exchanged glances with Holiday after she’d met her mom and seeing the camp leader shake her head no, as if to say, her mom wasn’t supernatural.

“Okay, I guess I should go,” her mom said. “Do you want to walk me to my car?”

Kylie spied the clock on the wall. Her mom was leaving thirty minutes early. *So much for mother/daughter quality time.*

“Of course.” Kylie got up. As they passed Della and Miranda with their parents, Kylie realized neither of them seemed particularly happy. Tonight’s table chat, a nightly ritual, was going to be more like a whine session.

Kylie and her mom walked to the parking lot without talking. Thankfully, the ghost didn’t join them. When her mom turned around to say her final good-byes, she reached out and gave Kylie’s arm a squeeze.

Kylie’s chest tightened as the memory of needing a hug at Nana’s funeral came barreling back at her.

“You know, some moms hug their kids.”

Shock crossed her mom’s face. “Do you need me to hug you?”

“No,” Kylie said. *Who wanted a hug you had to ask for?* It was like having to ask for an apology.

“Bye, Mom.” Kylie turned around and went back to the dining hall to wait for her dad. She didn’t look back and watch her mom drive away, even though she knew her mom would be waving and expecting Kylie to do the same. From now on, no hugs equaled no farewell waves.

* * *

Kylie almost didn’t recognize him. First, where was the touch of gray lining his temples? Second, his hair was not naturally two-toned. And for sure, he didn’t wear it in a spike cut. She wasn’t even going to talk about the clothes he wore. Old men should never, ever wear tight jeans.

“Is that him?” Holiday asked.

Kylie wished she could lie and run out the back door, but her dad spotted her across the room and started over to her.

“Is he a supernatural?” Kylie asked, fighting the embarrassment and looking back at Holiday’s twitching brows.

“No.” She let out a big sigh. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“I know,” Kylie interrupted.

“How’s my pumpkin?” Her dad pulled her into a tight hug.

Kylie closed her eyes and tried to forget how he looked and just let herself soak up the comfort of having his loving arms around her. Tears filled her eyes and she swallowed hard, praying she could contain them.

“I’m okay,” she muttered, and pulled back. Her sinuses stung, but the tears didn’t fall.

“Is this one of your friends?” her father asked, motioning to Holiday.

Kylie looked at Holiday’s camp-leader badge and wondered if her dad’s dye job had fried his eyesight.

“I wish.” Holiday held out her hand. “I’m Holiday Brandon, one of the camp leaders.”

“You’re kidding me,” her dad said. “You can’t be a day over twenty. And

you don't look like any camp leader I've ever seen." His smile widened and his gaze shifted down Holiday's shapely form.

"No kidding." Holiday eased her hand from her dad's.

Kylie gawked at the man who had been her rock, who had been there through skinned knees, mom arguments, and even boy problems. The reality rolled over her like a dump truck. Her father was flirting. With Holiday. Holiday who was ... well, at least fifteen years younger than her dad.

"What happened to the gray in your hair, Dad?" Kylie blurted out.

Her dad looked back at her. "I ... I don't know."

"Well, excuse me," Holiday said, and Kylie could swear she saw a smile appear in the woman's eyes. "I'll let you two visit."

Or not, Kylie thought. She didn't know this man, and she wasn't all that sure she wanted to get to know him, either.

* * *

"He wasn't like that before," Kylie said a little over an hour later, still fighting the urge to cry.

Kylie's dad had stayed less than an hour. Holiday, as if sensing Kylie was upset, asked her to go with her on a run into town to buy some supplies.

"Divorce is hard on people," Holiday said. "Trust me, when my parents divorced, they went totally bonkers, too. Mom even got breast implants and started borrowing my clothes."

"How did you survive?" Kylie asked.

"You just do. Of course, large ice cream consumption helps." Holiday smiled as she pulled into the ice cream shop parking lot. "What do you say? Wanna feed our worries with creamy, sweet, cold stuff?"

Kylie nodded.

Holiday reached for the door. "Follow my lead. First we have to sample at least five flavors each, then we order a triple scoop."

Kylie laughed. "What worries are you feeding?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know how many hours I've been stuck with

Mr. Big, Bad Vampire?”

“Burnett,” Kylie said, understanding. “Why don’t you just say yes?”

“Yes? Oh, no. Over my dead fairy body. He’s as irritating, rude, and obnoxious as he is ... hot.”

“So you’re in love, huh?” Kylie teased.

Holiday pointed a finger at her. “Keep this up, and you won’t get any ice cream.”

As Kylie and Holiday fed their faces with everything from chocolate mint to banana chocolate fudge, Kylie, hyped up on sugar, let a question slip that she normally wouldn’t ask. “How do you know you’re in love?”

Holiday licked her spoon clean of her cotton candy–flavored ice cream. “You don’t ask easy questions, do you?”

Kylie spooned up a bite of butter pecan. “Nope.”

Holiday studied her ice cream. “I’ve thought I’ve been in love several times. A few times with my heart and even more times with my hormones.”

Holiday’s answer described Kylie’s situation with Lucas and Derek perfectly. Kylie spooned up a bite of ice cream. “And none of those worked out?”

“Nope. That’s the tricky thing about love. It walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and smells like a duck. But after you sleep with it a month or so, or get dumped at the altar by it, it starts smelling more like a skunk.”

Kylie leaned forward to ask. “Is this your fancy-dancy way of telling me I shouldn’t sleep around?”

Holiday pointed her spoon at Kylie. “Nope, it’s my fancy-dancy way of saying you gotta be careful.” She leaned in. “Just because a guy rings your bell, doesn’t mean you have to toot his horn.”

Kylie laughed and so did Holiday.

Holiday stirred her ice cream. “If I could go back, I wouldn’t have slept with three of the guys I did. But you can’t go back. And the memories. Bad, bad memories are tattooed on my brain.” She tapped her spoon against her forehead. “You can’t even get them lasered off.”

Kylie nodded. She had a few bad memories of her own that she couldn’t

shake, so she totally related.

When they finished their ice cream, they walked next door to the used bookstore. Kylie happened to catch the title of a book that had been left on a shelf. *Overcoming Dyslexia*. Picking up the book, she flipped through it and wondered if Miranda had ever read it.

She walked over to the counter and asked if they had any other books on this subject. The lady took her to a whole section of books about different disabilities. Kylie selected three more on coping with dyslexia and paid for them.

Holiday was still browsing, so Kylie stepped outside and took in the small town's main street. It was quaint. Antique stores, specialty shops, and even a candy store—the kind of place her parents used to drag her to when she was a kid.

A couple walked past holding hands and Kylie tried to remember if, on any of those trips, her mom and dad had ever acted like they were in love. She couldn't recall ever seeing them holding hands. They always did their own things when they were out. Her dad played golf. Her mom shopped.

Kylie had just moved over to Holiday's van when she spotted another couple step out of the bed-and-breakfast. They were kissing. Not the quick, touch of lips kind of kissing, but tongues moving in and out of each other's mouth like they were in heat or something. The kissing quickly progressed to the butt-grabbing stage. *Find a room*, Kylie thought, wondering if they knew they had an audience or if they even cared. Ahh, but wrong or right, Kylie couldn't look away.

Mostly because alarm bells were sounding in her brain.

There was something familiar about them.

She watched the woman's hands slip into the front of the man's jeans. Kylie's mouth dropped open. Gross. That was so lewd, yet Kylie, now hiding behind the van, still couldn't turn away. When the couple finally parted mouths and the guy turned forward, recognition hit.

Kylie gripped the side of the van, her knees suddenly feeling like jelly.

"Oh, my God."

Chapter Thirty-six

Dad?

Kylie grabbed the door handle to keep herself from falling face-first onto the street. What was her dad doing ... doing with ... Kylie's gaze shot to the woman, or she should say, shot to the "girl." Kylie recognized her dad's new assistant whom she'd met last month at a company picnic. The girl was in her third year of college.

Still leaning against the van, Kylie did the math. While math wasn't her best subject, she figured the girl to be about four years older than Kylie herself.

And just like that, Kylie figured out a bunch of things. Like how her father's six pairs of underwear ended up being grilled—how her mom's countless cold-shoulder moments toward her dad suddenly added up to be fair justice.

Realizing the couple had walked to where they might spot her, Kylie moved to the other side of the van. And the cold that followed her around the van told Kylie she wasn't alone. Yet, too emotionally distraught to think about the ghost, Kylie concentrated on not barfing up the triple scoop of ice cream she'd just consumed.

Holiday arrived shortly. "You okay?"

"Great," Kylie lied, too embarrassed, too horrified to give details. Bad enough her father had flirted with Holiday, but to see him with someone who probably still treated her skin for acne, well, it was just too much.

On the way back to the camp, Kylie looked at Holiday. "Do you know

what qualifies as justifiable homicide?”

“No.” The camp leader laughed. “But if I have to put up with Burnett much longer, I might become an expert. Who are you thinking of offing?”

“My parents.” The vision of Kylie’s dad groping his assistant filled her head and her chest ached. “Or maybe just my dad.”

Kylie waited a few more minutes before she dropped the bomb. “Do you think ... you could hold off a few more weeks before you talk to my mom about my going home?”

Holiday didn’t look at her, but Kylie saw the smile of victory in her profile as she continued to watch the road. “You betcha.”

* * *

Monday night, almost everyone hung out at the dining hall to watch movies. Kylie, Miranda, and Della had stayed up way too late Sunday night nursing the wounds inflicted by their respective parents. Then Kylie and Miranda went over the books Kylie had bought on dyslexia.

“This won’t work,” Miranda said, frustrated at just trying to read the first chapter.

“What if I read it to you?” Kylie said.

Miranda looked up at Kylie and her eyes went misty. “You’d do that?”

“You’d do it for me, wouldn’t you?” Kylie asked.

“In a snap,” Miranda said.

Hence, the two of them had stayed up way too late. So instead of hanging out to watch a movie, Kylie headed back to her cabin.

When she opened her cabin door, the smell hit her and she wrinkled her nose. She obviously needed to clean the litter box. Then Socks, the little ball of fur Lucas had given her as a farewell gift, stuck its head out from under the sofa and hissed.

“Come here, sweetie,” she cooed, but dang it if the kitten didn’t go deeper under the sofa. Her phone buzzed. Kylie pulled it out of her pocket, saw that it was her mom, and placed the phone on the coffee table and tried to coax

the kitten out.

After several failed attempts, Kylie gave up. “Fine, sleep under the sofa.” Frustrated and tired, Kylie started pulling her shirt off over her head and went to get her PJs on.

When she reached her dresser, she heel-kicked off her tennis shoes and pulled out her favorite nightshirt. Slipping off her bra, she dropped it on a chair. Then and only then did she raise her eyes to the mirror.

Her breath hitched. It took her mind a second to compute what she was looking at in the reflection. And another second to get friggin’ mad.

“Get out of here, you twerp!” She hurried and slipped on her night shirt before turning her full fury on Perry, who had transformed himself into a lion and was stretched out and taking up her whole bed.

“Out!” Kylie seethed.

The lion roared.

Kylie grabbed her boobs beneath the nightshirt and raged, “You finally got a peek at your first set of boobs, didn’t you? You are so ... so pathetic. And don’t you think for one minute that I won’t tell Miranda about this, either.”

She reached down and picked up her shoe and threw it at the beast. “Out!” The animal roared again. “I swear to God, Perry, if you don’t sparkle your ass out of here, I’ll pin both your ears behind your head and break your neck.”

The room’s temperature suddenly dropped a good fifty degrees.

“Don’t scream,” a male voice said. “And don’t make any sudden moves.”

Kylie’s heart slammed against her ribs when she saw the soldier standing beside her night table. It wasn’t so much that he was there that had her mentally stammering, it was that he’d spoken to her.

She took in a deep breath. A wisp of steam escaped her lips as she exhaled.

Goose bumps rose on her flesh. She crossed her arms to fight the chill. “The lion isn’t real,” she managed to say. “It’s Perry. He’s a shape-shifter.”

The soldier wasn’t bleeding this time. But the memory of the dream, of

seeing him dying on that dirty floor came hurtling back. Her heart ached for him. Now that he was finally talking to her, would he tell her his name? Oddly enough, even mentally referring him as Soldier Dude didn't feel right. He deserved more respect.

"It is real, Kylie," he said as the lion roared again.

She reached for her other shoe and hurled it at Perry.

"Kylie, listen to me." The ghost's voice grew louder, firmer. "That isn't Perry. It's real. And it's dangerous. Don't provoke it. Move to the door. Get out, now."

His words sank in and she stared harder at the lion.

The lion who was not sparkling back into human form.

The lion who stood up and leapt from the bed.

The lion who moved in front of the door and prevented her from escaping.

The lion, who paced back and forth while sizing her up as if trying to decide what kind of sauce he wanted her served with.

Kylie didn't, couldn't, look away from the lion, but she spoke to the ghost. "Okay, the door thing didn't work. Got any other ideas?"

"Stay calm." His words rang the same time the animal roared, sounding angry. Hungry.

"That's kind of hard to do." She shivered, both from the cold and the thought of the lion's teeth ripping open her rib cage.

"He's waiting for you to run. If you stay calm, it will give us some time."

"Time to do what?" she asked. The lion dropped down on the floor and started cleaning his paws. Was he washing up before dinner?

"Time to think of something else," he answered.

Hearing her own teeth chatter, she glanced over at the ghost. "Can't you ... make him leave?"

"If I could, he would already be gone." Sincerity added deepness to his voice. In spite of her panic, something about the ghost struck that chord of familiarity again. As if she knew him, or maybe as if she should know him.

"What's your name?" She tried to stop shaking, but couldn't.

"Daniel Brighten," he said.

She let the name bounce around her head, trying to find a connection. Nothing clicked. Blinking, she met his blue eyes again, watching as a strand of his blond hair fell across his brow. “Why?” she asked. “Why are you following me around? Is it about how you died?”

“No,” he said. “I needed you to know that I didn’t have a choice.”

Why did he need me to know that? Kylie flipped her gaze from him to the lion every other second. “Do I need to tell someone? Did you get accused of hurting that woman?”

“No.”

The lion stood back up and Kylie’s breath caught. She looked around for something to defend herself with.

“Don’t do that,” the ghost said.

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t grab the chair.”

She gazed back to him. “Can you read my mind?”

“No, you were looking at it.”

“I’m scared,” she admitted.

“I know, but if you grab it, the lion might feel threatened.”

“Yeah, well, I’m kind of feeling threatened, too. The beast is supposed to be next door at the refuge, not in my bedroom.” Kylie suddenly remembered Della telling her that the animals sounded angry. Was the lion angry at her now? “How did it even get here?”

“I don’t know, but let’s worry about that later.”

A deep rumble sounded from the lion’s chest. Kylie wasn’t sure if that was his angry noise, but from where she stood it sure as hell was his scary noise.

“Don’t panic, Kylie. He can smell it.”

Daniel was right, Kylie decided. Animals, like supernaturals, could smell things like fear. She inhaled slowly. *Think about something else. Think about something else.* Her mind found a topic and she looked at Daniel again.

“Is Nana, my grandmother, in heaven?”

“Of course she is.”

“If you can visit me, why hasn’t she?” The steam from her lips snaked up to the ceiling.

“I was here first.”

“Where were you first?” Her teeth chattered again.

“Waiting until you were old enough to understand. They only allow one spirit to come to you at a time, until you are able to cope.”

“Well, they were wrong.” She looked back at the lion.

“Wrong about what?”

“I’m not ready to cope yet.”

He smiled.

Kylie hadn’t meant it to be funny. “So you’ve actually seen Nana?” New goose bumps started forming on top of the old goose bumps. Kylie knew she would feel warmer if the ghost left, but the idea of being alone with the lion didn’t thrill her.

“She is not a woman who can be missed,” he said. “Not even in spirit form.”

Curiosity struck. “Did you meet her before ... before she died?”

“A long time ago.” His light blue eyes, combined with his blond hair, pulled her in for a second. She studied him. And then it happened.

She saw inside his head. She was doing what all the other supernaturals could do. Seeing his pattern. A tiny thrill ran through her.

Blinking, she continued to look at his pattern. He had vertical lines and then some odd kind of writing, like Chinese, or prehistoric symbols. “You are ... were supernatural, weren’t you?”

The lion let go of another roar. Kylie flinched as the beast stood. “I think he’s hungry,” she said. “I think I should get the chair now, don’t you?”

The ghost didn’t answer. Kylie noticed the temperature rising. Oh, shit. Even the ghost feared being eaten alive. Only he couldn’t be since he was already dead.

Just as she might be soon if she didn’t think of something quick.

Tears filled her eyes. She was alone. All alone. And then the lion tossed his head back and forth and lunged at her.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Kylie shot behind the chair, thinking about using it as a weapon, but when she looked up, the lion had backed up. He poked his face out the bedroom door as if something out there had caught his attention.

Then Kylie heard it, the kitten. The lion took a step out of the bedroom. She could go slam the door, push the bed against the wall.

And listen as the animal ate her kitten alive.

“No!” She rocked the chair back and forth to get the lion’s attention. “Come here, you ugly foul-smelling monster.”

The lion backed up, growled, exposing his teeth, and shook his mane at her.

For some reason, she thought about the soldier and his choice to die as he went back to save the woman.

I’m not going to die. I’m not going to die.

“Daniel, please come back,” she called out, not wanting to be alone.

The cold brushed over her skin again. “Holiday is getting help.”

The lion came closer to the chair. New tears filled her eyes. “Don’t leave me again, okay?” she begged.

“I won’t,” he said. “I never wanted to.”

“Kylie?” Holiday yelled out from the living room.

The lion charged at the door. “Don’t come in,” Kylie screamed, and shook the chair to keep the beast’s attention in case Holiday didn’t hear her.

Kylie heard retreating footsteps. “Burnett is on his way to get a sedative gun,” Holiday called. “He’s just a few minutes away. Are you safe?”

Safe? She had a lion in her bedroom. But if Burnett was on the way, maybe ... Kylie started to answer when she heard more voices.

“No,” Holiday said.

“No what?” Kylie asked.

“It’s too dangerous,” Holiday said as if talking to someone else.

Footsteps sounded from the cabin’s living room. The lion growled. Derek appeared in the doorway. His soft green eyes met hers, and then shifted to the lion. Fear flickered in his eyes, and she felt the same fear as he did.

The thought she might have to watch the lion attack Derek sent her heart bouncing against her ribcage. “Leave, Derek,” Kylie said, trying to sound calm even though she was a breath from screaming. “Listen to Holiday.”

“I can do this,” he said in a confident voice. “I have the gift, remember?”

Derek took a step into the room. The lion shook his mane and growled.

Derek didn’t move. He stared at the beast. Then he started unbuttoning his shirt.

“What are you doing?” she asked, and while the idea of seeing him without his shirt tempted her, this was so not the time.

“He doesn’t like how I smell.”

“Then for God’s sake keep it on so he doesn’t eat you.”

“It’s okay.” Derek tossed his shirt back into the living room. He looked even better than she imagined. Then, holding his palms out, he took another step forward. The lion roared, but didn’t charge.

Derek took another step. This time, the lion lunged for him, almost taking Derek’s arm in his mouth.

“No.” Kylie started rocking the chair to get the animal’s attention.

“Stop that,” Derek ordered.

“It stops him from getting you.”

“Kylie, you’re making him mad. Trust me, okay? Stop!”

The firmness in his voice got her attention. Soldier Dude stood silent in the corner, so she couldn’t stop shivering.

“I’m going to come over to you,” Derek said. “I want you stand behind me. Then we’re moving out the door. You go through first and I’ll shut it.

You understand?”

Almost as if the lion knew Derek’s plan, he growled and faced Derek, but backed up closer to Kylie. Each step Derek took, the lion took another closer to Kylie.

A urine smell filled Kylie’s nose. The big cat’s backside hit the chair and knocked Kylie against the wall.

When she refocused, she saw Derek now stood inches from the lion. So close that the beast’s mane brushed up against his bare abdomen. Derek’s muscles tightened and his upper body appeared hard, almost chiseled.

“Now ease out from behind the chair, Kylie,” Derek said.

“Do as he says,” Daniel said, speaking up.

Kylie moved her foot and the lion slammed his head into Derek, and almost knocked him down.

Derek rebounded. “Slowly, Kylie,” he said, as if he didn’t realize the lion could open his mouth and use him for a chew toy. “Slow and easy.”

She inched out, afraid to even breathe, and then Derek caught her arm and eased her behind him. She placed her hands on his bare sides. The palms of her hands pressed against his warm skin.

“That’s good. Now we’re going to do baby steps back until we’re out the door. You’re doing good. Keep going.”

Kylie felt the door’s threshold against her heel. Derek reached around to the left for the doorknob, and the lion lunged and swatted his claws at Derek.

Derek’s hiss filled Kylie’s ears, and she knew the beast’s claws had ripped into his skin. “You okay?” she asked.

He didn’t answer, just reached again for the knob. The lion roared, but didn’t charge this time. Kylie continued to move backward into the living room as Derek slowly followed. As he closed the door, Kylie saw Daniel smile.

“You did it.” Holiday rushed inside the cabin. Kylie stood there, hugging herself, her insides trembling, and feeling sick to her stomach.

“Help me move the sofa to the door in case he decides to charge it,” Derek said.

As Derek and Holiday moved the sofa against the door, Kylie noticed blood dripping down his hard abdomen.

“You’re ... hurt.” Her teeth chattered so hard she could barely talk. She pointed at him and felt a cold sweat drip from her forehead.

“Just scratched,” he assured her.

She took the steps separating them and fell against him. She didn’t care that she was getting blood all over her favorite nightshirt, either. She dropped her face against the warm wall of skin and muscle and continued to shake.

He wrapped his arms around her. Holiday moved in and placed a hand on her back.

Kylie didn’t know which one of the fairies were doing it, or if it was both—she honestly didn’t care—but the thousands of tiny pinpricks of panic started to fade. She felt safe and that was all that mattered.

She buried her face deeper into Derek’s naked shoulder, loving how he smelled, how it felt to be this close to him.

“Put Kylie down in one of the other bedrooms,” Holiday said.

“No. I’m fine.” Kylie raised her head, but didn’t want to leave the comfort of Derek’s arms. She needed this for just a little longer. He was so warm and she was so ... cold.

Kylie saw Daniel standing behind Holiday. He smiled at her and then faded. “Thank you,” Kylie said, hoping he heard her.

“You’re welcome,” Derek answered.

Kylie looked back to offer Derek his own verbal gratitude, but a loud *whack* stopped her. The cabin door slammed open so hard it sounded like it had cracked. Burnett came barging into the cabin, his eyes glowed red, and he held a big rifle in his hands.

“You promised me that you wouldn’t come up here,” he seethed at Holiday.

“I changed my mind,” she said, not sounding at all remorseful.

The lion roared on the other side of the door and Burnett roared with him. “I’ll take care of that first, and then I’ll deal with you.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that.” Holiday smirked.

Burnett started toward the door. “Wait.” Derek set Kylie back. “Let me calm him down so he won’t think you are killing him.”

At first Burnett appeared doubtful, but then Holiday nodded. “Fine,” Burnett said.

Kylie couldn’t say she’d offer the beast that much courtesy, but deep down, she admired Derek for doing it.

The two men eased the sofa away from the door. Burnett pressed his ear to the door and then said, “He’s on the other side of the room.” Then he reached for the knob.

“Be careful,” Kylie said.

Derek looked back at her and smiled. “Piece of cake.”

* * *

“You don’t have to stay here,” Kylie told Holiday, who pulled a chair beside Kylie’s bed about an hour later. The camp leader had personally cleaned Kylie’s room to remove the stench of the animal.

Holiday leaned in and whispered, “It’s this or I’ll get my ass chewed out by Mr. Big Bad and Handsome. So just pretend like you need me until he leaves. Now that they’ve taken the lion, I don’t think he’ll hang around longer than a few more minutes.” Sitting back in her chair, she bit down on her lip. “Boy, am I glad Derek was around.”

Something occurred to Kylie. “Couldn’t one of the witches have stopped this?”

“If I could have found them,” she said. “They were all out on a hike with Sky. I knew Burnett had just left here to go back to the wildlife park, so I called him.”

“What was he doing at the wildlife park?” Kylie asked. Then she said, “What’s going on, Holiday? How did the lion get here? Who put it in my room? And don’t tell me that it’s your job to worry, either.”

It didn’t appear as if Holiday was going to answer. Her expression turned grim, and she dropped her hands into her lap. “You’re going to find out

tomorrow, anyway.”

“Find what out?”

“Someone is raiding the wildlife park. Killing the very animals the park is trying to save. Most of the animals killed have been on the endangered species list. Of course, the government didn’t waste any time blaming us, either. Any strange crime happens anywhere and someone is pointing to the supernaturals.”

“They think one of us is doing it?” Kylie asked.

Holiday bit down on her lip. “Not only do they believe it, but as of this afternoon they have proof. At least they think they do.”

“So someone here is doing this?” Kylie asked.

“They found a blood trail leading back to our camp.”

“But the lion wasn’t killed,” Kylie said.

“No, but the fact that it was here just makes things worse. Someone had to help that animal escape.”

“And someone put it in my room,” Kylie said.

“That or it could just be a coincidence,” Holiday said. “He could have wandered into any cabin.”

“But the cabin door was closed,” Kylie said.

“Maybe one of you left it opened. Then he might have hit it and shut himself in.”

“Or someone put him here,” Kylie said.

Holiday reached out to touch her again, to calm her, and Kylie held up her hand. “I’m okay.”

Falling deeper into her pillow, Kylie stared up at the ceiling. “Do they blame Lucas for this?”

Holiday was quiet for a moment. “He’s being looked at as a possible suspect.”

“I don’t believe it,” Kylie said. “He’s not like that.”

“I know, but ... I can’t convince them of that. Especially since Fredericka took off this afternoon.”

“She did?” Kylie watched Holiday nod, and she felt the tiniest bit of

jealousy. “Do you think she’s with Lucas?”

“Knowing her, yes.”

Kylie clutched her hands together, accepting she had to get past Lucas, but still refusing to believe he was guilty. “Are they going to try to shut down the camp?”

Holiday’s frown deepened. “If they can’t get to the bottom of this, they’ll try. I’ll fight it with every ounce of fairy dust I have in me, but ... it may take more than me.”

Silence filled the room and then Holiday said, “Burnett’s going to hold a meeting tomorrow and probably interrogate everyone. I wish I could stop him, but damn it, with all the evidence, I can’t even argue with him that it’s not one of us. But throwing accusations around in a group of adolescent supernaturals is sure to backfire.”

“Do you really believe someone here is doing it?”

“Yeah. Either that or someone is trying awfully hard to make it look like we’re doing it.”

The door to Kylie’s bedroom opened and Burnett stuck his head in. “Are you going back up to the office?”

Holiday’s expression changed to fake concern. She rested a hand on Kylie’s shoulder. “I’m afraid she needs me. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Burnett wasn’t fooled, that was apparent by his expression, but he didn’t argue, either. Well, as long as one didn’t call slamming the door an argument.

“Jerk,” Holiday muttered.

“I can hear you,” he retorted from the other side of the wall.

Holiday frowned. “I swear, he’s this close to me siccing a death angel on his ass.” And she didn’t try to say that quietly, either.

“I thought you didn’t know if they really existed,” Kylie whispered after a few minutes. If she’d thought they existed, she would have asked Daniel Brighten, the soldier, to go find one. Then she recalled what Holiday had said about all ghosts being angels. For sure, Daniel had been a big part of what saved Kylie.

She leaned close. “All I have to do is threaten and even big bad vampires

usually piss in their pants.”

They both laughed and then Kylie said, “He saved me, didn’t he?”

“Derek?” Holiday asked. “Yeah, I would say he did.”

“No. I mean, Derek did save me, but it was the ghost who told you, right?”

“Sort of,” she said. “Because he’s attached to you, he can’t really communicate with me. But he found someone who could.” Holiday reached down and squeezed Kylie’s hand. “Nana said to tell you she loves you. But she wished you wouldn’t have let them bury her wearing that purple lipstick.”

Kylie got tears in her eyes and laughed at the same time. After a few minutes, she said, “I finally did it.”

“Did what?”

“I saw into someone’s mind.” Kylie almost told her it was the ghost’s mind that she’d been able to see, but for some reason she wasn’t ready to talk about that. It was as if she needed to digest it all first. There were a lot of things she needed to digest.

Holiday grinned. “Welcome to our world, girl.”

Kylie’s smile was weak, but it was real. “Does that definitely mean ... that I’m one of you guys?”

“Yup.” Holiday brushed a strand of hair from Kylie’s cheek.

“When you saw Nana, did you check if she had been a supernatural?”

“I did. She was human.” Holiday gave Kylie’s hand a squeeze. “How do you feel about this new development?”

Kylie let out a deep breath. “A little scared. A little relieved. Now I just want to figure out what I am.”

“You will, Kylie. The answer is here. It always is.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

Holiday was right.

Not about Kylie discovering what she was. It had been five days since Kylie had almost been a lion's dinner, and her identity crisis was still alive and thriving.

The thing Holiday had pegged right was Burnett's method of solving the wildlife crimes backfiring. As soon as he announced that someone at the camp was guilty everyone started pointing fingers. The vampires accused the werewolves because most of the animals killed had been from the feline family and everyone knew werewolves hated cats.

The werewolves accused the vampires of doing it because their blood supply was low. The fairies accused the witches because they sometimes used tiger blood in some of their spells. The witches accused the fairies because everyone knew fairies were sneaky little bastards. Someone pointed out that the shape-shifters were known to use wild animals as sport to hunt and conquer them.

Then, the finger-pointing stopped being species-directed and certain unlucky individuals got suspicion slapped on them. Lucas and Fredericka got voted to be the most likely guilty parties. Then Derek's name got thrown in the hat because he could communicate with animals, and everyone knew he didn't want the gift. Then because Kylie was still considered "the weird one" with a strange pattern and a closed mind, her name got tossed into the guilty hat as well.

Kylie had even forgotten herself and went to Della and accused her cousin

Chan of being the culprit. Maybe he really was one of the Blood Brothers gang. Della did what Della always did. She got furious.

Tension at the camp was at an all-time high. People had stopped participating in the Meet Your Campmates Hour, and Holiday and Sky were having a hard time just keeping everyone from killing each other.

Then there was the tension between the two camp leaders.

Kylie had walked into the office and overheard them tossing verbal punches. Sky insisted it was time to throw in the towel and close down the camp. Holiday insisted right back that it would be over her cold fairy body before she let them close it down. Sky accused Holiday of being a martyr and unrealistic, and Holiday accused Sky of having lost her faith in the school and of half-assing her job this year.

Kylie didn't know Sky very well, but she knew enough to agree with Holiday. For some reason, Kylie had never warmed up to the werewolf camp leader. In some ways, the woman even reminded Kylie a bit of her mom. Cold, uncaring, and closed-off.

Not that Sky might not have reasons for joining the ranks of the Ice Queen Sorority. It appeared that Kylie's mom sure as hell did.

It was funny how all of a sudden Kylie saw the relationship between her mom and dad differently now. Yeah, her mom was cold, but her dad was a cheater. It sort of became a "what came first, the chicken or the egg" kind of question. A question Kylie didn't have the answer to.

While it still hurt something fierce to think about the divorce, Kylie had decided to try not to make it her problem. Face it, she had enough fires to put out in her own life. Heck, she'd almost become kitty chow. In the back of Kylie's mind, she still wondered who wanted her harmed badly enough to put the lion in her room. The only name that came to mind was Fredericka. But if she believed Fredericka guilty, did that not put more suspicion on to Lucas?

Thoughts of Lucas snuck into Kylie's mind more than she wanted. Now at least when they showed up, they had to compete with thoughts of Derek. He and Kylie hadn't been alone since the whole lion scene, but he sat with her and Miranda and Della sometimes during meals. Every now and then,

she'd catch him looking at her with more than friendship, but good to his word, he never put any pressure on her.

Nope, the pressure she felt came from herself. One minute she'd make up her mind to just walk up to him and kiss him. The next she'd find herself thinking about her dad, about Trey, and she'd wonder if giving herself to a relationship was worth the heartbreak that seemed to follow.

And then there was the whole issue of trying to figure out what she was. For some reason, she felt that once she got that solved, she'd be free to make other life choices.

Kylie walked back into her cabin, stopping to sniff the air for beast smells. Nose still up, she felt her foot being attacked by Socks. Scooping the little fellow up in her hands, she brought him to her face.

Whenever Socks was running amok, Kylie figured the cabin was free of beasts and ghosts. Daniel had only dropped by a few times—each of which would send Socks scrambling under the sofa. Not that Socks had to stay hidden long; Daniel was back to short visits and he'd stopped talking.

"So the coast is clear, huh?" Kylie asked Socks.

"Except for a very happy witch," Miranda said, barreling out of her bedroom to give Kylie and Socks a hug.

"Let me guess," Kylie said. "Perry finally grew a pair and kissed you."

"No," Miranda said. "I'm beginning to wonder if he ever will. But forget about him right now, because I finally did it. Well, with your help, of course."

"You did what?" Kylie asked.

"I got rid of Mr. Pepper."

"Of who?"

"My piano teacher."

"Oh gawd, tell me you didn't let Della cook him."

"No. I figured out what I messed up with the curse, and reversed it. I used those books to help me figure out what I could have gotten backwards—words, letters. It was like a puzzle, but I finally figured it out." She held her arms up in the air in victory. "I'm toad free."

Kylie laughed.

“And...” Miranda continued, “the best part is that Mr. Pepper checked himself into a mental hospital.”

“Because he has a thing for young girls?”

“No, because he’s been dreaming he’s a toad, but ... he confessed to the doctor that he was worried about his attraction to little girls.” Miranda laughed. “I sort of dropped in on his first session. But what’s important is maybe he’ll get some help.”

“You did good,” Kylie said.

“No. We did good. I wouldn’t have done it if not for you. And while I’m not sure I’ll ever make High Priestess, I still might be in the running. You’re my hero, Kylie Galen.”

“And I’m not?” Della asked, walking out of her bedroom.

“Sorry,” Miranda said. “You’ll have to try harder next week.”

Kylie put Socks down so he could attack Della. For some reason, the kitten loved her Donald Duck slippers.

Kylie watched the kitten take swats at Donald’s bill and then reality wormed its way into her good mood. “We may not have next week. They really may shut the camp down if they don’t find out who is terrorizing the wildlife park. We’ve got to stop pointing fingers and do something. I don’t know about you guys, but I don’t want to go home.”

“Did something else happen?” Della asked.

Kylie told them what she’d learned when she’d stopped by Holiday’s cabin. “They almost snagged the white tiger.”

“How?” Della asked. “I thought that vamp from the FRU was guarding the place.”

“He is, but someone broke into the lion’s fences again, and while Burnett was investigating that, someone cut the fence to the tiger’s cage.”

“Poor animals,” Miranda said.

“Yeah,” Kylie answered, remembering Derek saying the lion that had shown up in her cabin had been confused and scared. “Wait,” Kylie said. “Why didn’t I think of this before?”

“What?” Della and Miranda asked at the same time.

“I think I know how to get to the bottom of this.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

“It doesn’t work like that,” Derek said ten minutes later, wearing his shirt completely unbuttoned. No doubt Kylie had banged on his cabin door after he was already undressed.

Kylie glanced at his chest and noticed that his scratches were healing. “What do you mean, it doesn’t work like that? I thought you could communicate with animals.”

Derek closed the cabin door and moved her off the porch as if he was afraid one of his roommates might be listening.

“It’s not like I can ask them questions. I hear or, should say, sense their emotions. And not even all of them.”

“You said the lion told you he didn’t like how you smelled.”

“He didn’t tell me. He thought it.” Derek shook his head. “It won’t work, Kylie.”

“But it has to.” Her throat tightened. “They’re going to close down the camp, Derek. I’m just getting a grip on the whole non-human stuff, I can’t leave now.”

He studied her face for a moment. “I know, but—”

“It’s not just about me, either. You’ve seen what’s been happening at the camp. Everyone is turning on each other. Everyone says the camp is what helps keep peace among all of us. If they think the various supernatural gangs are bad now, think of—”

He put a finger to her lips and she fought the desire to slip her hands inside the opened shirt and hug him. “I’m not disagreeing with you. But I just

don't think it will work."

Right then she remembered. For Derek to be able to turn off his gift, he had to continue to shut them out. Yet he'd saved her from the lion. She hadn't even considered his sacrifice until now. How could she have forgotten that?

"I'm sorry." She closed her eyes a second. "It's because of your gift, because you have to stop using it. I forgot—"

"No," he said. "Okay, yeah, maybe a little."

"It's okay, Derek," she said, seeing guilt in his eyes. She remembered that only a few weeks ago she would have eaten worms to send her gift packing. "It's not fair of me to ask you to do this." She turned to leave.

He grabbed her by her arm. "Wait." His gaze met hers. "I was serious when I said it was only a little part of why I'm hesitating. To be honest, I'm this close to saying the hell with it and playing the Tarzan role."

She saw from his expression that he told the truth. "Hey," she said. "That Tarzan role saved my life. Don't belittle it."

"I know, and that's why I'm thinking about accepting it. But this is ... over the top. It's not like I can sit down and have a chat with the animals. It doesn't work that way."

"How do you know?" Kylie asked. "Have you tried?"

"No, but ... others have this gift. And if I could actually do that, Holiday would have said something."

"Holiday has said a thousand times that everyone's gift is different. Look, I know you said that so far all you hear are their thoughts, but somehow you communicated with that lion not to make hamburger meat out of us."

"Okay, if by some miracle I can actually communicate with them, it still won't happen. That FRU James guy wouldn't let me near the animals. He had me in the office again today. He thinks I'm involved. He even accused me of doing it to impress you."

Kylie considered going to Holiday right then, but she knew Holiday would worry someone might get hurt and would say no. She tilted her chin back in defiance. "Then we don't ask him to let us in. We sneak in."

"Sneak by a vampire? That's like trying to fool Superman."

“Yeah, but I happen to know what his kryptonite is.”

“He has a kryptonite?” Derek asked.

“Yup. And her name is Holiday.”

* * *

Kylie admitted this might be a long shot, but when it was your only shot, you made the most of it. And that’s what she and Derek had done. They had to acquire a little help to pull it off, but she was dang proud of her plan.

Kylie and Derek waited a few hundred yards away from the wildlife park gates, hidden behind some trees. According to Della, that distance would be far enough that Burnett couldn’t smell them. Kylie clutched the maps of the park she’d printed off the Internet from the computer in Holiday’s office.

Once Burnett was out of the way, getting into the camp was going to be a piece of cake. Well, it was when you had a certain eye-color-changing shape-shifter helping you out. And to make sure they didn’t run into any unexpected surprises, Della would make a sweep of the park, and then stand as lookout.

Their biggest concern was if Derek’s ability would allow him to learn anything from the animals. He was skeptical.

Kylie wanted to believe in miracles.

Her phone rang. “Done,” Miranda said.

Which meant Miranda had managed to get Holiday’s cell phone and send Burnett the 911 message, a ruse Kylie knew he would not be able to resist. Helen, gracious enough to help, was right now having a meltdown by the creek that required Holiday’s help. The longer Burnett searched for Holiday, the more time Derek would have with the animals.

However, first they needed Burnett to leave. And he did a few minutes later, when he slammed the door to the office and disappeared into the night.

“Looks like he’s in a hurry,” Derek whispered.

“I think he really cares about Holiday.” Kylie’s heart pinched with guilt for scaring Burnett. To make up for it, if things calmed down, Kylie might help get the two of them together.

“Ready?” Derek asked.

She nodded. They ran toward the park, knowing the clock was ticking.

Perry had the gate open for them when they arrived. “See ya.” Because his presence might upset the animals, he took off, sparkles falling around him as he transformed into an eagle and disappeared into the dark sky.

“It still freaks me out to see that,” Della said, stopping at Kylie’s shoulder.

“What did you find?” Kylie asked, knowing their time was short.

“One guard, human—sleeping on the job—in the back office.” Della paused. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come, too?”

Kylie shook her head. “I think the less people involved, the more likely the animals will communicate with Derek. Go back to the camp and let us know when Burnett heads back. Hopefully in time for us to get out.”

Having already studied the maps, Kylie and Derek took off to the section called the “lion’s den” first. Lion’s den? That so didn’t have a good ring to it.

While there were some stars out, the moon, as if stingy with its light, only peered out from behind a cloud every now and then. Even the animal sounds seemed more ominous than usual, or maybe Kylie’s perception was warped because she knew they were trespassing—basically breaking the law. Either way, she found herself moving closer to Derek.

“The lions are right around the bend here,” he said.

She wasn’t sure if it was cat urine or something else, but the stench hit her nose. “I can smell them.” The odor took her back to being trapped in the room with the beast. Her emotions started jamming to the tune of panic.

“Relax,” Derek said.

The fact that he could read her emotions still unnerved her. “I’m trying.”

“There’s something I need to know,” he said at the same time as a lion’s roar rang out.

“What?”

“What are you going to do if we learn that Lucas is behind this?”

“I’ll do the same thing I’ll do if we discover someone else is behind it. Tell Holiday.” She paused. “But that’s not what we’re going to find.”

“You seem really sure he’s innocent.”

She could feel Derek studying her. “And you seem really sure he’s guilty.”

“That’s because the evidence says he is.”

“It’s all circumstantial.”

“For someone who was scared shitless of the guy, you sure have changed your tune.”

Kylie realized where this conversation could lead and she wanted to call it over. “I just want to find out who’s doing this and pray it stops them from closing down the camp.”

“Me, too,” he said.

Feeling a blast of icy wind brush against her, she wrapped her arms around herself.

Derek studied her. “Is the ghost here?”

“Maybe.” She looked around and didn’t see him. “He’s only come back a few times since the lion incident and he never stays but a few seconds.”

“Maybe he’ll help us out the way he did then.”

“Maybe, but I’m hoping we don’t need any help,” she said, and the coldness left as quickly as it had appeared.

They stopped at the fence. “This is it.” Derek peered through the chain-link fence.

“Are they here?” She couldn’t see them.

“Yeah. Behind the tree and beside the pond over there.”

“Do they know we’re here?” Kylie asked.

“Hell, yeah.”

She took a small step back from the fence. “How are you going to do this?”

He chuckled. “I was waiting for you to tell me.”

“You’re serious?” she asked.

“Partly,” he said, sounding a tad insecure.

“Okay.” She bit down on her lip. “Can you read them?”

“Right now, all I’m getting is that they see us as a threat.”

“Why?” Kylie asked at the same time as another wild animal noise—maybe an elephant?—filled the night. “Surely that’s not all they’re feeling.”

“They’re males.” He snickered. “We don’t elaborate on feelings.”

“Real cute,” she muttered.

“I thought so.” He grinned.

“This is serious.” She nudged him with her elbow.

“I know.” His smile faded. “I told you I didn’t know if this would work.”

“Just concentrate,” Kylie said. “Ask them what they’re afraid of in your mind.”

He leaned his head on the fence and closed his eyes. She watched him. Time crept by, one minute, two. She had to bite her lip to keep from asking him if it was working.

Then thinking if she concentrated, too, maybe it would be better, she moved against his back and placed her hands on his sides. *Why do we scare you? Why do we scare you?* She repeated the question in her mind.

“Kylie?” Derek whispered.

“You getting something?” she asked, hoping.

“I was until...”

“Until what?” she asked.

“Until you pressed your breasts against me. And thinking about them beats lion chatter hands down.” He chuckled. “You’re going to have move back.”

She stepped back and gave him a swat on his back.

He laughed, but then went back to concentrating.

She heard a rustle behind the fence. “I think one of them is coming.”

“Shh,” he said.

She hushed, but when the lion pounced on the fence, she let go of a scream as loud as his roar. Jumping back, heart pounding, she landed on her butt.

“That’s the same lion, isn’t it?” she asked, staring at the creature who stared at her. She would never forget his eyes, golden and hungry.

Derek didn't answer. He didn't even turn around to offer her a hand up. Then she noticed how he stood frozen, eyes open, staring at the beast as if ... as if they were having a mental chat.

Staying where she was on the ground, so as not to disturb them, she lifted her hands to dust off the gravel. She hadn't given her hands one dusting when she felt herself being lifted off the ground.

She screamed, and another hand slapped over her mouth.

Derek swung around but before he could even take a step forward, a blond guy had him by the throat, pressing him into the fence. The lion roared behind him.

"Not so loud." The voice didn't sound even slightly familiar. From the coldness of the touch, Kylie knew the person who had her was a vampire, or something equally cold-blooded.

Derek struggled to free himself. The lion's roar grew more threatening.

"What do we have here?" her attacker asked.

Kylie managed to look at him. Auburn colored hair. Red glowing eyes matched his hair. Definitely vampire, she decided, noting his fangs that hung slightly over his bottom lip.

"Looks as if someone is hungry," said Red, the vamp holding her against him. "Bet the kitty would like to eat a young tender thing like you. Problem is, so would I."

"What the hell?" The blond guy who had Derek by the neck yelled out, and then he dropped in a dead faint to the ground.

Kylie noticed the intense look on Derek's face, and she knew he'd done something to the blond. Then Derek's gaze shot to her and Red.

"Get your hands off her," Derek said, his voice hoarse.

Kylie saw him lunge forward, but out of the sky two more guys dropped, each grabbing one of Derek's arms. He struggled.

"Excuse me," Kylie's attacker said. "I think I'll go have a snack." He jumped back at least twenty-five feet, taking her with him. They landed with a thud. Kylie's whole body jarred and she bit the edge of her tongue.

Hard.

She tasted blood as it pooled onto her tongue.

She tried to pull away but the vampire's strength made her feel as capable as a bug against a fast-approaching windshield.

"Oh man, you smell good." The vampire raised her off the ground and turned Kylie's head toward his. "Pretty, too." He studied her for a second as if reading her pattern and then his mouth came down on hers.

She knew he drank her blood and wasn't kissing her, but she wanted no part of it. No part of him.

Fight. Fight dirty. She remembered dating lesson number one that her father had taught her. Pulling back her leg, she let go with everything she had and kned that bastard in the balls.

She hadn't even considered if vampires had the same weak spot. But the vamp's scream proved they did. However, she could have foregone being tossed through the air like a rag doll. Her back slammed against the fence and she slid down to land with a clunk on the ground.

Everything in her said she needed to stand up, get ready to fight. But unable to breathe, it took everything she had just to open her eyes.

She saw the two vampires who had been holding Derek had fallen to the ground like the one earlier.

"Kylie, you okay?" Derek suddenly appeared standing over her.

"She's mine," said a gravelly voice.

Helpless, Kylie watched the vampire who kissed her snatch Derek up by the neck, and throw him across the fence and in with the lions.

Kylie heard the lions roaring and envisioned them ripping Derek apart. "No!" she screamed.

The vamp looked at her as if she were the prize in the box of cereal. "What are you?" he asked, and reached down to pick her up.

An enormous cold showered her. Colder than anything she'd ever felt. Icy needles touched her skin, cut through her human tissue, and found its way to her bones. For a second, her arms and legs felt paralyzed.

Then suddenly Kylie was standing. The vamp held someone in his arms. Then Kylie realized he had *her* in his arms. His eyes now glowed an even

hotter red.

Oddly enough, she wasn't afraid. She waited for him to get closer, sensing she could deal with him. But not knowing how.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Derek pull himself over the top of the fence.

"I said don't touch her." Derek jumped off the fence at Red.

Red dropped her body and knocked Derek back against the fence. "You don't know when to die, do you?" he growled.

Another dark figure dropped out of the sky and hit Red so hard he fell to the ground. Kylie recognized Della instantly.

Derek turned back to check on Kylie's body, but another dark figure slammed him against the fence again.

Without thinking, Kylie moved forward. She grabbed the vamp holding Derek and slung him away. She watched in a kind of daze as the vamp's body flew thirty or forty feet in the air to land in a patch of woods.

When she looked back, Derek stared right through her.

"Wow, did you see that?" she asked Derek, but he didn't answer.

He joined Della in sparring with the vamp she'd kneed in the balls. The taste of the guy's mouth still lingered on her tongue and she wanted to spit. But first she moved in, found an open spot, tightened her fist, and swung. The vamp flew backwards and landed in a crumbled heap.

Both Derek and Della swung around and stared at each other as if confused.

"Kylie?" Derek screamed.

"Yeah," Kylie answered, but then she watched Derek run over to her body on the ground. He turned her over and for the first time she felt the shock run through her system. If she wasn't in her body, where was she?

Derek screamed her name and then said, "Breathe, damn it. For God's sake, Kylie, breathe." He shook her.

Oh, crap. Was she dead?

Chapter Forty

Looking down at her clothes, Kylie realized she wore army fatigues. She was ... she was in Daniel Brighten's spirit body again—just like in the dream. *Did that mean she wasn't dead?*

She looked back at her own body and saw that Derek was fighting off two more vamps to keep them away from her. Della swooped in to help.

Remembering she could help them as Daniel's ghost, Kylie took a step toward them. But just like that, she realized she was back in her own body. She pushed herself off the ground, determined not to just lie there. Moving, however, caused her a ton of pain.

Someone else suddenly appeared and fought beside Derek and Della. Kylie squinted at their newest ally.

Sky?

Floodlights flared to life. The night's darkness, along with several of their attackers, scurried away like rats.

Burnett, along with a few other FRU-looking people, seemed to come at them from all sides. They grabbed a couple of the vamps and locked them in handcuffs at both their wrists and ankles.

Derek rushed over to Kylie. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, although her body was hurting in places she didn't know could hurt.

"What the hell happened?" Burnett demanded of Derek. He reached for Derek as if prepared to slap a pair of cuffs on him.

"It's my fault," Kylie insisted. "I made him do this."

“She did not,” Derek insisted.

“No, it was my idea.” Della surged forward.

“No, they’re all lying. It’s not their fault.” Sky moved in.

Everything seemed to go silent for a long moment, and then Derek spoke up. “Sky planted the blood that you guys found that led back to the camp. She helped those rogues take the animals. But she came to our defense in the end.”

Kylie knew Derek had learned this from his mind meld with the lions. The lions had talked to him, just as she’d hoped they would. A tiny bit of happiness about being right swiveled through the chaos of the moment, and she let herself savor it.

“He’s telling the truth.” Sky held out her arms to be cuffed.

Burnett put the cuffs on her. “Why?” he asked, staring at her as if disgusted.

“They...” she said looking at the captives, “have my sister. Threatened to kill her if I didn’t help them get the camp shut down.” Sky glanced at Kylie. “I could do it when that was all they wanted, but this ... They promised no one would be hurt. I don’t know how the lion got in your cabin, Kylie, I swear. I was told to take the witches out for a hike. I knew they were planning something, but hadn’t thought ... They said no one would be hurt.” She shook her head and looked back at Burnett. “I was only trying to save my sister.”

“They? Who are ‘they’?” Burnett growled, and looked at the two vamps cuffed on the ground. One of them growled at Burnett and fought against the handcuffs. Two of the other FRU men subdued him.

Kylie suddenly realized the red-haired vampire, the one who’d first grabbed her, had gotten away. And for some reason that thought sent chills down her back.

“The Blood Brothers,” Sky answered. “The vampire gang.”

“And why did they want the camp shut down?” Burnett asked.

“They feel as if the camp is corrupting potential members,” Sky answered. “And from what they said, they aren’t the only ones thinking it.

Most of all the rogue gangs are starting to rebel against the camp.”

“Do you know where they’re keeping your sister?” Burnett asked, and Kylie heard the slightest hint of sympathy in his voice for Sky’s dilemma.

“No. But my father’s hired someone to find her.”

Holiday came rushing forward. Her gaze shot to Sky wearing cuffs. “What are you doing?” she asked Burnett.

“My job,” he answered, and started walking Sky away.

Holiday shot forward. “You let her go—”

“He can’t, Holiday,” Sky said. “He’s right. I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Holiday asked.

Sky looked back at Derek. “Tell her,” she said.

Burnett looked at Holiday almost as if to say something, and then he nudged Sky to start walking.

Holiday looked back at Kylie, Della, and Derek. “Someone better start talking. And fast.”

* * *

Holiday had a doctor rush to the camp and go over everyone inch by inch. Other than a few scrapes and deep bruises, they were pronounced fine. It was after two in the morning at that point and Kylie’s muscles ached like a bad devil and she wanted nothing more than to go to bed. But apparently Burnett had other plans.

Kylie and her partners in crime—for some reason, Helen, Perry, and Miranda had all confessed to being part of Kylie’s plan—were told to wait in the dining hall. Holiday and Burnett walked in. Kylie saw the shadows of pain in the camp leader’s eyes; no doubt Sky’s betrayal had cut deep.

Burnett started the dialogue, or you could call it the chewing down. He referred to what they’d done as stupid and foolish. He told them they were lucky that none of them had been killed. Yada yada yada.

And he was right.

But Kylie would have done it again in a heartbeat.

She sat there and took her punishment like the rest of them. Yes, she knew sneaking into the park hadn't been without some risk, but she hadn't planned on going to war with a vampire gang. All she'd wanted to do was get Derek to the animals so he could possibly get some answers.

Which, by the way, had worked. Not that Burnett mentioned that in his ass-chewing.

"Did you even realize that they had outnumbered you by five? I can't believe..." He continued his rant, reminding them they were supernaturals and they were supposed to be smarter than that.

A question popped into Kylie's mind and before she could stop herself, it slipped out of her mouth. "Are you still going to close down the camp?"

Burnett, not happy about being interrupted, frowned. "If this is the kind of behavior we can expect, we have no choice."

Enough. Enough. Enough.

When the word scraped across Kylie's mind the third time, she stood up. "We did the only thing we knew to help."

She hadn't a clue where her assertiveness came from, perhaps exhaustion, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"You seem to have forgotten that we didn't plan to get into an out-and-out brawl with a vampire gang. All we wanted was to get Derek close enough to communicate with the animals and find out what the hell had been going on."

"You should have come to us," Holiday said.

While her heart went out to the camp leader, Kylie had a point to make. Since she'd already pissed Burnett off, she might as well keep going.

"Why should we come to you?" Kylie asked. "You didn't trust us enough to tell us what was going on. Yes, we know you're the camp leader, but we're not in kindergarten here. You say we're here to learn how to cope in the outside world but then you try to shield us from anything that might be the least bit unpleasant. And let's say if we did come to you with this, I don't think you'd let us do it because you'd be worried it could be dangerous. And then there's you." Kylie pointed to Burnett.

"That'll be enough," Burnett snapped.

Not hardly. “Even if Holiday had agreed to let us do it, there’s no way you would have let Derek in the park because you thought we were all suspects.”

“Ditto,” Derek said.

“Amen,” Della said.

“You go, Kylie,” Miranda snapped.

Everyone else in the room nodded their heads in agreement.

“That’s not important,” Burnett charged.

“Yes, it is.” Holiday held up a hand to silence the tall, dark, and menacing vampire. “Kylie’s right. I don’t like it, but she’s right.”

Holiday took a deep breath. “I have the tendency to be a tad overprotective.” She looked at Burnett. “And you have a tendency to be ... well, a jerk.”

Burnett’s expression was a cross between shock and anger.

“I’m just being honest.” Holiday glanced back at Kylie and the rest of them. “And to answer your question, Kylie, Burnett has already informed me that thankfully the camp will not be closed down.”

Everyone in the room let out a yelp of victory.

“As a matter of fact...” Holiday glanced at Burnett as if almost asking permission to continue. He frowned but nodded. “As a matter of fact, Burnett has also just informed me that my request to turn Shadow Falls Camp into Shadow Falls Camp Academy has been granted.”

“Like a full-time school?” Kylie asked.

Holiday nodded and Kylie saw her gaze seek out Della. “We’re hoping this will help alleviate some of the strain of the newly turned supernaturals who find living with normal parents impossible. It will allow them to maintain contact and hopefully prevent these families from completely severing relationships.”

Kylie grinned and glanced back at Della, who appeared as if she might start crying.

“And,” Holiday continued, “while it’s true, I did just call Mr. James here a jerk, and true, he is one, I’d also like to point out that tonight his boss

informed me that ... contrary to what I thought, he's been a supporter of the school. His boss said he's been our advocate all along. So like it or not—and for the record, I don't like it—he is deserving of our respect.”

Burnett had his arms crossed over his chest, staring holes at Holiday. Kylie suspected the camp leader didn't glance at him just to piss him off.

“That said,” Holiday motioned for the door, “it's very late and since tomorrow is parents day, we have to be up and at our best in the morning, even if we have to fake it.”

* * *

Miranda, Della, and Kylie walked out together. “Chan wasn't there,” Della said. “I would have smelled him.”

“I know,” Kylie said.

“Who's Chan?” Miranda asked.

“I'll explain it later,” Della said, and then she looked back at Kylie. “When Sky said that she didn't put the lion in your room, she was telling the truth.”

“I thought she was,” Kylie said. But something about that whole incident still didn't read true. Not that she'd ever really find out.

They started toward their cabin when Kylie saw Derek. “You two go,” Kylie said. “I want to say good night to Derek.”

“Do you smell those hormones?” Della asked Miranda.

Kylie frowned at Della as they walked away and then she turned to find Derek.

“Hey, wait up,” Kylie called to Derek.

He turned around and started moving toward her. When they met in the middle, he was smiling. “I liked how you stood up to Burnett and Holiday,” he said.

Kylie shrugged, unsure where she'd gotten the courage to do it, but lately she found herself speaking her mind. She didn't think it was altogether a bad thing, either.

“And I liked how you stood up to the vampires earlier. What did you do? They kept dropping.”

He grinned. “Apparently, I have the ability to shock their systems with emotional overload. It was pretty cool, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was,” she said.

He studied her. “Your ghost was there, too. Wasn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Kylie said, not really ready to share the whole out-of-body experience thing.

Their gazes met, held. “It worked didn’t it?” Kylie said. “You communicated with the animals. That’s how you knew about Sky, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. You were right.”

She thought she heard something in his voice—like regret. “Are you upset that it happened?” Like flies on a bad banana, guilt buzzed around her chest. He’d done it for her. “If you are ... I mean, I’m sorry that—”

He reached out to put a finger over her lips. “You don’t need to apologize. I’m glad I did it. To be honest, it felt right. Tonight felt right.” He pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear and left his hand there. “We did good. We make a good team.”

“You’ve saved my life twice now. Three if you count the snake.” She looked up at him, at his soft smile. His hand touching her neck felt so good. So right. Without thinking, she moved up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

He wasn’t the one who started the kiss.

Nope. She did that.

He wasn’t the one who deepened the kiss.

Nope. She did that, too.

He wasn’t even the one who moved in closer.

Nope. That would be her.

Not that he seemed to mind.

But he was the one who moved his tongue inside her mouth. Deep inside her, she heard a little voice say, “Oops.”

She pulled back. They were both breathing hard. She wasn’t sure either of

them had breathed this hard when they'd been fighting rogue vampires.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Wow."

Kylie inhaled, still trying to catch her breath, trying to clear her head. She stared down at her shoes, because looking him in the eyes right now seemed too much. She hadn't meant that to happen. Or had she?

He ran his finger under her chin and tilted her head up. Damn. He was going to make her look at him. Then he'd probably ask the question she couldn't answer.

"What was that, Kylie? Just a thank-you for saving your life ... or was it more?"

Yup, that was the question she was afraid he'd ask. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "Maybe just a weak moment."

He laughed. "Do me a favor." He leaned closer.

"What?"

"Whenever you're feeling weak, come see me."

She went to give him a thump in the chest, but he stopped her. He brought her hand up to his lips, his green gaze never shifting from her eyes, and he gently kissed the top of her hand. The moisture of his lips sent a shiver, a wonderful kind of shiver, all the way down her spine.

For some unknown reason, that second kiss wreaked more emotional havoc than the first had. And that's when she noticed how beautiful the sky was. It appeared ... enchanted. The stars twinkled like something out of a Disney movie. Was Derek doing this? Was he using his gifts and making her see things differently? And did it matter if he was? She didn't have the answer. "I should ... should probably go. Tomorrow is parents day."

"I'll walk you to your cabin." He arched a brow.

"I'm not kissing you again," she blurted out, before she thought about it.

He laughed. "I bet you will."

She knew he was right, but ... "Not tonight."

"I figured that. Good thing I'm patient."

* * *

Derek's kiss and maybe everything that came before it had helped Kylie not think about seeing her mom—about what she would or wouldn't say about seeing her dad making out in the middle of town. Then there was the other question she had to ask. The question that made Kylie's entire insides twitch.

The question Kylie hadn't let herself think about.

But now, standing in the dining hall, waiting for her mom to arrive, Kylie wondered if she shouldn't have been thinking about it. Face it, some things just weren't meant to be blurted out.

Her mom walked in and Kylie saw her scanning the room for her. Kylie took the second to just notice her mom. Like her brown hair, her brown eyes. Like how Kylie didn't look anything like her. Except for the nose. She'd for certain gotten her mom's little ski-lift nose.

"I almost didn't find you," her mom said as they sat down at one of the least crowded tables. Her mom's butt wasn't on the seat when she said, "You haven't been getting enough sleep, have you, Kylie?"

Was it some kind of mother radar or something that made a mom know these things? "Just restless," Kylie lied.

Her mom leaned over the table and whispered, "You aren't having those dreams again, are you?"

"No," Kylie said.

Her mom cut her eyes in that don't-lie-to-me stare.

"I swear."

"Okay," she said.

"Hello, everyone," Holiday said at the front of the hall. "I know I don't normally address you on these visits but I've got some news I'd love to share. First, I'm sorry to have to tell you that due to family issues, Sky Peacemaker, my co-leader of the camp, has to take an unplanned leave of absence."

Kylie had to admit, Holiday managed to explain it without really lying.

"However," Holiday continued, "we are in the process of looking for a replacement. Until then, we have a temporary—just temporary—replacement. And I'd like you to meet Mr. Burnett James. He comes highly recommended."

Kylie wondered if Holiday knew how telling the second “just temporary” was? The fact that she was going to have to work with Burnett was no doubt eating her alive.

“My second news...” Holiday then went into her spiel about the camp becoming a boarding school.

Kylie watched her mom as Holiday did her dog and pony show. She half expected her mom to stand up and applaud and scream out, *Freedom at last, freedom at last.*

Oddly enough, her mom was able to hide her excitement. Kylie felt a shot of guilt scratch across her conscience. How unfair was it that Kylie wanted to sign on full-time to the school, and yet she was going to be pissed at her mom for wanting the same.

After Holiday finished, Kylie looked back at her mom and said, “You want to take a walk? There are some paths through the woods that are nice.”

Her mom looked down at her feet. “Sure. Luckily I wore tennis shoes.”

Kylie decided to take her mom to a less woodsy trail that ended by the creek. It wasn’t as nice as her and Derek’s spot, but still pretty. She went by the cabin to get a blanket for them to sit on.

Her mom meandered around the cabin. “This is sparse, but nice.”

Socks came running out of her bedroom and attacked her mom’s shoelaces. “Oh, it’s sooo cute.”

Her mom picked up Socks, Jr., and held it up to her face. “Whose kitten is it?”

“Uh, mine.”

Her mom looked surprised. “Okay, but don’t you think you should have cleared that with me first?”

“I ... yeah, I guess I should have,” Kylie said.

Her mom continued to stare at the feline. “Do you know what cat this reminds me of?”

“Socks?” Kylie said.

“Yeah. Do you remember her? We had that cat when you were born. Your dad got it for me the day we had our first sonogram. He was so excited,

he...” Her mom stopped talking and blinked as if to chase the memory from her mind. “Yeah, cute kitten.” She put the feline down as if she half blamed the kitten for bringing on a painful memory.

Kylie saw the emotion in her mom’s eyes, and she wished she could punch her dad. She swallowed the knot forming in her throat and went to grab a blanket.

They walked in silence, and then her mom asked, “You are calling your dad now, aren’t you?”

Kylie almost lied, but then said, “The phone works both ways, Mom. If he wants to talk to me, he can call.”

“Honey, men aren’t always good at—”

“It’s not men we’re talking about. It’s Dad.”

“I’m sure he didn’t intentionally forget about coming to see you. His work sometimes can be challenging.”

“Really?” Kylie asked. “Is that why you barbecued his shorts on the grill?”

Chapter Forty-one

Her mom continued alongside Kylie, walking through the path in the woods. “I’m not very proud of doing that.”

“You should be,” Kylie said. “I think it was very fitting.”

Her mom looked at her before speaking. “He’s just going through something right now, Kylie. That’s all.”

The fact that her mom would defend him pushed Kylie over the edge. “Yeah, he’s going through his super-young assistant.”

Her mom stopped and grabbed Kylie’s arm. Tears filled her mom’s eyes. “Oh, baby. I’m so sorry.”

Kylie shook her head. “Why are you apologizing? Are you having an affair, too? I swear, if you’re seeing someone my age, I’m divorcing both of you.”

“No. I would never ... I didn’t want ... you to find out. You were always so close.” Her mom held a hand over her trembling lips for a second. “How did you find out?”

Kylie sensed it would hurt her mom to know that her dad brought the bimbo with him last weekend, so she lied. “I caught him in a lie.”

She shook her head. “He never was good at lying.”

Right then, Kylie wondered how good her mother was at lying. Did her dad even know the truth? She stopped moving and closed her eyes and considered the question she needed to ask.

“My, this is pretty,” her mom said.

Kylie opened her eyes and found her mom looking over at the stream.

“Yeah.” Kylie moved closer to the stream and stretched out the blanket for them to sit.

Her mom sat down and stared at the water. “Is there really a waterfall here?”

“I’m told there is,” Kylie said, hoping to keep the frustration about never having seen the falls from her voice. And right then, she decided even if she had to go alone, she was going to see that falls—for some crazy reason, it seemed important that she went. “I’ve never seen it, though.”

“Why not?”

Kylie shrugged. “Supposedly, there’s a legend about there being ghosts there. Most everyone is afraid to go there.” Me included, Kylie thought, but didn’t say it—not that it would stop her next time.

“Really?” Her mom looked intrigued. “I love ghost stories, don’t you?”

“Sometimes,” Kylie answered honestly, and glanced away so her mom couldn’t read anything in her expression.

“Well, it’s peaceful here,” her mom said. “I like it.” She leaned over and patted Kylie’s hand. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

Call Kylie a coward, but she shelved the question she didn’t want to ask, and went for the less explosive topic. One her mom should be happy about. “What do you think about the camp turning into a boarding school?”

“Your camp leader sounded happy about it,” her mom said, still staring at the water.

“What do you think about me signing up?”

Her mom’s head snapped around. “What? Hon, that’s a boarding school. That means you live here.”

“I know,” Kylie said, honestly surprised at her mom’s reaction. “Just think, you wouldn’t have to put up with me.” Kylie tried to go for a teasing tone. But if her mom’s expression was any indication, Kylie missed by a long shot.

“No,” her mom said. “Let me make this clear. Hell, no. You have a home and it’s with me.”

Two things, two huge emotional realizations hit Kylie at once. One, she

really wanted—no, make that needed—to stay at Shadow Falls Camp. Somehow, some way, she had to convince her mom to let her do this. And the second realization was that her mom didn't want to get rid of her. Kylie had been so sure, so certain that given the choice her mom would have packed Kylie a little knapsack and had her out the door in no time.

With her emotions playing bumper cars in her heart, Kylie didn't know what to say. "I ... I really like it here, Mom."

"You like it at home, too," she said.

Not anymore, was her true answer, but that suddenly seemed cruel. "But..."

"If this is retaliation for the divorce—"

"It's not," Kylie said. "I promise. I just ... It feels right here. I'm getting to know who I really am. Remember how you used to tell me that I had 'belonging issues' because I didn't want to join any of the clubs or teams at school? Well, here, I belong ... I belong here, Mom."

"You have Sara. You two are as close as sisters."

"I love Sara. I always will, but we're not ... as alike as we used to be. We don't even talk every day now. She's found some other girls to hang with and honestly, I don't fit in with them."

Her mom's eyes grew worried. "But—"

"Mom, please..." Kylie saw she'd made headway because her mom wasn't arguing nearly as adamantly as she normally did. Then Kylie remembered another trump card. "You said your new job would require lots of travel. What do you think you're going to do with me when you're gone?"

"Well, your dad will take over."

Kylie cocked her head. "Do you think I want to go over to his place while his girlfriend, who is practically my age, flaunts herself all over him?"

"Then I'll turn down the promotion," her mom said. "You are more important to me than ... than any job." Tears filled her mother's eyes.

Tears filled Kylie's eyes at the same time. She couldn't help herself. Then because it just felt right, she reached over and wrapped her arms around her mother.

“I love you,” Kylie said, and held on. She held on tighter than she had ever held on before.

Her mom didn’t pull away. She patted Kylie’s shoulder. It wasn’t the warmest embrace, but it had potential. Then, not wanting to push her luck, Kylie pulled back.

“I’m sorry,” Kylie said.

“For what?” her mom asked, and Kylie noticed her mom’s face was a splotchy mess. Another thing they had in common that Kylie hadn’t realized.

“I’m sorry,” Kylie said. “I really don’t want to hurt you. And it’s not as if you have to make a decision today. I’m here all summer, but I really do like it here. And Holiday said the students could come home on the weekends. There would be all kinds of vacation days. And I’m only three hours away. Heck, you work out of your home so you could even move closer.”

Her mom sighed. “But you’re my daughter, baby.” She ran her hand over Kylie’s cheek. “I don’t want other people raising you.”

“Mom, would you get real? I’ll be seventeen in a few months. You’ve already raised me.” Kylie hesitated and then added, “Besides, you should be dating and stuff.”

Her mom’s eyes widened. “I don’t think I’m that brave.”

“Why not? You’re beautiful and with a new wardrobe, you could be ... hot.” Her mom was much prettier than the tramp her father was involved with right now.

Her mom sighed. “When did my little girl grow up?”

“I don’t know.” Kylie grinned and lay back on the blanket. Her mom followed her lead and lay back. They listened to the creek water flow and stared up at the blue sky peeking out through the white cotton-ball clouds. Maybe it was Kylie’s imagination, but she could almost hear the falls even from here.

Finally, Kylie sat up. Her mom did the same. “Mom, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, hon.”

Kylie looked at her mom and just blurted out the question. “Who is my

real dad?”

Chapter Forty-two

Kylie saw her mom flinch. She didn't look at Kylie, almost as if trying to decide what lie to tell.

"The truth, Mom," Kylie said. "I need to know the truth."

Her mom finally looked at her. Both tears and panic filled her big brown eyes. "Who? Did your dad ... tell you?"

Which dad, Kylie thought, but didn't say it. She knew the one her mom meant.

Relief flowed through her. Her dad knew. Kylie hadn't wanted to believe her mom could have lied to him all these years. Then Kylie's relief vanished and she wondered if this was what the divorce was really about. Had her dad just discovered he wasn't Kylie's biological father? Her heart tightened at the thought that the divorce was her fault.

"No, Mom, I promise. He didn't tell me. It was just ... a feeling." That much was true. She didn't have proof, she hadn't even asked Daniel. But the odd feeling that Daniel looked like someone she knew had finally made sense.

He looked like the girl she saw in the mirror every morning when she brushed her teeth—the same blue eyes, the same blond hair, the same bone structure. They even walked like each other.

And then there was his brain pattern. She kept seeing it in her head and then she remembered how Helen had described Kylie's pattern.

But she couldn't tell her mom any of this.

"Plus, I don't look like Dad at all," Kylie said instead.

Tears dampened her mom's cheeks. "Oh, baby. I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

"What happened?" Kylie asked. "Please tell me the divorce isn't about this."

"No, baby." Her mom wiped her tears, and started talking. "I met him, Daniel Brighten, at the gym. He worked there. He was ... I don't even know how to explain it, but to say he was charming. Almost magical. I fell in love with him the moment I laid eyes on him."

Her mom stared off at nothing as if remembering. "He asked me out. On the first date, he told me that in three weeks he was set to ship out for the Gulf War. Three weeks was all we had. I know it sounds so wrong, and I'll lock you in your room if you ever do this, but ... after that first date I knew he was the one. By the third, I was ... There was nothing I wouldn't do for him. We were inseparable.

"When he left, he told me that when he came back, he was going to marry me. That he'd introduce me to his family. They lived in Dallas, so I'd never even met them."

Her mom's breath hitched. "Two weeks after he was deployed, I realized I was pregnant. In my next letter, I told him." She bit down on her lips, and more tears flowed. "He stopped writing. I thought..." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "At first I thought it was because he didn't want the baby." Drawing in a deep breath, her mom wiped her face. "About two weeks later, I saw his obituary in the paper. Now I don't even know if he got the letter."

Kylie's heart clutched and she remembered seeing Daniel pull the letter from his pocket to his lips. Tears filled her own eyes and she fought the need to tell her mom about her dreams, about Daniel coming to see her.

Her mom wrapped her arms around her knees as if she was cold. Kylie knew he was here. He stood beside her mom, looking at her with so much love in his eyes that Kylie's own tears came faster.

"I was ... only eighteen years old," her mom went on. "My mom might have understood, but my dad, he was ... it would have killed him. Your dad—I mean your stepdad—we had dated off and on through high school. He ...

always claimed he loved me.”

She held her head up. “He called me right after all this happened. I told him it wasn’t a good time. He didn’t take no very easily. He showed up at work and I went out and had coffee. I told him. I don’t know why I did. But I needed a friend.”

Her mom turned and looked right at Kylie. “He did what most men wouldn’t do. He got down on his knees and asked me to marry him, right then.”

Kylie thought about her dad, how much he must have loved her mom to have done that. But what happened to that man now? How could he be the same man who ...

Her mom continued. “He asked for one thing, one promise. He never wanted anyone to know that you weren’t his.” She pressed her hands against her lips again. “Your real father was gone. I was desperate. I never ... never realized how hard that promise would be to keep.”

Kylie reached for her mom’s hand.

“The day you were born, it was like seeing your dad all over again. You are so much like him.”

I know, Kylie thought, and gave her mom’s hand a squeeze. Then she looked up at Daniel Brighten.

“I know, if he’d lived, he would have loved you so much.”

Kylie closed her eyes and then the words popped out. “I think he does love me. I think he loves you, too.”

Her mom did it then. She wrapped her arms around Kylie and hugged her. It wasn’t quick, and not even awkward. It was just right.

They stayed there by the creek for another couple of hours. Talking about everything. She told Kylie about the whirlwind love affair she’d had with Daniel. They even talked about Nana.

“You know,” her mom said. “The day of the funeral. It took everything I had not to find me a tissue and remove that God-awful purple lipstick they put on her.”

Kylie laughed. “I’ll bet Nana would have appreciated it.” And right then

Kylie felt another breeze whisk by. It was cold, but it wasn't the same cold as Daniel's. Kylie smiled and knew Nana's spirit was close.

"Nana was special," Kylie said.

A while later, they started back through the woods. Their shoulders brushed up against each other as they walked. Her mom reached over and squeezed Kylie's hand. "Your dad," her mom said. "The man who raised you ... he loves you. I know you're mad at him."

"I have a right to be mad," Kylie said.

"I know," her mom answered. "I'm mad at him, too." She hesitated. "No, I'm furious. But I don't think he could have loved you more if you were his own. This is just ... a midlife crisis." She stopped walking. "Or maybe the truth is something I don't even want to admit."

"What?" Kylie asked.

"He loved me, Kylie. In the beginning, he loved me so much. And I ... never loved him like I loved Daniel. I never told him, but he knew it. And in time, I ... God help me, but I resented the promise he asked me to make. Every time I looked at you, I saw your real father and I felt as if I was lying to you. Lying to myself. The marriage suffered. Our relationship suffered." Her mom waved a hand between them. "It was easy to blame him, but honestly, I'm just as much at fault. I didn't have to make that promise."

Her mom reached over and brushed Kylie's hair back. "He was a good father. For years, most of those sixteen years, he was a good husband. He deserved a woman who loved him as much as he loved her. He never had that. How unfair was that to him? Maybe after all that time, he just couldn't handle it anymore."

Kylie knew her mom had made valid points. Things she should consider when she reevaluated her relationship with her dad. "He could have just asked for a divorce. He didn't have to start cheating with someone practically my age."

"I'm not saying he's right. Or that he's perfect. But he loves you, baby. He loved you even when he didn't have to."

Before her mom left, she made Kylie promise to call her dad again soon.

It was a promise Kylie intended to keep, but not today. Probably not even tomorrow.

* * *

“Why does romance have to be so complicated?” Kylie blurted out as she barged into Holiday’s office later that night.

Kylie had been in her room since her mom left, thinking about her dad and mom and Daniel and comparing all that to what she felt for Lucas and Derek. It wasn’t the same thing, but in some small way, it almost felt like it was.

Holiday looked up from the paper on her desk. If the woman’s expression was any indication, she was in about the same mood as Kylie. Confused and hurting. No doubt, Holiday and Burnett had butted heads again.

“Good question,” Holiday answered. “I personally think the gods did it just to piss us off.”

Kylie dropped down in the chair across from her desk.

Leaning back in her chair, Holiday studied her. “You’ve been quiet all day. Did the visit with your mom go okay?”

Kylie decided to spill the beans. “Daniel Brighten, the ghost, is my real father.”

Holiday nodded. Not the reaction Kylie expected.

Kylie felt her gut tighten. “If you tell me you knew this all along, I’m gonna be so pissed.”

“I didn’t know.” Holiday held up her hand. “I suspected. There’s a difference.”

“You should have told me.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, I don’t like how it works,” Kylie barked.

Holiday let go of a sigh. “Sometimes I don’t, either.”

They got quiet. Music from the dining hall wafted into the room. A party was going on. A celebration of sorts for not having to close down the camp

and for the decision to make the camp a boarding school. For many of the campers, it would be a lifesaver.

“Everything else okay?” Holiday asked.

“Yes.” Then Kylie felt that if she didn’t get it all out she would burst. “No, it’s not okay. I like two guys. One left so that should make it easy, right? Especially since the one who left is probably off having kinky sex with his she-wolf. But no, I’ve got my mom, my dad, and Daniel’s story in my head telling me how it’s not fair to care for someone if you care for someone else.” She stopped talking just so she could breathe.

“I’m sure that not’s easy,” Holiday said.

“Oh, I’m not finished yet. It gets better, because this guy, the one I like, has the power to toy with my emotions. And when I’m with him, I feel as if it’s too good to be true. That makes me wonder if maybe what I’m feeling is real. Maybe he’s just using his power to make me think I really like him.”

Holiday frowned. “I don’t think Derek would do that.”

Okay, Kylie knew Holiday would figure out who the boys were, but hearing his name made Kylie’s chest clutch.

“Then again,” Holiday said. “Derek is male. Their logic isn’t the same as ours.”

“So you agree; he could be doing this, couldn’t he?” Kylie asked.

Holiday looked as if she’d been put on the spot. “He could, but again I don’t think Derek is that type.”

“I don’t think he is either, but...” She closed her eyes. “I’m just feeling so confused.”

Holiday sighed again. “I wish I could tell you it gets easier when you’re older. But where men are involved, there always seems to be some bafflement.”

“And then there’s Daniel,” Kylie seethed. “Now that I need for him to show back up so I can ask him what the hell I am, he’s not cooperating. He’s off playing golf or poker with St. Peter or whatever men do in heaven. Or heck, maybe he’s found himself some hot too-young girlfriend like my dad has and decided to drop me in the grease, too.”

Holiday laughed. "Have you considered that maybe Daniel wants you to find this out for yourself?"

"Oh, that's so not fair," Kylie said. "Your parents didn't die or anything and leave you to go scrambling around to find out what you were. You were born knowing it."

Holiday shook her head. "Everyone's journey is different. Why don't you make that your next quest?"

Kylie slammed back in the chair. "I don't want another quest. Why can't it just be easy?"

Holiday grinned. "Easy is no fun." She sighed. "As much as I hate admitting it, if men were easy to figure out, they probably wouldn't be as much fun as they are."

"Yeah, but feeling as if your life is raining chaos isn't fun. And that's what I've felt for the last two months."

Holiday frowned and reached over and patted Kylie's hand. "And I'm about to make some things even more difficult for you."

"What?" Kylie pulled her hand away from Holiday.

The camp leader frowned and pulled a letter from her desk drawer. "I wasn't going to give you this, but then ... I remembered what you said about me being too protective."

A wiggle of concern shot through Kylie. "You know, being protective is good sometimes."

"No. You were right," Holiday said.

"Is it from Daniel?" Kylie stared at the envelope.

"No. It's from Lucas."

"Just shoot me now." Kylie banged her head on the desk.

Holiday giggled. "It can't be that bad." She reached over and gave Kylie's hand another squeeze. "You are a special girl, Kylie. If I had to guess, I'd say these two aren't going to be the only ones who will jump through fire to get your attention." She stood up. "I think I'm going to go sit in on the party for a while. Stay in here as long as you want."

"Holiday?" Kylie said her name without turning around.

“What?”

Kylie looked back. “Did Lucas write to you, too?”

Holiday nodded.

“Do you know if ... if Fredericka is with him?”

Holiday’s eyes shifted. “Yes.”

“Thanks.” Kylie turned around. Holiday’s footsteps faded into the sound of the music from next door. Kylie pulled the letter closer. She remembered how it had felt to kiss Derek—hot, safe, except for the little doubt that her emotions were being manipulated.

Her kiss with Lucas had been ... hotter, but nothing about it had felt safe. Maybe that was even why it had been hotter. Risk and passion seemed to go hand in hand.

Kylie stared at the letter. Was there anything that Lucas could say in that letter that would change the fact that he’d left, that he was with Fredericka—a girl he admitted to having sex with? A girl he’d even admitted caring about.

No, Kylie thought. There was nothing Lucas could say to change that. Any more than her dad could change what he did to her mom. Or what Trey had done to her.

The music seemed to call out to her. There was a party going on and she should be there. She folded the letter and put it in her pocket. She deserved to just enjoy tonight. Later, she’d find out what Lucas had to say.

She stood up, turned to leave. The cold hit her so fast, her breath caught, then, the room filled with a thick fog.

Okay, this was different.

The thought no more went through her head when Kylie knew how different. This wasn’t Daniel.

She tried to relax. But face it, this ghost business was going to take some getting used to. “Daniel?” She said his name almost hoping she was wrong.

A section of fog slowly lifted. A woman, no more than thirty, with long dark hair, stood there. She wore a beautiful white gown, or it had been beautiful at one time.

Kylie’s heart thudded against her chest bone as she took in the

bloodstains. The woman looked at Kylie with dead eyes, eyes filled with so much hopelessness that Kylie wanted to cry.

“Stop him,” the woman said. “Stop him, or he’ll do it again.”

“Who?” Kylie asked. “Who did this?” Kylie gripped her hands together and wished Holiday hadn’t left. “Are you looking for Holiday?”

The woman didn’t answer. Instead, she faded into the fog. Kylie stood there, hugging herself against the cold, as the fog rose and disappeared into the ceiling. Slowly, the temperature crept back up.

“That is so unfair,” Kylie muttered.

“What’s unfair?”

Kylie swung around. Derek stood in the doorway. Dressed in faded jeans and a light blue shirt, he looked ... good. Safe. She met his eyes and she saw the affection he held for her.

Right then, she decided that for tonight she was going to forget.

Forget about the letter in her pocket.

Forget about not knowing what she was.

Forget a certain woman wearing a blood-soaked gown.

Forget that she still hadn’t made the trip up to the falls.

Even forget that her mom still hadn’t agreed to let Kylie stay at the school.

Tonight, she just wanted to listen to some music, and sit next to Derek—shoulders touching.

“You going to the party?” she asked.

“I’ve been there. Waiting on you.”

“Then let’s go.”

Kylie started moving toward the dining hall, and Derek followed her. She paused at the threshold, and he bumped into her. Hit with *déjà vu*, she remembered almost the same thing happening the first time she’d walked through these doors.

She’d been so scared, so certain that she would hate it here. Then again, she’d also sensed that her life was going to change. And yeah, she had been right about that.

“Are we going inside?” Derek asked, brushing up against her. His breath felt warm against her neck.

She nodded, but she just stood there wanting to take it all in. She saw Miranda chatting with Perry. The shape-shifter had yet to admit he liked Miranda, but Miranda was patient. Helen sat with Jonathon who played a game of chess with another vampire.

Della, sipping a glass of blood, stood watching the game. Since learning about the Shadow Falls Camp turning into a boarding school, Della had seemed to lose some of her pent-up anger. Not all of it, but some.

“You okay?” Derek asked, leaning even closer to her ear. He felt solid and so warm standing behind her and right now that was what she needed.

“Yeah.” Kylie spotted Holiday sitting with Chris, listening to him play his guitar.

Looking across the room, Kylie found Burnett leaning against a wall, his attention so locked on Holiday that the world could end and he wouldn’t notice. Yup, Holiday was his kryptonite, all right.

A sense of belonging filled Kylie’s chest. She looked back at Derek and smiled. “Yeah,” she repeated. “I’m okay.”

Awake at Dawn

c. c. hunter

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To my husband, Steve Craig—my partner, my best friend, and my hero. Your love, support, and willingness to do laundry helped me take my dreams and make them our reality. Thank you for being a part of my dreams. I love you.

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Chapter One

“You have to stop it, Kylie. You have to. Or this will happen to someone you love.”

The spirit’s ominous words flowed from behind Kylie Galen and mingled with the crackle and pop of the huge bonfire about fifty feet to her right. The frigid pocket of air announced the spirit’s presence loud and clear, even if the words were only for Kylie’s ears and not for the thirty other Shadow Falls campers standing in the ceremonial circle.

Miranda stood by Kylie in the people chain, completely unaware of the ghost, and gripped Kylie’s hand tighter. “This is so cool,” Miranda muttered, and looked across the circle at Della.

Miranda and Della were not only Kylie’s closest friends, but also her cabin mates.

“We give thanks for this offering.” Chris, or Christopher as he referred to himself tonight, stood in the middle of the circle and raised the sacred goblet up to the dark sky as he blessed its contents.

“You have to stop it,” the spirit whispered over Kylie’s shoulder again, hindering her concentration on the ritual.

Closing her eyes, Kylie envisioned the spirit the way she had appeared to her several times now—mid-thirties, long dark hair and wearing a white gown—a gown covered in blood.

Frustration bounced around Kylie’s already tightened gut. How many times had she pleaded with this spirit to explain, to tell her who, what, when, where, and why? Only to have the dead woman repeat the same warning.

Long story short, ghosts just coming out of the closet sucked at communication. Probably as bad as beginner ghost whisperers sucked at

getting them to communicate. Kylie's only option was to wait until the ghost could somehow explain her warning. Now, however, wasn't the optimal time.

I'm kind of busy right now. So unless you can explain in detail, can we chat later? The words formed in Kylie's mind, hoping the ghost could read her thoughts. Thankfully, the chill running down Kylie's spine evaporated and the night's heat returned—Texas heat, muggy, thick, and hot, even without the bonfire.

Thank you. Kylie tried to relax, but the tension in her shoulders remained knotted. And for a good reason. Tonight's ceremonial event, sort of a show-and-tell, was another first in her life.

A life that was so much simpler before she knew she wasn't all human. Of course, it would help if she could identify her non-human side. Unfortunately the only person who knew the answer was Daniel Brighten, her real dad. She hadn't known he existed until he'd paid a visit to her a little over a month ago. And he'd obviously decided to let Kylie deal with her identity crisis all on her own.

He seldom visited anymore, bringing a whole new meaning to the term *deadbeat dad*. Yup, Daniel was dead—died before she was born. Kylie wasn't sure if they offered parenting classes in the hereafter, but she was tempted to suggest he find out. Because now, when he did drop by, she would catch him watching her and just when she started to ask him a question, he'd fade away, leaving only a cold chill and her unanswered questions.

"Okay," Chris said. "Release your hands, clear your mind, but whatever you do, do not break the circle."

Kylie, along with the crowd, followed his directions. Yet as she released her hands, Kylie's mind refused to clear. A whisper of wind picked up a few strands of her long, blond hair and scattered it across her face. She brushed it behind her ear.

Was her deadbeat dad afraid she was going to ask for sex advice or something? That always had her mom disappearing from a room—running around in search of another give-this-to-your-teen pamphlet. Not that Kylie had actually asked her mom for sex advice. Honestly, she was the last person Kylie would go to for *that* kind of advice.

Why, the mere mention of her being interested in a boy sent her mom into a panic as the letters S-E-X practically flashed in her mom's eyes. Thankfully, since Kylie had been shipped off to Shadow Falls Camp, the supply of sex-related pamphlets had declined.

Who knew what she'd missed this last month? There might have been a few STDs discovered that she didn't know about. No doubt her mom was stockpiling them for when Kylie went home for a visit in three weeks. A visit she wasn't looking forward to, either. Sure, she and her mom had sort of mended their not-so-good relationship since her mom had confessed about Daniel being her real dad. But the new mother-daughter bond felt so fragile.

Kylie couldn't help but wonder if their relationship wasn't too delicate to actually spend more than a few hours together. What if she went home and found things really hadn't changed? What if the distance between her and her mom still existed? And what about things with Tom Galen, the man Kylie had perceived to be her real dad all her life, the man who had walked out on her mom and her for a girl only a few years older than Kylie? Kylie had been mortified at seeing him sucking face with his way-too-young assistant. So much so, she hadn't even told him.

A late-night breeze brought the smoke from the roaring bonfire into her face. She blinked the sting from her eyes, but didn't dare step out of the circle. As Della had explained, to do that would have shown a lack of respect to the vampire culture.

"Clear your mind," Chris repeated, and handed the goblet to a camper on the other side of the circle.

Closing her eyes, Kylie tried again to follow Chris's directions, but then heard the sound of falling water. Jerking her eyes open, she looked toward the woods. Was the waterfall that close? Ever since Kylie had learned about the legend of the death angels at the falls, she felt driven to go there. Not that she longed to come face-to-face with any death angels. She had her hands full dealing with ghosts. But she couldn't kick the feeling that the falls called her.

"Are you ready?" Miranda leaned in and whispered, "It's getting closer."

Ready for what? was Kylie's first thought. Then she remembered.

Was Miranda freaking kidding?

Kylie stared at the communal goblet being passed around the circle. Her breath caught when she realized it was only ten people away from being placed in her hand. Drawing in a deep smoke-scented gulp of air, she tried not to look disgusted.

Tried. But the thought of taking a sip from a container after everyone had smacked their lips on the rim landed somewhere between gross and nauseating in her mind, but for sure the biggest yuck factor was the blood.

Watching Della consume her daily nutrition had gotten easier this last month. Heck, Kylie had even donated a pint to the cause—supernaturals did that sort of thing for their vampire friends. But having to taste the life-sustaining substance was a different matter altogether.

“I know it’s sickening. Just pretend it’s tomato juice,” Miranda whispered to their friend Helen standing on the other side of her. Not that whispering helped in this crowd.

Kylie looked across the circle of supernatural campers, their faces cast in firelit shadows from the bonfire. She spotted Della, frowning in their direction and her eyes glowing a pissed-off gold color. Her acute hearing was only one of her gifts. No doubt Della would call Miranda on her “sickening” remark later. Which basically meant Kylie would have to convince the two of them not to murder each other. How two people could be friends and fight so much was beyond her. Playing peacemaker between the two was a full-time job.

She watched another camper raise the goblet to her lips. Knowing how much this meant to Della, Kylie mentally prepared herself to accept the glass and take a sip of blood without barfing. Not that it stopped Kylie’s stomach from wanting to rebel.

Gotta do this. Gotta do this. For Della’s sake.

Maybe you’ll even like how blood tastes, Della had said earlier. *Wouldn’t it be cool if you turned out to be vampire?*

Not, Kylie had thought, but wouldn’t dare say it. She supposed being vampire wouldn’t be any worse than being werewolf or shape-shifter. Then again, she remembered Della practically crying when she talked about her ex-boyfriend’s repulsion to her cold body temperature. Kylie preferred to stay at

her own temperature, thank you very much. And the thought of existing on a diet that mainly consisted of blood...? Well, Kylie seldom even ate red meat, and when she did ... cook that cow, please.

While Holiday, the camp leader and Kylie's mentor, had said it was unlikely for Kylie to start exhibiting any huge metaphysical changes, Holiday had also said anything was possible. Truth was, Holiday—who was full fairy—couldn't tell Kylie what her future held, because Kylie was an anomaly.

And Kylie hated being an anomaly.

She'd never fit in the human world, and damn it if she wasn't a misfit here, as well. Not that the other campers didn't accept her. Nope, she felt closer to these supernaturals than she did human teens. Well, she did as soon as she learned that no one here was dying to have her for lunch. Why, Della and Miranda were now her two major best friends—there wasn't anything she couldn't or wouldn't share with them. The blood donation pretty much proved that fact.

Okay, there was one thing Kylie couldn't share with her two best friends. Ghosts. Most supernaturals had a thing about ghosts. Not that Kylie herself didn't have a thing about them. But it didn't stop the pesky phantoms from regularly popping in for visits.

Nevertheless, whatever type of supernatural she was, being a ghost magnet was her gift. Or ... one of them. Holiday believed that ghost whispering was probably one of many of Kylie's gifts and that others would manifest over time. Kylie just hoped any future gifts were easier to deal with than the indecisive and communication-challenged dead people.

"It's coming," Miranda said.

Kylie watched someone pass the glass to Helen. Kylie's throat tightened again. Her gaze shifted to Derek, the brown-haired half fairy, standing three campers past Helen. Kylie had missed him drinking the blood. Not that she was sorry. The next time they kissed, she didn't want to think about him drinking blood.

He smiled tenderly and Kylie knew Derek could sense her emotional turmoil. As crazy as it seemed, his ability to read her emotions was both what attracted her to him and kept her from getting closer. Well, it wasn't so much

his ability to read her that kept her from allowing their relationship to deepen, it was his ability to control those emotions. Being half Fae, Derek not only could read her emotions, but with a simple touch, he could alter her emotions, turn fear into fascination, anger into calm. Was it at all surprising that she stayed in awe of the sexy-as-sin boy?

Call her paranoid, but after seeing how her dad—make that her stepdad—had cheated on her mom and then how Trey, her ex-boyfriend, had dropped her in the grease when she'd been hesitant to go all the way, trusting the male gender was difficult. Trusting one who had the power to manipulate her emotions was even harder.

Not that it stopped her from liking Derek or from wishing she could throw caution to the wind. Even now—her stomach clenched as she thought of drinking blood, surrounded by the entire camp—she felt herself being lured to him. Felt herself wanting to lean up against his chest, to get close enough to see the gold flecks in his pupils melt and mesh into the vivid green of his eyes. She wanted to feel his lips on hers again. To taste his kiss. She learned these last few weeks how good he could kiss.

A clearing of Miranda's throat brought Kylie back to the moment. When she saw Derek's caught-you smile, she knew he'd read her turned-on emotions, and her cheeks warmed and she shifted her gaze away from Derek to Miranda.

Oh crap. Miranda held out the glass for Kylie to take. It was showtime.

She took the goblet. It felt warm against her palm, almost as if the liquid inside had just been drained from its life source. Her stomach knotted and her throat followed course. She didn't know if the blood was animal or human.

Don't think about it.

She inhaled and the coppery smell, like old pennies, filled her nose, and before the glass touched her lips, her gag reflex prepared to bounce.

Just do it. Show Della that you respect her culture.

She swallowed hard, tilted the glass up a notch higher, and hoped like hell Della appreciated this. Telling herself she only had to taste, not drink, she waited for the moisture to dampen her mouth.

The second the warm liquid wet her lips, she went to pull the glass back,

but somehow the thick red blood snuck through her tightened lips. Her gag reflex jumped but then the taste exploded on the tip of her tongue. Almost like black cherries but better, sort of like ripe strawberries but tangier and sweeter, the exotic flavor had her mouth opening and greedily swallowing. As the liquid slid down her throat, the smell of old pennies vanished, replaced with a spicy fruity scent.

She had almost downed the whole glass when she remembered what she was drinking. She yanked the glass from her lips, but couldn't stop her tongue from dipping out the corner of her mouth to catch a drop that tried to escape.

Immediately, the intensity of everyone's gaze on her pressed against her awareness and a deeper reality sank in. Murmurs filled her ears ...

At least now we know what she is.

How come she's not cold?

Looks as if we're going to up our blood drive.

Della's victory yelp followed.

Kylie's hands started to shake. The smoke from the bonfire filled her nose and throat and made it hard to breathe.

Crap! Crap! Crap! What did this mean? Was she ... a vampire?

She scanned the wide-eyed faces to find Holiday, wanting to see her reassuring smile that said it was okay, that said this ... this meant nothing. But when she found the camp leader, her expression mirrored that of the others—shock.

Blinking, hoping to wash away the start of tears, she shoved the almost empty glass into the hands of the person beside her. No longer caring about showing respect, she took off at a dead run.

* * *

Five minutes later Kylie was still running. Running faster than she knew she could move. But was it vampire fast? The hot, muggy summer air filled her lungs and came out in gasps. Even with the night temperature clinging to the high eighties, a chill ran down her spine. Was she at this moment morphing into a vampire? Was she growing cold? Hadn't Della said it was painful?

More like excruciatingly painful.

Was she in pain? Emotionally yes. But physically? Not yet.

She kept moving. The sound of her feet hitting the ground filled her ears, and the sound of the thorny vines snagging her jeans and then ripping away seemed too loud. Her consciousness throbbed right along with the beating of her heart. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

How many times had she told Della she wasn't a monster? And yet the mere idea that Kylie might be a vampire seemed ... too much.

The smell of the bonfire smoke clung to her clothes and filled her nose. Yet the taste of the sweet blood lingered on her tongue. She ran harder. Faster. Did her speed mean she was a vampire?

She didn't want to think about that.

Didn't want to accept it.

Her lungs finally gave out, declined the air she tried to force down. The muscles in her legs cramped and her knees shook. She stopped, her legs refusing to support her weight, and collapsed in the middle of a thorn-infested field. Pulling her legs to her chest, she hugged her shins and dropped her head on her knees.

She drew hot air into her lungs that now begged for oxygen. One breath, then two. Physically exhausted, she went still as the realization finally stuck. If she were a vampire, would she not have Della's stamina? Maybe that came with the change of body temperature. The dampness on her cheeks told her she'd been crying.

The air suddenly chilled. Turned cold.

Not vampire cold.

Dead cold.

She wasn't alone—another spirit had joined her. But who was it this time? Holiday had explained that in time, her abilities would increase and she would have to deal with more than one ghost at a time. But right now, there was only one ghost she wanted to see. Only one thing she wanted.

She wanted answers. "Daniel?" she called her father's name. And then louder. "Daniel Brighten. What am I?"

When he didn't appear, she screamed his name again and again. Her

throat became sore, but she didn't stop. "You come here now. You give me answers or I swear to you, I'll never, *NEVER* acknowledge your presence again. I will shut you off, eradicate you from my mind, and refuse to see, talk, or even think of you again."

As the threat fell from her lips, she didn't even know if she had the ability to do it, but something inside her said she could. She dropped her head against her knees and tried to breathe.

Suddenly the cold grew nearer. She felt it surround her. Felt it wrap around her in a tight embrace. It wasn't just any cold, it was Daniel's cold.

She raised her face and saw his spirit kneel beside her. His blue eyes, the same light color as her own, met hers. His eyes, and most everything else about his facial features, from the oval-shaped face to the slightly turned-up nose, were so much like hers that it was a bit disturbing. When his arm curled around her shoulders, the knot in her throat doubled.

"Don't cry." He brushed a tear from her cheek. "My little girl should never cry." The icy touch shouldn't have been comforting, but it was.

"I drank blood and it was good." She spit out the words like a confession.

"And you see this as wrong?" he asked.

"I ... It scares me."

"I know," he said. "I remember feeling much the same the way."

"Did you drink blood? Are we ... vampires?" The word almost wouldn't come.

"I never tried blood." His expression filled with empathy. "But, Kylie, you didn't do anything wrong." His voice came out soft, his words soothing. The cold, his cold, lessened her fear of the unknown and she felt ... loved.

Right then, she knew love had no boundaries, not even death. Love had no temperature. Maybe being cold wasn't altogether a bad thing. She leaned into him and drew comfort from his nearness.

Minutes passed. She blinked away her tears and sat up. He shifted from his kneeling position and sat beside her. Wiping her face, she stared at the father she'd never known in life. Yet, even separated by death, she felt the bond. "Tell me. Please tell me what I am."

The smile in his eyes faded. "I wish I could give you what you want, but I

don't have the answers. I was older than you when I realized I was different from everyone else. But it wasn't until I was eighteen and away at college that things started happening."

"What kind of things?" she asked, and then somehow she knew. "You saw ghosts?"

He nodded and cupped his hands together. "I thought I had lost my mind. Then one day I met an old man fishing. He told me he was fairy."

"Did he tell you what you were?" she asked.

"No, just that I wasn't human and, of course, I thought *he* was crazy. It took me months before I believed him. When I went back to find him again, he was gone."

"But what about your parents?" Kylie asked. "Didn't they tell you?"

"No. And when my ability to recognize other supernaturals made sense to me, I realized they were both human. At that time, I didn't know that I couldn't have been their child. Since my death, I learned I was adopted. Not that it made them any less my parents. They loved me. And they would love you, too."

"They never told you that you were adopted? How could they lie to you like that?"

"Back then it was considered best to keep adoption a secret, even from the child. I have yet to find out who or what my real parents are. So you see, the answers you seek were the same answers I sought right before my death. Maybe you can discover them for us both."

"But..."

"But what?" he asked.

"I thought ghosts were all-seeing. They are in the movies, anyway. Isn't there someone on the other side who could tell you?"

He smiled. "You would think so. But no, even here, they want you to find your own answers."

"That freaking sucks," Kylie said. "Being dead should have some benefits."

He laughed. The sound echoed with familiarity. It was another thing she had gotten from him—the tenor of her laugh. Her thoughts went to her

stepdad, the man whom she had loved so much and yet who had turned his back on her and her mom. She still didn't know if she could forgive him. If she wanted to forgive him. And then the strangest thought hit: she had loved the wrong father.

Her throat felt tight again. "I missed you all my life," Kylie said. "I didn't know I missed you, but I know it now. You were supposed to be there."

He placed a hand on her cheek. "I was there. I saw you take your first step. The day you fell off your bike and broke your arm I tried to catch you. You went right through my arms. And remember the day you flunked that algebra test and you got so upset that you ran off and smoked a cigarette?"

She frowned. "I hate algebra. But I hated the cigarette, too."

"Me, too," he chuckled. "I've been here, Kylie, but I can't stay here much longer."

His words bounced around her head and hit her heart with a thump. "That's not fair. I just got to know you."

"My time in this realm is limited. I've used much of it watching you grow to be the woman you are."

"Then ask for more time." Her throat tightened. She had lost one father already; she didn't want to lose another one. Not now. Not before she even got to know him.

"I'll try, but it may not happen. I don't regret spending my time with you then." The corners of his eyes crinkled into another smile. "I see in you the best of your mother and the best of me. And while I know you don't want to hear this right now, I see the best of Tom Galen. He is not all bad, Kylie."

She wanted to tell Daniel he was wrong, to insist she wasn't like Tom Galen, but her thoughts were interrupted by the whisk of wind. It came on so fast, as if something had shot past, something so fast that her human eye hadn't detected it. Something not human.

The dark silence that followed told Kylie she was right. "I'll bet that's Della." Kylie looked around. "Looking for me." But even as Kylie finished the sentence, she felt the cold of her father's presence fade. "No, please don't ... go." Her last word rang out in the warm yet eerie and lonely silence.

Gone. He was gone.

Her chest tightened, then she came to the realization that even though he'd come to her, he didn't have the answers she wanted. Her surefire plan of solving her identity crisis had been squashed.

Biting her lip, she pushed away her thoughts of her father and prepared herself to face Della. Could she explain to her friend her reservations about being vampire without hurting her? Would Della be totally furious that she'd broken the circle and disrespected the vampire culture? Knowing Della, the answer would be a *hell* yes.

Della had a lot of unresolved anger and it didn't take much to infuriate her. Some of her angst could be blamed on being vampire—vampires weren't known for their loving dispositions, but most of Della's issues were from her family. Apparently, her super-strict father had noted the changes in his daughter since she'd been turned, and he didn't like them. Not being able to tell her dad about being vampire, Della had remained silent, which made her dad accuse Della of everything from drugs to just being lazy. The sad part was, Della loved her father so much that disappointing him was breaking her heart.

Kylie waited for Della to return, to come to a whizzing stop. She didn't. Had her ghost-fearing friend sensed her father's presence and kept going? The lack of sound suddenly seemed menacing.

"Della?" Kylie called out.

No answer came. Not unless you considered the dead silence an answer. Kylie recalled Della's cousin, Chan, and the uninvited visit he'd paid to Della and her after she'd only been here a few days. His presence had brought on this kind of dead silence as well.

The memory of that night filled Kylie's head. Della had assured Kylie that he'd only been joking about her being a snack, but after Kylie's little run-in with the Blood Brothers gang of rogue vampires, when she'd nearly become a snack for real, trusting an unknown vampire took a little effort.

When the night's stillness continued, Kylie forced herself to speak. "I know someone is here." She stood up, hoping her false bravado would become real. The whisk of speeding wind passed again. "If that's you, Della, this isn't funny."

No one answered. Kylie stood there, trying to think of what to do next. Then she heard it. Very slight, but still the definite rustle of some bushes—someone was behind her. Breath held, she swung around to face the music.

Chapter Two

At first Kylie didn't see anything, then her gaze shifted lower to the ground and locked on to a pair of eyes—eyes that glowed golden in the night's obscurity. They weren't vampire eyes. Nope, they weren't Della's golden hue that expressed her anger. These weren't even human.

Canine?

No.

Wolf.

She nearly tripped taking a step back, as her heart screamed *run*. But the one word that whispered though her head next stopped her from attempting escape. *Lucas?*

Her chest clutched tighter but no longer from fear. Something akin to longing warmed her heart. Then the warm, gooey feeling slipped right into the feeling of betrayal. The hot-looking werewolf had kissed her senseless, made her want him, and then run off with Fredericka.

Kylie's gaze shot up to the cloud-covered moon. Even through the gray mist, she could tell it wasn't full. That didn't happen until next week, when the werewolves at the camp were planning their own ceremonial event.

Which meant the wolf staring at her couldn't be Lucas. Which meant it was a real wolf. A real wild-animal kind of wolf. Which meant she should be trying to get the hell away before it decided to attack.

Her gaze shot back to the wild animal, and while her mind created images of the creature snarling, ready to pounce, what she saw wasn't anywhere near as frightening. The gold eyes held hers. The cloud shrouding the moonlight must have shifted, and Kylie was able to make out the medium-size wolf in detail. Its coat looked thick and coarse, and it held a mix of colors from gray

to red. She wouldn't call it beautiful, not exactly, but it sure as heck didn't appear threatening.

Lowering its snout, it slowly moved forward. Even though the thing still didn't look hostile, Kylie took a step back. As if sensing her fear, it crouched lower to the ground in a submissive position.

"What are you—someone's pet wolf?" Another thought hit. A real wolf couldn't have made the supersonic blast of air. But a real shape-shifter could.

She slammed both her hands on her hips and gave the beast a hard cold look. "Damn it, Perry, is that you?"

Perry, the powerful shape-shifter of the camp, loved to play jokes. But Kylie had had it up to her eyeballs with his tricks. Enough was enough.

"Game's over or I'm going for your ears." Kylie waited for the diamond-like sparkles to fill the air around the wolf as it changed back into human form. "Now!"

No sparkles.

The creature, down on all fours, inched forward.

"No," Kylie insisted, accepting that this was truly a wolf. "You stay there." She held out her hand and the animal seemed to listen. "Nothing personal, but I'm more of a cat person." Her voice rang loud and brought her awareness again to the lack of night noises.

No crickets. No birds. Not even the wind dared to blow. She looked up at the tops of the trees, which held so still they looked photographed. Even the Texas vegetation appeared frozen with fear.

She fought the sense of danger stirring in her chest and looked back at the wolf, more certain than ever that the danger didn't stem from the creature's presence. No, whatever was here was much more evil than a wild animal. Chills tap-danced up her spine, sending all her barely-there hair on the back of her neck standing at attention.

The wolf lunged up on all fours, sniffed the air, and snarled. It took a step away, then turned back around. Its golden eyes met hers almost as if to warn her of danger.

Not that she needed to be further warned. Her heart skipped a beat. The brush of cold wind passed again, only closer this time, and it left a foul odor

that carried the stench of death. The wolf's snarl grew more intense.

"Kylie?" Her name echoed from the distance, the sound leaking from the thicket of trees. She brought her head around and the whisk of air shot past her again. Only this time, Kylie got the feeling that it kept going. Whoever, whatever it was, wanted her alone. She folded her arms over her middle and tried not to shiver from the thought.

The wolf made a soft whine and she turned her head and made eye contact again. It moved its head slightly, as though giving her a farewell greeting, then it turned and, causing only a slight rustle of vegetation, it disappeared.

"Kylie." Her name came again, carried with a slight whisk of wind. This time she recognized Derek's voice.

"I'm here," Kylie yelled, and, not wanting to be alone a second longer, she took off running.

* * *

She ran toward the sound of Derek's voice. Her heart pounded as she dodged trees and jumped over patches of thorns. She kept running. As if she could escape the fear she'd just felt, as if she could run away from her problems. Oh, yes, she so wanted to leave her problems behind. With each thump her foot made against the hard earth, she felt her fear slip farther away, but the problems not so much. They hung on, but exertion of energy still felt good. Good until she smacked right into something, or rather ... someone.

Derek.

His muscled body let out a gush of air and he hit the ground with a thud. Kylie, thrown off balance, toppled down on top of him. His clean, spicy scent filled her nose at the same time his arms wrapped protectively around her.

"You sent the wolf," she muttered, still short of breath, as she just now recalled his ability to communicate with animals.

"What wolf?" His gaze shifted left then right. "Are you okay?" He rolled her over onto the ground. One of his legs still rested on top of hers and his left arm lay across her middle, while his palm fit right into the curve of her waist. Warmth and comfort pulsated from his touch. He pushed the curtain of

hair from her face with his other hand. His gaze, filled with concern, met hers and she fought the lump of emotion crawling up her throat.

“Kylie, talk to me.” His tone echoed the same caring she saw in his eyes, and that warm feeling she always got when he touched her spread inside her chest.

“Damn it, are you okay?”

She blinked up at him and she meant to say yes, but the truth came out. “No. I’m not okay.”

“What happened?” His arm tightened around her waist.

All her problems came raining down on her like pitchforks and one made a direct hit to her heart. “I drank blood.”

“We all drank blood. It was part of the ceremony,” he said, and she got the feeling he was trying hard to say the right thing.

“But I enjoyed drinking it,” she answered.

“I know,” he admitted. “Your emotions were skipping all over the place when you drank it—passion, euphoria, joy.”

She raised her head off the ground an inch. “What does that mean? Seriously, what does that mean?”

“Maybe you just like it,” he answered with a cautious tone.

“Or maybe I’m vampire?” she countered, then she dropped her head on the ground and closed her eyes.

He didn’t say anything for a minute, and then spoke up. “You saw a wolf? You said something about a wolf?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “He was acting strange, almost friendly.”

“He’s not here anymore,” Derek said as if his gift allowed him to check the nearby woods for animals. “It was probably just a stray dog.”

“He looked like a wolf.”

“Then he was probably a hybrid.”

“Probably,” she admitted, realizing she might be overreacting.

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Closing her eyes, she savored the feel of Derek’s body next to hers and slowly relaxed. When she opened her eyes, the stars above sparkled with a fairy-tale radiance. The tall grass around them danced in the wind. Derek was doing it again, making the world around her

appear utopian, too perfect. Even the air became fragranced with the spicy scent of plants, hinted with the floral aroma of wildflowers. She closed her eyes again, afraid to let herself be completely pulled into the world he created.

“Do you think you’re a vampire?” he asked.

His question brought back some reality. She looked at him. “I don’t know. I’m so friggin’ confused.”

He ran his hand over her cheek. “Does it really matter what you are, Kylie? It sure as hell doesn’t matter to me.”

“Of course it matters.” She propped herself up on one elbow. “You don’t understand because you know what you are. You’ve always known what you are. Everything about what I perceived about myself, who I am, what I am, who my father is, it’s all been ripped away. All I’m left with is a bunch of questions. Nothing is like I thought.”

Tears filled her eyes. “And—”

Derek’s mouth met hers. Her eyes fluttered closed. The sweetness of the kiss sent all her emotional havoc out of her mental window. She let herself enjoy the moment. Let herself be pulled into the sensations of just feeling and not thinking. And, oh goodness, it felt good.

When he drew back she wasn’t ready for it to end. She opened her eyes. No longer under the sweet sensations of his kiss, she wasn’t sure how she felt about him shutting her up. She sat up. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” he asked.

“Kiss me when I was trying to talk.”

A smile formed in his eyes. “You don’t like me to use my gift to calm you down, so I thought I’d use my charm instead.”

“If it is just your charm, and not your gift, how do you make everything so much like a fantasy world?”

He shook his head, and his brown hair brushed against his brow. “I told you, I’m not doing that.”

She cocked her head to the side and sent him an accusing look.

“If I am doing it, I’m not doing it on purpose. I swear. Being with you makes me happy and maybe being happy ups my charm.” His smile was

contagious and any emotions taking up residence in her chest similar to anger or distrust vanished.

She thumped his shoulder with her palm. "You think you're that charming, huh?"

His smile widened. "I think you like my kisses." His gaze lowered to her mouth where she could still taste the moisture of his kiss.

"Really?" she teased. "You're that sure of yourself?"

"I'm sure that you're not feeling upset anymore. And that's what matters, isn't it?" He passed a finger over her lips. "Because I really hate seeing you upset."

Her heart squeezed and she wondered if that was a confession that he was indeed manipulating her emotions. Then again, was it wrong to want to make someone happy, to chase away their fears? Oh heck, what was she waiting for? What kept her from saying yes to everything Derek wanted? Yes to agreeing to go out with him. Yes to ... to more kisses and to wherever those kisses led. She leaned in closer, wanting to taste his kiss again.

"See," he said playfully, and arched his eyebrows. "Admit it." He moved in. His mouth came so close to hers that she could practically feel it moving when he spoke.

"Admit what?" She put a little tease in her own voice, hoping she drove him as crazy as he drove her.

"Admit that you like my kisses. And then say yes to going out with me."

She cut her eyes up at him and grinned. "I'll admit I like your kisses, but do you like mine?"

"More than anything." He closed the tiniest bit of distance between them. "Go out with me." He kissed her again. Softly at first and then deeper. She felt his tongue slip inside her mouth. She felt herself gently being lowered back to the ground. Felt his hand slip up under her shirt and touch her bare skin at her waist. He'd touched her like that before but she got the feeling he wouldn't take that touch higher; he wouldn't push the intimacy any further until he had her approval.

And just knowing that made her want to approve. Knowing it was her choice and he would respect whatever she chose meant so much. But was it

enough to take that leap?

She reached for his hand, seriously considering moving it higher, giving him permission to ...

“You two need to go back to the camp.” The deep voice penetrated Kylie’s sensual haze.

Both Kylie and Derek jerked apart. Burnett, the temporary camp leader and a member of the Fallen Research Unit, a supernatural unit of the FBI, stood over them. Kylie’s face grew hot with embarrassment at her and Derek being caught making out in the grass.

Derek didn’t seem to be bothered. He shot to his feet and looked around. “What is it?”

Kylie stood up. Only then did Kylie recall Burnett’s dark tone and notice that his eyes glowed red. A sign that he was on the defensive. Obviously danger lurked close by.

“What’s happened?” Derek asked.

“Someone else was here earlier,” Burnett said.

“Who?” Kylie managed to ask.

“I don’t know. But they’re vampire and not one of us. Now get back to the camp.”

“Maybe I should come with you?” Derek offered.

“And leave her alone?” Burnett asked firmly, his frown deepening.

Derek cut his gaze back to Kylie and then back to Burnett. “You’re right. I’ll make sure she gets back safe. Do you want me to come back?”

“No,” Burnett insisted. “I’ll be fine. Just keep an eye on the camp. Let everyone know to be on the lookout. Stay together.”

And leave her alone? Burnett’s question kept playing in Kylie’s head and with each repetition, she felt more annoyed. She wanted to insist she could take care of herself. God knew Della would be having conniption fits at being treated like she needed to be protected. Then Kylie recalled how frightened she’d felt before she’d started to run, before she’d found Derek. Obviously, Kylie wasn’t Della.

Did that mean she wasn’t vampire? Or did it mean she was just a vampire lacking anything that resembled courage? Did yellow-bellied vampires even

exist?

Burnett continued, "Don't let Holiday leave either. Tie her down if you have to. Got it?"

"Got it." Derek reached for Kylie's elbow and started walking.

Kylie didn't budge. "I felt it earlier," she blurted out. "It moved past me several times. Almost as if teasing or testing me." She recalled how it kept flying past, making its presence known without letting her see it.

"That's odd. Vampires don't normally tease. Or test," Burnett said. "They see prey and attack to kill. Now go back to the camp."

Chills ran up and down her legs. Derek sensed her fear because he reached for her hand and offered her palm a warm emotion-quieting squeeze. Her fear lessened.

"Come on. Let's get back." Derek took her by the elbow. The sound of his voice helped her brain connect to her limbs, and she started moving.

They walked at a fast pace and without talking. The sounds of an occasional owl and crickets sang out into the darkness. Not that she minded their music. Music was good. Music meant intruders weren't near.

"Why didn't you tell me a vampire came at you?" Derek asked, frustration adding a new layer of intensity to his voice.

"I ... at first I thought it was Della and then..." Then she had thought it was Chan, but she couldn't tell Derek about Chan. She'd promised Della. "Then I heard you calling. And I started running and I wasn't so afraid anymore." She looked at the frown etched on his face. "I told you about the wolf."

"I think the vampire was a bigger deal."

"Yeah and I would have ... told you, but you started kissing me."

"So that makes it my fault?" His tone came out harsher than before.

"Sort of," she said, not liking it that he was annoyed with her when only a few minutes ago they'd been kissing. She started walking faster.

They continued moving in tense silence for another five minutes. With each step, she realized how silly their argument was. "I probably should have told you right away. I wasn't thinking." She stared away from him, afraid he wouldn't accept her offer for a truce.

She heard him inhale. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been grumpy." He reached for her hand again. His palm felt good against hers. "It just scares me thinking that ... that you could have been hurt." He sounded older. His voice deepened and his need to protect gave his tone a new quality. In spite of still feeling a bit annoyed at his thinking that she couldn't protect herself, she liked the new quality. It made her feel safer.

Yes, with Derek she felt safe, but it didn't stop her from looking at the trees and praying the wind didn't stop blowing, that the night didn't go silent again.

Chapter Three

“What happened?” Miranda cornered her in the dining hall twenty minutes later.

As soon as Derek had told Holiday about the rogue vampire on the prowl, she called everyone and told them to gather here.

Deep down, Kylie still trembled. Be it from fear, or perhaps Della’s icy mood, Kylie couldn’t say for sure. Della’s cold shoulder could be felt from clear across the room.

“Come on, spill it,” Miranda said. “And then I’ve got something to tell you.”

Kylie looked at Della again. “How mad is she at me?”

Miranda glanced across the room. “On a scale of one to ten, ten being totally vampire pissed off, I’d say she’s about a fifteen ... and climbing.”

“Great,” Kylie muttered.

Miranda shrugged. “She’ll get over it. You know how she is. Now tell me what happened.”

Kylie shook her head. “I ran off and...”

“But why did you run off? Why did you ... drink the blood like it was a cold beer on a hot Friday night?”

Kylie looked down at her shoes. She didn’t want to talk about this, not now. “I don’t know.”

“You liked how it tasted, didn’t you?” Miranda sounded offended.

The most Kylie could do was nod.

“Okay, then what happened?” A frown marred Miranda’s expression.

Kylie swallowed the tightness down her throat.

“Come on, give it up,” Miranda snapped.

“I ran and then I felt someone there—a vampire someone. And then I heard Derek. I think he scared off whoever was there. I took off running and found Derek and then we just...”

“You what?” Miranda asked, hanging on to her every word.

Started making out. “Nothing. Burnett showed up.”

A whisk of air blasted them as Della came to a sudden stop beside Kylie. “And you told him you thought it was Chan, didn’t you?” Della obviously had been listening the whole time.

Kylie looked at Della. “No. I didn’t.”

“Who’s Chan?” Miranda asked.

“Nobody,” Della snapped at Miranda. “Mind your own business.” Obviously, Della didn’t want anyone to know her vampire and scoundrel cousin had broken one of the biggest Shadow Falls rules: no visitors without permission passes. That especially went for those who were against the FRU’s attempts to govern the supernaturals.

Miranda, unhappy, glared right back at Della.

“Was it Chan?” Kylie asked, not caring if Miranda overheard. Kylie understood Della’s loyalty to Chan. He’d been the one who’d helped Della get through the painful change. However, it made sense that if Chan had broken the rule once, he very well might break it again.

“I told you he wouldn’t come back,” Della snapped.

“But how can you be so sure?” Suddenly Kylie remembered how frightened she’d been in the woods when she’d met Della’s smug cousin. She folded her arms over her middle and took on a defensive posture. Just because Della believed Chan wasn’t a threat, didn’t mean crap. He could be a part of the Blood Brothers gang as far as Kylie knew.

“Because I trust him, unlike other people. I thought you and Miranda were friends. All I asked was that you respect the fact that tonight was important to me. That—”

Kylie’s frustration level peaked. “Damn it, Della. Why does everything always have to be about you?” The words hadn’t fully left Kylie’s mouth when she spotted the look in Della’s eyes. The same look her friend got every time her parents came to visit. The look that told Kylie that Della felt like an

outcast.

Kylie dropped her attitude. “I didn’t mean to show disrespect. I just freaked out, okay?”

“Why?” Della’s anger sounded in her voice, but it was hurt that colored her eyes.

“Why what?” Kylie asked, but deep down she knew what Della was asking her. She just needed a few seconds to figure out how to word it so it wouldn’t sound so bad.

Della moved an inch closer. “You freaked out because you don’t want to be a vampire, right? You think I’m a monster, don’t you? You’re scared to death that you might become like me. That’s why you freaked out, wasn’t it?”

Kylie opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. Probably because she couldn’t lie to Della. The vampire would know the truth. Della turned to leave. Kylie reached out to stop her, but Della was gone.

“Where did she go?” Kylie searched the dining room twice and still couldn’t find her. The room was filled with excited campers milling around.

“Just let her go cool off,” Miranda said.

“I can’t.” Kylie knew how much this hurt Della.

Finally Kylie spotted Della’s midnight-colored straight hair behind a group of shape-shifters. Kylie started walking over.

Miranda followed her. “Seriously, why don’t you just give her some time?”

“Go away,” Della growled before Kylie came to a complete stop.

“No.” Kylie stood her ground.

Della’s eyes glowed gold with anger. Then her top lip raised just enough to show her extended canines. There was a time when seeing Della like that would have scared the bejeebies out of Kylie, but not anymore. She wasn’t afraid of Della.

“I don’t think you’re a monster,” Kylie said. “But that doesn’t mean I wasn’t scared.”

“Liar,” Della growled.

“I’m not lying. Check my heartbeat if you want,” Kylie said. “Listen to

my heart, see if I'm lying."

Della turned to walk away, and Kylie caught her elbow this time. "Don't you dare walk away," Kylie insisted.

"Let me go," Della rumbled in a low voice. When Kylie didn't let go, the vampire swung around, her eyes brighter, her teeth fully exposed.

Kylie heard a few murmurs in the crowd. The argument had obviously drawn attention. Della heard it, too, because she looked around and hissed. The few people standing close by scattered like scared mice.

Kylie still wasn't afraid.

"Uh, we should leave, too." Miranda bumped Kylie with her elbow. "She's really pissed off now."

Kylie didn't look at Miranda. She continued to stare at Della, letting her know that she wasn't afraid. "I'm not leaving until she hears me out."

"I don't have to hear you out. I know what you think." Della's angry glare, filled with so much hurt, slapped against Kylie.

"That's unfair." Kylie glared right back at the pissed-off vampire.

"What's unfair is that I thought you were my friend." The hurt in Della's eyes shined brighter through the golden hue.

"I am your friend. I gave you my blood," Kylie said.

"Me, too," added Miranda, sounding nervous.

When Della's expression didn't change, Kylie continued. "And I also remember you telling me how scared you were when you found out you were turning. You said you were so afraid of what was happening. You said you didn't want to change."

Della turned to leave again. But Kylie kept talking and didn't let go of her elbow. "Are you the only one allowed to be afraid?" Kylie felt the emotion swell in her chest, and tears filled her eyes. "Are you so special that no one else can feel that?"

Kylie half expected Della to zip off. Maybe even pull her arm out of her socket when she did.

She didn't. But neither did her friend turn around. She just stood there for several long seconds. One. Two. Three. Kylie counted and waited, hoping this meant—

“Fine,” Della bit out in frustration, and finally turned around. Her eyes were no longer gold. She looked down, then up again. “You’re right.” She looked away and then back at Kylie. “I’m sorry.”

“Damn,” Miranda said a little loud. “I didn’t know vampires could or would *ever* apologize.”

Della shot Miranda a cold look. “I didn’t apologize to you. So why don’t you go find your broomstick and fly to Timbuktu. That is if your dyslexic, screwed-up sense of direction will get you there. And don’t bother coming back, either.”

Miranda took an offensive step toward Della. “You are so mean—”

Della bared her teeth and growled. “I heard you when you told Helen that blood was disgusting. You promised you would respect—”

“Is it disrespectful to be honest?” Miranda asked.

Kylie moved between them. “You two can sling insults, call each other names, and even kill each other later. But right now...” She looked at Miranda. “I need a minute alone with Della. Please.”

Miranda’s chin notched up a few inches. She didn’t like it, but she walked away. That was the thing about Miranda. She might get pissed in a flicker of a heartbeat, almost as fast as Della, but Miranda got unpissed just as quickly. Della on the other hand—that girl knew how to hold a grudge. And while she pretended nothing could hurt her, Kylie saw her vulnerable streak and it ran even wider than Miranda’s.

Finally alone, Della and Kylie stood there staring at each other. Kylie spoke first. “I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to disrespect your culture. I really just freaked out.”

Della nodded. “I get it. Didn’t get it at first but ... I do now.” Della sighed and a smile touched her lips. “You loved it, didn’t you? The blood. It was good.”

Kylie wasn’t proud of it, but she admitted the truth. “It was awesome.”

Della touched Kylie’s arm. “But you’re still warm.”

Kylie nodded. “And if I am vampire, wouldn’t I already be cold?”

“I don’t know,” Della said honestly. “Maybe you just haven’t changed yet. But you’re about to.”

Kylie remembered Della telling her that turning had felt like boiling water running through her veins.

"I'll be here for you," Della said as if she'd read Kylie's mind. "To help you through it. If it happens. You won't have to be alone. I think I remember most of what Chan did to help me."

"I know you will." Kylie tried to smile. Right then, she spotted Miranda staring at them from across the room, looking like a lost puppy. Kylie felt bad asking her to leave. "So will Miranda. She will be there for me. And she'd be there for you, too. I really ... really wish you two would stop fighting."

Della shrugged. "She's just so good at pissing me off."

"And you her," Kylie defended Miranda.

"Yeah, but she's not like you. You seem to know what I'm feeling, always manage to say the right thing." Della's brow crinkled as if in thought. "It's almost as if you're an empath. You know, like Derek and Holiday and you can read emotions?"

"No," Kylie said, but deep down she couldn't help wonder. Hadn't she always been good at reading people? Like with her mom, she'd always sensed the distance her mother kept between them, knew there was something keeping her mom from bonding with her completely.

"Is everything okay?" The familiar female voice came from behind Kylie. Kylie and Della looked over at Holiday.

"Yeah," Kylie and Della said at the same time.

Holiday gave Kylie's arm a squeeze. "We need to talk about what happened tonight, and we will just as soon as things calm down."

Kylie nodded and while Holiday's touch offered a small amount of comfort, she couldn't help but wonder if Holiday hadn't touched her just to check her temperature—to find out if she'd changed into a vampire.

"Later, okay?" Holiday asked.

"Yeah." Kylie did want to talk to Holiday, yet she sensed the camp leader would tell Kylie the same thing she always did. *I don't have the answers. I think this is something you must find out for yourself.*

But how was Kylie supposed to find the answers? Her plan of getting information from Daniel had been flushed down the toilet. Where did that

leave her?

The chirp of Holiday's cell phone brought Kylie back to the present.

Holiday yanked the phone to her ear. "Burnett?" Holiday's expression hardened. "No. You have the wrong number."

Kylie heard the frustration in Holiday's tone. No doubt the camp leader was worried about Burnett. A little of that worry wiggled into Kylie. She'd been the one to run off from the vampire event—if anything happened to Burnett it would be Kylie's fault. Looking off at the log walls of the dining room, she tried to deal with the guilt.

Then Kylie remembered that Burnett was probably the last person in the world who couldn't take care of himself. The man was six foot three of hard muscle and his vamp powers were some of the strongest. Or so Della had said. Since Burnett had stepped in as a temporary assistant, Della had become a bit of a Burnett fan.

"I'm sure he's fine," Kylie offered, and leaned into a dining chair.

"No one stands a chance against him," Della insisted.

But neither Kylie's nor Della's comments helped. Holiday's brow remained pinched with worry. And it was more than normal concern, too. Kylie sensed the attraction between the two of them the first time she saw them together. Just because Holiday didn't want to get involved, didn't mean she didn't care.

Holiday dialed a number and then snapped her phone closed.

"Why would he turn off his phone?" Holiday's eyes tightened. "He has to have known I would want to talk to him."

"I can answer that," Della said. "You see, when you're out in the woods looking for someone, hoping to find them before they find you, nothing takes away your advantage more than a ringing phone."

The truth of Della's words only brought a deep frown to Holiday lips. "He could have called before he left. He's just being ... difficult. I swear, I can't wait until they hire someone else. I simply cannot work with that man."

Della grinned. "You can't work with him, you say you don't like him, but look how worried you are about him."

"I'm not worried ... I mean, I am worried, but not ... It's not like..."

“Like you really care about him,” Della finished off Holiday’s sentence, and then continued. “Like you have the hots for him? Or do you have the hots for him? You know one might assume—”

“You got the hots for me?” Burnett’s deep voice rang out as he moved to stand behind Holiday.

Holiday’s face blushed—from anger or embarrassment, Kylie wasn’t sure. Then Holiday swung around and confronted the tall, dark vampire. Burnett’s eyes briefly met Kylie’s and he nodded.

Kylie recalled what she’d been doing the last time Burnett’s presence had startled her, and was sure her face reddened right along with Holiday’s.

“So you’re alive,” Holiday snapped. While her voice expressed anger, her expression told another story—genuine, heartfelt relief. Seeing the emotion, Kylie forgot about her own embarrassment. No doubt about it. Holiday cared a lot about Burnett. Probably more than she wanted to admit.

“You never answered,” he said. “You got the hots for me, or not?” His dark eyes lit up with a smile.

Squaring her shoulders, Holiday started talking. “Della assumed I might have the hots for you. And you know what they say about assuming, right?”

“It makes an ass out of you and me,” Della answered, and gave Kylie the elbow. “Get it. A. S. S. U. M. E.”

Holiday cut her eyes to Della in visual reprimand, then started walking away. She got three steps and swung back around. “Are you coming?” she snapped at Burnett.

“You didn’t ask me to,” he answered.

“Well, I assumed you would know I needed to discuss what happened.”

He arched one dark brow upward. “And what did you just say about assuming?”

Della grinned and appeared totally entertained by Holiday and Burnett, but Kylie’s thoughts went in another direction. She cleared her throat. “Didn’t you guys agree to be forthcoming with all of us from now on? So why do you have to leave? Why can’t we all hear this?”

Holiday frowned.

“She’s right.” Burnett held out both his hands. “You did say that at the

meeting. I believe it was the same one at which you called me a jerk,” he added.

Holiday’s eyes brightened with frustration. Obviously the man didn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.

“Fine,” Holiday said between her closed teeth. The two of them stared at each other, and neither of them blinked. When the silence became long, Holiday let go of a deep breath. “Why don’t you address everyone then?” She waved at the front of the room. “The floor is all yours.”

“I think I could do that,” Burnett answered, but his expression said he didn’t really like addressing the group. Kylie also got the feeling that Holiday knew it.

Holiday shot off, and Burnett watched her go. “I don’t know which is worse, talking to everyone or talking to her alone.” He looked up at Kylie and flinched as if he hadn’t meant to say that aloud. Then before he moved to the front, he looked at Della. Kylie could swear she saw him mouth the words “Thank you.”

When he left, Kylie studied Della. “How long did you know Burnett was in the room?”

“Pretty much from the time Holiday walked over here.” Della grinned. “Hey, we vampires have got to stick together.” She nudged Kylie with her elbow as if saying Kylie was one of them. Kylie wasn’t so sure she was. Then again, she wasn’t sure she wasn’t, either.

The door to the dining room swished open. Kylie looked that way. Derek walked into the dining room, and his gaze went straight to her. The sweet smile he sent her reminded her of the kisses they’d shared earlier. A warmth brought on by the memory filled her abdomen at the same time an unnatural coldness brushed her skin.

Goose bumps popped up on her arms when she heard the words again. “*You have to stop it. You have to. Or this will happen to someone you love. Soon. Soon. It will happen soon.*”

“Who? How soon?” Kylie muttered under her breath. The spirit materialized only a foot from Kylie’s face. She still wore the blood-soaked gown, only this time the blood dripped from the hem of her gown and pooled

around her feet. Kylie's breath caught, and while it was the last thing Kylie wanted to think, her mind took her there. To the sweet, addictive flavor of blood.

"Soon what?" Della asked. Kylie looked from the ever-growing puddle of blood to Della's slightly slanted eyes that hinted at her Asian heritage. Then she watched those eyes widen with fear. Della shivered and took a step back. "You've got company again, don't you?"

Della ran off. At the same time several other campers standing close by started backing away as if they had figured out what was happening as well. Feeling ostracized, Kylie's throat tightened and her sinuses stung.

She fought to keep the tears from filling her eyes. When she looked back to the spirit, it had faded and the air had lost its chill.

Kylie's lungs swelled with frustration. Frustration, no doubt, brought on by all her unanswered questions. Her whole freaking life was one big unanswered question.

"Excuse me." Burnett's deep authoritative voice filled the room. "Can everyone give me your attention? I know you're all curious as to what happened tonight. And since Kylie reminded Holiday and me that we said we'd be more forthcoming with situations, I figure I'd best explain."

Chapter Four

Hearing Burnett speak lessened the emotional lump in Kylie's throat. Everyone looked toward the front.

"We had an uninvited visitor to the camp this evening," Burnett explained. "A vampire."

"Was it from that gang? The ones who attacked you guys at the wildlife park?" Helen asked, and glanced over at Kylie.

Kylie moved a little closer to the front, not wanting to miss Burnett's answer.

"I don't know for sure." He looked around the room as if searching for someone. A second later, his gaze settled on Holiday and his expression softened.

"But," Burnett continued, "I don't think they were here to hunt. If he or she were here to kill, he had a chance at easy prey and didn't take it." His gaze shifted to Kylie, making it clear, at least to Kylie, that she was the "easy prey."

Easy prey. Prey maybe, but *easy*? That annoyed Kylie more than she wanted to admit. Okay, sure, she wasn't exactly Superwoman, but she'd held her own fighting the Blood Brothers that night at the wildlife park. Granted, she'd had some help from Daniel, but nevertheless, she'd kicked ass right alongside everyone else. Didn't she get any credit for that?

Burnett cleared his throat. "Chances are it was just someone curious about the camp."

Kylie recalled how threatened she'd felt those few minutes back in the woods when she'd felt the vampire's presence. It had felt like more than just curiosity. It felt menacing. If Derek hadn't shown up, Kylie didn't know what

would have happened, but she suspected it wouldn't have been good.

“Or it could be the gang just wanting to let us know they haven't run scared. It could have also have been just a friend or relative looking for someone, and they didn't want to go through our visitor check. And if any of you have a vampire friend who might try this, please let it be known loud and clear that entering this camp without getting a visitor's pass is considered a serious offense. If I find them, I'll treat them like a hostile. And that goes for all species, even humans.”

Kylie hoped Della was listening. Personally, Kylie didn't care too much for Chan, but she knew Della did, and for her sake, Kylie would hate for something to happen to him.

Burnett's gaze grew cold with his warning before he continued. “While I don't see this as an out-and-out threat, neither do I think we should totally let our guards down. The Blood Brothers gang was stupid enough to try something once. They might be stupid enough to try again.”

“I still don't understand what it is they have against us,” one of Miranda's witch buddies said.

“I'll take that question,” Holiday said, and made her way up front. “If you'll notice, we have more vampires here than any other species. The reason is clear. The virus can be passed down so many generations and therefore parents of a newly turned vampire may not even be aware that supernaturals exist. This makes living at home extremely difficult, which leads many of them to joining the gangs. But since the camp opened, we've saved more than four hundred newly turned vampires from following that dark path. We've obviously cut into their membership immensely. They see Shadow Falls as standing between them and their gangs' growth potential.”

She paused. “Any other questions?” When no one spoke up, Holiday added, “Now, it's almost two in the morning, so why don't you all go back to your cabins and try to get some rest? But remember what Burnett said. Don't let your guard down.”

As the crowd started to leave, Kylie went to join Miranda, who stood by herself in a corner and played a video game on her phone. When she saw Kylie, she cocked her head to the side and smirked. Which reminded Kylie of

a cute but pissed-off puppy.

“Oh, so when everyone else abandons you, now you want to be around me,” Miranda said.

Kylie frowned. “I hurt Della’s feelings and I just needed to apologize.” *And I couldn’t do it with you two verbally scratching each other’s eyes out.*

“But you don’t care if you hurt my feelings,” Miranda said. “It’s good to know where I rate.”

“You don’t believe that,” Kylie said.

“I don’t?” She shook her head, her multicolored hair—pink, black, and green—shimmering around her shoulders. “Is this the way it’s going to be from here on out? Because you’re both vampire, you don’t want me around.”

“No. It’s not like that. And ... we don’t know if I’m vampire.”

“You liked the taste of blood.”

“That doesn’t make me a vampire.” Frustration built in Kylie’s chest. But when she met Miranda’s eyes and saw the insecurity lingering in her friend’s eyes, Kylie stopped thinking about her own fears. “And for the record, I’m sorry I hurt your feelings. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“And for the record, neither did I,” Della added, joining them in the corner.

“Wow,” Miranda looked at Della. “That’s almost an apology. And to a dyslexic witch.”

“Don’t push it,” Della said.

“Fine.” A smile lit up Miranda’s eyes. “Let’s make a pact that no matter what Kylie ends up being, no matter what happens, we’ll always stick together.”

Della snorted. “What planet have you been on? We already made that pact.”

They started moving toward the door but stopped when Holiday called out Kylie’s name.

“Can I see you a minute?” the camp leader asked.

* * *

Della and Miranda said they’d wait outside. Kylie walked over to Holiday.

“I know you want to talk about what happened tonight, but I’d like to get my talk with Burnett out of the way first. Is it okay if I stop by your cabin and we can chat in your room?”

Kylie remembered Holiday’s comment about it being late. “If you’d like to wait and talk to me in the morning, we...”

“No.” Holiday’s brow wrinkled. “Don’t you want to talk about this tonight?”

Kylie stopped trying to be polite. “Yeah, I would like to talk.”

Holiday gave her a quick hug. “It’s going to be okay.”

While Kylie realized she wasn’t as scared as she was earlier about the whole vampire possibility, there was still a whole heck of a lot of ambivalence bouncing around her insides. “I know.” She smiled and hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

* * *

When Kylie got back outside, everyone had disappeared except Miranda and Della, who sat in the big white rocking chairs on the office cabin’s porch.

“What did she want?” Miranda asked.

“To tell me she’s going to drop by the cabin in a few minutes to talk.”

“To talk about what?” Della asked.

“Stuff.” She didn’t want to open up the whole vampire thing for another discussion with Della.

Miranda hopped up from her chair. “You guys ready?”

They walked down the trail to their cabin. Between the stars and moon, it wasn’t too dark. The night sang out its song, of which Kylie was more than grateful. It was when the night music stopped that Kylie worried.

“I got kissed tonight,” Miranda blurted out.

“Wow,” Kylie said. “Perry finally made a move, huh?”

“About time that guy grew a pair of balls.” Della giggled.

“It wasn’t Perry.” Miranda kicked at the dirt-worn path.

“Not Perry?” Kylie grabbed Miranda by the elbow. “Who was it?”

“Yeah, who was it?” Della studied Miranda really hard. “If you say it’s Steve, I’m kicking your little witch’s ass. You know I have a thing for him.”

“It wasn’t your shape-shifter Steve.” Miranda frowned. “It was Kevin.”

Kylie’s mouth dropped open. “Not Kevin, Perry’s roommate and good friend? Please tell me it wasn’t *that* Kevin.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.” Miranda dropped her face in her hands. “What am I going to do?” She peered at them through her fingers.

“This is not good,” Kylie said.

Miranda still stared at them through the mask of fingers. “I didn’t mean for it to happen.” She dropped her hands. “I ... I was coming back to the cabin thinking you might be here and I ran into Kevin. I was worried about you. We started walking together and talking and then ... then, he just kissed me and...”

“And what?” Della asked.

“And I didn’t stop him.”

“But was it yummy?” Della asked.

“Sort of. A little bit. I don’t know. Why do I feel so guilty?”

Kylie stared at Miranda. “Because you’ve been acting like you like Perry.”

“But Perry’s not acting like he likes me. Sure, he sits with me sometimes at lunch and dinner, but don’t you think if he liked me he’d have kissed me or something?”

“I think he’s just nervous,” Kylie said.

“I think he doesn’t have a pair of balls,” Della added.

“Stop it!” Miranda’s face grew red.

“Stop what?” Della asked.

“Stop talking about Perry’s genitalia. It’s crude and I don’t like it.”

Della grinned. “Ooh-la-la, somebody likes Perry enough to defend his boys.”

“So what if I like him. What’s it to you?” Miranda placed her hands on her hips.

“It’s nothing to me.” Della’s tone now sounded annoyed. “But it might be something to Kevin since you sucked face with him earlier tonight.”

“Stop it,” Kylie said. “I swear. Can you two not go fifteen minutes without getting pissy with each other?”

“She started it,” both Della and Miranda said at the same time.

Kylie looked from one girl to the other. “Both of you started it. And both of you need to stop it. I’m up to here with it.” Kylie put her hand on her forehead. “Seriously, I mean—”

“Shh.” Della put a finger over Kylie’s lips.

“What is it?” Miranda whispered.

“Do you not know what *shh* means?” Della asked.

Kylie pushed Della’s finger from her lips and listened. A silence filled the night. Not the total kind of silence as it was back in the woods, because in the distance, sounding almost like background music, she could hear the insects and birds, but close by, everything had grown quiet.

Kylie leaned in and whispered, “Is it another vampire?”

Chapter Five

Della raised her nose in the air. “Not vampire. It’s a wolf. It’s been following us for a few minutes. I got a whiff of it a few minutes ago, and I thought it was just passing by. But it’s not.” She pointed toward the woods.

“What’s a wolf doing this close to the camp?” Miranda asked.

Just like that, Kylie remembered the wolf from tonight. Derek hadn’t made a big deal of it, so neither had Kylie.

“You wanna see me kick some wolf butt?” Della’s eyes lit up as if the thought thrilled her.

Kylie remembered the wolf and its submissive posture. It hadn’t been threatening. “No, I don’t want to see you kick wolf butt.” She grabbed Della’s elbow.

“Why not?” Della asked. “It’s not a werewolf. It’s just an animal.”

“Yeah, a real live animal. It’s not hurting us,” Kylie said. “So why would you hurt it?”

“It’s following us. And that’s creepy,” Della answered.

Miranda leaned in. “I hate to say this but I agree with Della. It’s creepy.”

Kylie stared into the woods, and between the collage of trees she spotted the golden eyes staring back at her. A shiver ran up her spine. Creepy? Maybe, but it still hadn’t hurt anyone. Then Kylie couldn’t help but wonder if the wolf’s presence wasn’t some sort of message, or a piece of a puzzle. Or was it like Derek had said, just a hybrid animal wanting company?

“Oh man. Is that its eyes?” Miranda pointed into the woods.

“Yeah,” Della snapped. “And I don’t like it. I’m really in the mood to kick wolf butt.”

Realizing Della was serious, Kylie snatched up a small rock and slung it

in the direction of the wolf. “Go away,” she yelled.

The rustle of underbrush filled the silence as the animal shot off. Then she looked up at Miranda and Della. “There, it’s gone. Happy now?”

The sound of the insects started chiming again.

“Not really,” Della said. “It would have been more fun if I’d done it my way. I could have used a snack.”

“Tell me you wouldn’t have killed it,” Kylie insisted.

“Just a little bit.” Della grinned.

Kylie rolled her eyes and hoped like heck Della was joking.

“Is it really gone?” Miranda looked down the line of the woods.

“Yeah,” Della said, and they started walking again. But Kylie couldn’t help but look back and question just exactly why the wolf was here. Then a thought hit and it felt as if Kylie’s heart bounced around her ribs for a second. Could Lucas be trying to send her a message?

“Back to my problem,” Miranda said as they approached their cabin. “What am I going to do about Kevin?”

“That’s simple.” Della jumped up onto the cabin porch. She turned around and looked back at Miranda. “You have to make up your mind.” She held out her right palm. “Do you want Kevin?” She held out her left palm. “Or do you want Perry? It’s not really that hard. Kevin?” She lifted her right hand. “Or Perry.” She moved her left hand up higher.

“What if I choose Perry, but he never chooses me? Never makes a move. Never even kisses me. What if I end up being the oldest witch virgin alive?”

“Then you’ll know you screwed up.” Della shrugged.

“You’re not a lot of help.” Miranda looked at Kylie. “What do you think?”

“I think...” Kylie remembered kissing Derek tonight, wanting things to be different, but feeling as if something was always stopping her from taking that leap. Then she remembered feeling torn between Derek and Lucas.

“I think you shouldn’t come to me for relationship advice. I suck at it.” Kylie shot up the steps and went into the cabin.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie snuggled in her bed with her kitten, the kitten Lucas had given her. Outside her door, she heard Miranda and Della talking to Holiday. When the camp leader had knocked on the cabin door, Kylie pulled the blanket over her face and closed her eyes. She felt her kitten climb on top and paw at the blanket. It wasn't that she no longer wanted to talk to Holiday. It was more like she doubted this chat would help.

How many times did she have to hear Holiday say "I don't know, Kylie, this is something you'll have to figure out for yourself"? Why did Kylie think this talk would be any different? Wasn't that the definition of insanity? To do the same thing over and over again and expect different results?

"Kylie?" Holiday's voice penetrated the blanket as she tapped on the door.

Leaving the blanket over her head, Kylie called out, "Come in."

Kylie heard the door open into her tiny room, she heard it shut, and she heard Holiday come to a stop. "That wasn't a very enthusiastic welcome," the camp leader said.

"You want me to fake it?" Kylie moved the blanket off her head and sat up. Socks moved to snuggle in beside her.

Holiday smiled and sat down at the foot of Kylie's bed. "I know it's tough."

"You don't know the half of it." Kylie pulled her knees to her chest and watched Socks move over to the camp leader and rub his face against her arm. "I had a plan to figure it all out. All I needed to do was get Daniel to hang around long enough to tell me what he was, so I'd know what I am. He finally shows up tonight, but he doesn't have any answers." Kylie's throat tightened.

Holiday looked genuinely puzzled. "How could he not have the answers?"

"Because he was adopted. He didn't realize he wasn't human until he was eighteen. And I don't even know where to start to find the answers now."

"You'll figure it out," Holiday said, stroking Socks from his head to his tail. "I believe that with all my heart."

Kylie's eyes started to sting, which basically meant that the tears were on their way. "Does liking the taste of blood make me a vampire?"

Holiday hesitated.

“Wait. Let me guess. You don’t know, do you? And then you’re going to tell me that this is probably something I just need to find out for myself.” Kylie wiped the first of the tears from her eyes.

Holiday let go of a deep sigh, then reached over and took Kylie’s hand. “You’re only partially right. Right in the fact that I don’t know if you are vampire. But I think I can honestly say that liking the taste of blood doesn’t make you one. I know of humans who enjoy drinking blood and that doesn’t make them vampire. Even if some of them are freaks and they think it does.”

“So this whole thing could be insignificant.” Kylie pulled her hand away from Holiday.

“Yeah, it could be insignificant.” Holiday’s tone left a lot of doubt.

“But you don’t believe that.”

“I think it probably means something. I just don’t know if it means you’re vampire.”

“But what else could it mean?”

Holiday gazed at Kylie with a ton of sympathy shimmering in her green eyes. “I don’t know. But ... I do believe that if you keep searching, all the answers you *really* need will be answered.”

“*Really* need?” Kylie repeated Holiday’s words. “As if I don’t need *all* of the answers?”

Holiday raised her right eyebrow. “We never figure it all out, Kylie. Some things are meant to be a mystery.”

“Maybe some things,” Kylie said. “But not this. Not about what I am. I feel as if everything in my life is on hold until I have this answer.”

“Then keep searching,” Holiday said.

Kylie dropped her head on her knees and moaned. “See, I knew you would say that.” Socks came running over as if to check on her.

Holiday put her hand on top of Kylie’s head. “When one door closes, find another.”

Kylie gazed back up. “And what if there isn’t another door?”

“Then you try the window.”

“And if there’s not a window?” Kylie asked.

“Then you find a sledgehammer and make a window. Life isn’t supposed to be easy. Generally speaking, the harder something is the more rewarding the results will be.”

“But what if I fail?” Kylie asked. “What if someone is stabbed to death because I wasn’t smart enough to find the right answers? I’ve done what you said and asked specific questions and all the ghost ever does is repeat the warning. She just keeps saying, ‘This will happen to someone else,’ if I don’t stop it. She won’t tell me who, when, or where. How the heck am I supposed to find those answers?”

“How do you know someone will be stabbed?” Holiday asked.

“Because she’s bleeding profusely and it looks like her gown has been sliced and diced. Bullet holes are round.”

“You’ve seen a bullet hole?” Holiday asked.

“On television.”

Holiday bit back a grin. “Okay, I see where you might think it’s about a stabbing, and she could be trying to tell you that, but remember when Daniel first came to you, you thought he’d been wrongly accused of a war crime.”

Kylie slumped back on her pillow. “I suck at this.”

“At what?” Holiday asked. “Communicating with ghosts? I told you, they’re the ones who need a refresher course in getting their messages across.”

“Not just the ghosts,” Kylie said. “Everything. I suck at *not* being human.”

“Not true.” Holiday bumped Kylie with her shoulder. “You’ve done better than I ever thought you would.”

Kylie cut her eyes up to the camp leader. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

Holiday chuckled. “Yeah, it is.” She paused. “Hey, if it makes you feel any better, sometimes I’m pretty sure I suck at everything, too.”

Kylie stared at Holiday and saw a touch of regret flickering in the depth of her eyes. “Do any of those things involve Burnett?”

“That is a subject I think I’ll pass on right now.” Holiday let go of a deep breath that hinted at frustration and Kylie felt certain it was all about Burnett.

Kylie remembered telling Miranda she shouldn't ask her about relationships, but for some reason Kylie couldn't stop herself from speaking up now. "Della was right tonight when she said you seemed to care about him."

Holiday twisted her ponytail in a tight knot. "I care about world peace. I care about the mangled moral compasses of today's politicians. I care about all the innocent creatures pancaked on that stretch of road two miles past our camp. Point is, I care about a lot of things, and my caring isn't going to change a thing—especially not a relationship between myself and that stubborn, egotistical, macho vampire."

"You're attracted to him," Kylie said. "And don't try to deny it. You've even admitted that much to me."

"Okay, I won't deny that. He's got that whole hard body, vampire magnetism going for him. But when I was young, I had a crush on Big Bird. That wouldn't have worked out either."

"Big Bird. Really?" Kylie asked. "It was the Cookie Monster for me." They both laughed, and then Kylie added in a serious tone, "It could work if you wanted it bad enough."

"I haven't got that much patience."

"Hmm," Kylie said. "Some very smart person just told me that the harder something is the more rewarding the results will be."

Holiday studied Kylie. "Do you really not have enough worries of your own to chew on that you want to take on my issues, too?"

"Everyone else's seems easier than mine." Kylie smiled.

"Ever heard that saying about the grass always looks greener on the other side? Well, it's the same way with problems. We all have our hurdles to overcome. So why don't you solve yours and let me take care of mine?" Holiday brushed a lock of Kylie's hair behind her ear. "But thank you for caring."

Holiday smiled and Kylie once again felt the bond between them inch closer. Kylie had long wondered what it would be like to have an older sister. She couldn't help but think this was as close as she'd ever get to that type of relationship.

Holiday studied Kylie and her eyebrows twitched. Kylie knew Holiday was testing to see if Kylie had opened up the doors of her mind. The first day at camp, Kylie had learned that supernaturals had the ability to read brain patterns. Supernaturals also allowed other supernaturals to read deeper, to get a glimpse of who and what they were.

Not Kylie, of course. The only brain pattern she'd been able to see had been that of the ghost of her real dad. And while other supernaturals could see Kylie's brain pattern, she had yet to learn to open up to let anyone get a deeper glimpse.

"Are you doing the mental exercises I told you to do?" Holiday asked.

"Yes," Kylie said, and watched the camp leader's brow crease. At least twenty minutes a day, Kylie was supposed to meditate. But so far it hadn't helped, or at least if it had, no one had told her.

"Anything?" Kylie asked, not wanting to be the odd duck anymore.

"No. You're still tight as a drum. Any luck reading anyone?"

"No. Maybe I'm a supernatural retard."

Holiday rolled her eyes. "If anything I think it's just the opposite. I think your brain is holding off giving you your powers until it thinks you're capable and mature enough to deal with them."

"Are you calling me immature?" Kylie made her point and stuck out her tongue.

"Not immature." Holiday chuckled. "I think you're wiser than a lot of girls your age." Her expression went serious again. "But that doesn't mean that you haven't got a lot to learn." Holiday stood up. "Do you think you can sleep now?"

"Maybe," Kylie said, but deep down, she doubted it.

Holiday got to the door, then turned back. "Oh, about the ghost problems. If she doesn't give you anything to work with the next time she shows up, tell her you're going to shut her out until she offers something more concrete. Then do it. If she doesn't give you something different, change channels on her. Nothing ticks off a ghost more than being ignored. That usually makes them figure out a better approach."

"How do I change channels?" Kylie asked.

“Concentrate on something else. It has to be something you want to think about.” Holiday’s brow rose as if she’d just remembered something. “Like making out with Derek.”

Kylie saw something in the camp leader’s eyes and she knew. “Burnett told you.”

Holiday nodded. “And I’m not going to get involved with that, but just promise me you’re not doing anything you’ll regret.”

“Nothing happened,” Kylie said.

“This time.” Holiday let go of another of her deep sighs.

Kylie sat up a little straighter. “Derek would never try to pressure me into ... anything.”

Holiday’s chin lowered and her gaze zeroed in on Kylie with startling effect. “It’s not Derek I’m worried about, Kylie.”

Kylie looked down at her hands, feeling exposed. How did Holiday know how close Kylie was to giving in? Then Kylie remembered Holiday was just like Derek—she could read people’s emotions. Obviously, just being around Derek had Kylie putting out turned-on vibrations. Good grief, she might as well just put a sign around her neck that said I’M HORNY. And wasn’t that just lovely?

“Kylie ... it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. And I’m not asking you not to ... What I’m asking is that when you do make that decision, it’s a decision you make rationally and not one you just let happen. You understand the difference?”

Kylie nodded.

“Good.” Holiday walked out.

Even after the door closed, Kylie’s chest filled with even more emotion—embarrassment, uncertainty, and a touch of resentment. She didn’t want Holiday or anyone knowing her deepest emotions or desires.

Then she recalled the sister-like bond she’d found with Holiday, the one Kylie totally valued. She supposed there was a downside to every good bond. She supposed a real older sister, even an all-human one, would have felt compelled to talk to her about sex.

As Kylie dropped her head back on the pillow, she remembered how it

had felt to kiss Derek and wondered if she could ever make a rational decision where he was concerned. Especially when he had the ability to control her emotions.

Socks leapt up on the mattress, and Kylie was totally caught off guard when her thoughts went from kissing Derek to kissing Lucas.

Great. Just freaking great. She grabbed her pillow so tight that if it had a life, she'd killed it. Socks let out a pathetic meow and scurried back to the foot of the bed. Kylie moaned into the foam stuffing beneath the pillow case. She was already going to have a hard enough time sleeping and now she had the whole Derek versus Lucas thing to mull over.

Chapter Six

An hour later and she hadn't hit a lick of sleep yet. Well, not more than a few seconds. Every time she'd almost be there, she'd get this strange kind of sensation as if she was floating, or maybe flying, and the odd feeling would yank her from the light slumber. Once, right before she'd awoken, she'd spotted Lucas, as if she was about to dream of him.

He'd been surrounded with what looked like clouds, and a cool breeze stirred the foggy atmosphere. Just when she'd get a good look at him another cloud would float by, hiding him from her. He'd been wearing a button-down shirt, left unbuttoned, and that breeze would pick up the ends of the shirt, showing off his chest and flat stomach. That's when the cloudy atmosphere started moving faster and the sensation of flying grew stronger and yanked her awake.

Catching her breath, she sat up and pushed her hair from her face. Disappointment started to build, but she chased it away. She couldn't even think about the other "Lucas" dream—they in the water, only partially clothed—without blushing. She certainly didn't need to add a second dream to her couldn't-think-about list.

Rolling over, she punched her pillow as if the bag of foam could be the blame. Then sitting all the way up, she turned on her light and without even knowing what she planned to do, she pulled out the letter. The letter from Lucas. The one Holiday had given her weeks ago but she hadn't read.

Hi Kylie,

I've started writing this letter a dozen times and crumpled it up and tossed it away. Maybe it's because I don't know what to say, when there is so little I can say at this point and time. Maybe it's because I just shouldn't write you, because ... it's wrong. There are so many reasons why I

shouldn't think about you all the time, reasons that have nothing to do with you and everything to do with me. I know I'm not making sense and if I could, I would explain it to you. Hell, maybe if things turn out the way I hope, I can explain it to you. Not sure that would change anything, but damn if I don't hope.

Do you see why I keep tearing this letter up? It doesn't make sense, does it?

What should make sense is this. You are so special, Kylie. And I'm sorry I didn't say this to your face. I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away that I remembered you. But I was so shocked to see you that first day at camp. Shocked and thrilled. You knew things about me that I'd tried to keep hidden—hidden from everyone including myself. My parents did some very bad things, and while I was young and didn't know better, I participated in much of it. You have no idea how hard I've tried to forget about that time of my life.

Actually, you were the only thing I didn't want to forget about. The little blond neighbor girl who looked like an angel, and who was a mystery. What were you? Who were you? You both scared and intrigued me even back then. I didn't understand how you made me feel inside. I wanted to kill the boys who threw those rocks at you, I wanted to touch your hair to see if it was as soft as it looked. On full moons, I would watch you, hoping that you would turn. That you would end up being a were.

I think I just figured out why I have to write this letter. To tell you what you meant to me, just in case I never get to tell you that in person. Now if I can just put this in an envelope before I decide this is stupid and toss it in the trash.

Thinking of you.

Lucas

P.S. Dream of me.

His last line seemed to echo in her head. *Dream of me.* If only he knew ...

Then all her other emotions were chased away by the residual anger. Just exactly what did he mean, dream of him? Dream of him doing what? Playing leap frog with Fredericka?

Kylie stuffed the letter back into its envelope and dropped it back in the drawer. Did he think his letter was supposed to make her feel better? If she was so special, why had he run off with Fredericka? Why hadn't he even tried to explain that to Kylie in the letter? Why was he being so secretive?

Did he think she wouldn't know that Fredericka was with him? Did he think it wouldn't matter? Duh, he'd admitted having had sex with the girl. He admitted that she thought they were a couple. And now he took off with her. How could he think Kylie wouldn't be upset about that? Were all men just dogs? No, wait ... make that wolves?

No, she really needed to completely get over Lucas. Move on. And that was exactly what she intended to do. Cutting off her light, she dropped back on the pillow. Then she got a vision of Lucas and the she-wolf making out and she gave the pillow one last punch.

* * *

The next morning Kylie had to drag herself out of bed to get dressed and comb her hair. She'd tried to go back to sleep after waking up at dawn with the icy chill of a spirit's visit. It hadn't worked. Now, with only an hour or two of sleep, she really would have loved to have buried her head under the pillow and ignored the daily grind. Who needed a thing like breakfast or nutrition? She dropped her butt back down on the bed.

She'd almost fallen back asleep when a thought jarred her fully awake again. Was she not hungry because she'd drunk the blood last night? Was she already losing her appetite for human food?

"You coming?" Miranda called out.

"Yeah, I'm coming." She fell back on her pillow, stared at the ceiling, and tried to decipher how she felt about all this in the morning light. So okay, the idea of becoming a vampire didn't feel like the end of the world anymore, but it still felt like a major calamity. Plus, she needed to know. Had a right to know what she was.

"You coming in the next century?" Della yelled out about three minutes later.

Calling Della a name under her breath, she started to sit up.

"Right back at you," Della yelled in return.

Yelled. Della yelled it back. Kylie tilted her head and tuned into the noises around her to see if her hearing had become supercharged overnight. But nope, she couldn't hear any better than she had last night. Which could mean Holiday was right. Her liking blood didn't mean Kylie was vampire.

Or at least not yet.

Forcing herself to get up, she ran a hand through her hair and went to face her roommates and the day.

"Good morning to you, too," Miranda said when Kylie stepped out of her

room and didn't say a word.

Kylie shot her a mock smile. Then she did what she did every morning. She studied Miranda, twitched her eyebrows, and stared really hard at her campmate's forehead in hopes of seeing her pattern. But nothing. Just a tiny pimple near her hairline. Not that Kylie would inform Miranda of it. The girl would likely freak.

"You sure are perky this morning," Della said, joining them from her room.

"Didn't sleep well," Kylie said.

"Me, either," Miranda chimed in, and sighed pathetically. "What am I going to do if Perry finds out that Kevin kissed me?"

Della chuckled. "Run and hide before he turns into a fire-breathing dragon and scorches your ass."

"I'm serious," Miranda snapped back.

"And you think I'm not?"

Miranda glared at her.

Della shrugged as if conceding and started for the door. "First, you need to decide what you want to do."

"What do you mean?" Miranda asked as they walked out of the cabin. Then while waiting to hear Della answer, Miranda turned around and waved her hand up and then down at the door, putting a protective charm in place.

Miranda had started doing it last week, saying she felt an uninvited presence trying to come in. Part of Kylie wondered if it were the ghosts that Miranda wanted to keep out. Not that it was working. Every morning at the first sign of dawn, Kylie was awakened by the cold.

"I mean," Della answered, "are you going to start liking Kevin, or are you planning to hang in there with the shape-shifter in hopes that Perry will..."

"Don't say it. Leave his testicles out of your dialogue." Miranda pointed a finger at Della.

Della jumped the rest of the way off the steps then looked back up at Miranda with mock innocence. "I wasn't going to mention his testicles."

From the grin on Della's face, Kylie knew the vampire was lying. Nevertheless, she had a good point.

“She’s right.” Kylie put in her two cents’ worth. “You need to make a decision.”

Miranda frowned and pulled back her hair. They walked a few minutes without talking. Miranda seemed to be contemplating something.

“But I don’t have to make it like ... right now,” Miranda said. “Do I? I mean, there’s a chance that Kevin will just forget it happened. It wasn’t really even that good of a kiss.”

“Hey, Miranda.” The voice came from about fifty feet behind them.

All three girls turned around and confronted the mediocre kisser moving down the walking path.

“Fat chance that he forgot,” Della said and sniffed the air. “You don’t even want to know about his hormones right now. The guy’s got it bad for you.”

“Really?” Miranda asked. “I thought you said you couldn’t read the hormones and pheromones of a shape-shifter? When Perry was a bird, you said—”

“I said I didn’t know what horny birds smelled like. But in their natural states, shape-shifters pollute the air with their lust just like everyone else does.” She waved a hand in front of her face.

Miranda looked from Della to Kevin, who was closing in on them.

“Hi.” He stopped right in front of the three of them. Kylie had never really noticed Kevin before, but she supposed he was kind of hot in his own way. Not anywhere near Derek’s status, but he had some boy charm. And if you asked Kylie, he was even cuter than Perry, not that Kylie disliked Perry. The shape-shifter had sort of grown on Kylie these last few weeks.

“Did you sleep well?” Kevin asked Miranda, and dropped his hands inside the pocket of his khaki shorts. Kylie noted the navy T-shirt he wore hung a bit loose on his medium-size frame. His hair, a brownish blond, hung a little on the long side. He grinned, his blue-eyed gaze zeroing in on Miranda with obvious romantic interest.

“Yeah,” Miranda answered, which was a lie, and Kylie noted Della rolling her eyes.

“I thought maybe we could walk together to breakfast,” Kevin said.

“Okay. I guess.”

Miranda looked to Kylie as if to ask if she thought her answer had been a mistake.

Kylie didn't know what to think, so she just smiled nonchalantly. No doubt, if Perry found out Miranda and Kevin were hooking up, he would be hurt. While Kylie wasn't afraid of Perry, a lot of other campers feared his powers. So hurting Perry could be a bad thing. But then Kylie saw the blush rise in Miranda cheeks and she also noticed how the girl stood a little straighter. Right or wrong, Kevin's interest in her was doing wonders for her friend's confidence.

When Miranda and Kevin took off ahead, Kylie and Della hung back. They stood there without talking until Miranda and Kevin took the turn in the trail that offered them some privacy.

“Whatcha think?” Kylie asked Della as they both started walking at a slow pace so as not to catch up with the two ahead of them.

Della rolled her eyes. “I think sooner or later some serious shit is going to hit the fan.”

“Yeah, but did you see how her eyes lit up?” Kylie asked. “Everyone wants to think a guy likes her. Maybe Perry will see it and realize he needs to make a move.”

“That's when the shit will hit the fan. You do not play with a shape-shifter's emotions, especially not one as powerful as he is. I'm telling you, the fact that Perry didn't turn himself into a wild boar and gore your ass the night you bobbed his ear is a miracle. It was the first thing Chan explained about the supernatural world to me. Beware of shape-shifters, they are one badass species.”

Della tilted her head to the side as if listening. “Oh, shit. Make that sooner.”

“What?” Kylie asked, not that Della answered.

Della had disappeared. Kylie didn't understand until she heard Miranda scream and some serious animal roaring punctuated the morning air.

Running with everything she had, which was amazingly fast compared to the speed she could run a month ago, Kylie got to the V in the trail just in

time to see two huge black bears swinging claws at one another.

Della was holding Miranda, who fought to get away, as if she wanted to break up the fighting animals. It took Kylie about half a second to realize that these weren't your average giant bears. Nope. They had to be Perry and Kevin.

When the larger bear raked its claw across the other bear's shoulder and blood squirted onto the dirt path, Kylie screamed out, "Stop it!"

She would have gotten more attention from a brick wall. The two angry animals continued to swing at each other. Suddenly, a few sparkles filled the air, and one bear transformed into a lion, a lion about the size of a minivan. Its roar rang so loud, it hurt Kylie's ears. Within a few more seconds, the other bear transformed into a lion—only larger. The sound of clashing teeth could be heard between the piercing roars, and more blood moistened the dry earth beneath their paws.

Kylie didn't know if the damage the two shape-shifters did to each other was permanent or if when they transformed they came back in one piece. When one lion grabbed the other by the throat, Kylie realized she couldn't just stand by and watch these two possibly kill each other. Not thinking about the consequences, she flung herself into the mix, grabbed the larger lion by its mane, and yanked as hard as she could.

"Don't do that," Della yelled out, and while Kylie couldn't see her, she suspected Della was talking to her. And just when Kylie actually considered listening to Della's advice, the huge cat stood up on his back paws, bringing Kylie up with him. With her two fists knotted in the orange hair of the lion's mane, Kylie's feet swung in the air. The beast opened its mouth, blood dripped from his teeth, and it roared with fury unlike anything Kylie had ever heard. The feline's angry eyes cut back at Kylie. She saw the eyes turn from a deep gold to purple. And somehow she knew this was Perry.

"Put me down and stop fighting!" she yelled.

Right then the other lion rammed Perry in the side. The hit jolted Perry back and Kylie almost lost her hold on the mane. She looked to the ground a good six feet below. The fall would no doubt hurt, might break a bone, but she would survive. However, the fall would also put her right in the path of

Kevin's angry swipes and snapping jaws. Surviving that might be a little harder, so she tightened her hold on the mane and hung on for dear life.

Perry started shaking his head as if to rid himself of her presence. She swung from the right to the left like a not-so-loved stuffed animal in the hands of an angry child. Kylie's fingers started to slip. She glanced back down, trying to figure out an escape route, but her thoughts shifted when she saw Kevin's jaws sink into Perry's soft lion underbelly. Tightening her hold on the thick mane, she raised her foot and kicked the attacking lion right in the eye to stop him from killing Perry. Kevin let go, but when he retreated, Kylie saw blood dripping from his mouth.

Perry roared, from pain or fury Kylie wasn't sure. Maybe both.

Kylie heard Della yelling something. Next, Kylie felt her friend flying past as if in an attempt to rescue her, but each time she passed, Perry would shift direction, moving Kylie out of Della's reach.

"Enough!" Kylie screamed at the lions. "Both of you, stop it! Stop it or I'll get the death angels here."

The words no more than left her mouth when Kylie felt the temperature drop around her. The air in her throat felt icy. Her idle threat rang in her ears. But then she couldn't help but wonder ... Did she have the power to call forth the death angels or was this just Daniel or another ghost making their presence known at an inopportune time?

Or maybe an appropriate time.

Hadn't Daniel helped her in the past? Suddenly it didn't matter, because she saw bright orange sparkles appearing around Kevin. Perry drew back his right paw as if to attack Kevin during his morphing stage.

"Don't do it, Perry," Kylie demanded.

Perry roared as if complaining, but he came back down on his four paws. Kylie let go of his mane and dropped. Still a couple feet off the ground, she landed off balance on her feet and then fell flat on her butt. When she looked up, there were sparkles appearing around Perry and she saw his human form take shape. With clothes, thank goodness.

He looked down at her, his eyes glowing bright yellow, and fury still filled his expression. But he wasn't bleeding. "That was stupid of you. Never,

never ever get in the middle of a fight with shape-shifters. You could die.”

“You’re scolding me?” Kylie asked, flabbergasted that he had the nerve to reprimand her. “I wasn’t the one trying to maul a fellow campmate. And I was trying to protect you.” She leaned on one hip and rubbed her bruised backside.

“I didn’t need protecting.” His voice boomed and his gaze shot to Miranda.

Glancing back at Kevin, Kylie realized his changing process took longer than Perry’s. As soon as Kevin appeared, he stepped away from Perry.

“This isn’t over. We’ll finish this later,” Perry said to Kevin, his voice sounding more like a roar.

“Fine.” Kevin stared Perry right in the eyes, and Kylie almost thought they were going to start again, but Kevin turned and walked off.

Kylie realized it took nerve to turn your back on Perry when you’d just taken a chunk out of his belly. But somehow the fact that Kevin was the one to walk away, that he never once looked at Miranda, left Kylie with little doubt which of the two held more power.

* * *

When Kevin disappeared into the woods, Kylie waited for Perry to say something to Miranda. But no one spoke. The birds in the distance started back on their song.

“Are you okay?” Miranda asked.

Kylie looked up to assure Miranda that she was fine, but then she realized that Miranda wasn’t talking to her, but to Perry. Kylie shifted her gaze to him. He looked fine. Not a scratch on him. Which meant that when shape-shifters changed back into human form they healed from any injuries they’d received. And that meant Kylie had thrown herself in the middle of the fight and gotten a bruised ass for no good reason at all. She could have let them rip each other to shreds. She should have.

Just friggin’ great. Still sitting on the ground, propped up on one side of her hip, she gave her backside another rub and watched as Miranda moved closer to Perry.

“Why did you do that?” Miranda sounded half honored he’d fought for her and half pissed because, well, he’d fought for her. “Tell me.” She took another step toward the source of her anger.

“I felt like it,” Perry growled back. Indeed, his anger became apparent in the way his body changed the moment she stepped closer. His posture hardened as if he was unable to bend. His blond hair hung scattered over his sweaty brow. His eyes were blue for a second, then changed to bright green.

He still personified the fierce appearance of an angry lion—gone was the jokester, the guy who always had something funny or sarcastic to say. And for the first time, Kylie understood why everyone was a little frightened of him.

“You didn’t do it because of me?” Miranda asked, obviously not picking up on the fury he wore like an outer skin. “Because you were jealous?”

Perry didn’t answer Miranda. He just stared at her and asked his own question. “So it’s true?”

“What’s true?” Miranda said.

“You kissed him,” Perry said. “I didn’t believe him when he told me. I thought he was just trying to piss me off, but he wasn’t making it up, was he? You really did it. You kissed him.”

Miranda’s eyes grew a tad larger. “Yes.”

Silence hung in the hot morning air.

“No,” she blurted out, and shook her head, sending the streaks of pink, black, and green in her hair intermingling with each movement. “I didn’t kiss him. He kissed me.”

“But you kissed him back,” he accused.

Kylie held her breath. Della came to stand beside Kylie and extended her hand. Kylie accepted Della’s help and, once upright, she reached back and gave her rear end another rub.

“Answer me,” Perry demanded.

Kylie’s gaze shot back to Miranda and Perry. The tension radiating from the couple seemed to suck all the oxygen from the air and made it hard to look away.

“This could get nasty,” Della said.

Chapter Seven

Kylie crossed her fingers that this whole mess could somehow have a good ending to it—that the only thing nasty to come out of it would be her sore ass.

“Be honest,” Perry demanded.

Miranda hesitated before answering. “I ... I didn’t kiss him back.”

Della shifted her head closer to Kylie’s ear and whispered, “She’s lying.”

Perry took a step closer to Miranda and studied her as if trying to figure out if he believed her. “Why don’t I believe you?” He paused. “And even if you didn’t kiss him back, you didn’t stop him.”

Miranda hesitated and then her shoulders dropped as if in defeat, and Kylie knew Miranda had decided to come clean.

“No. I didn’t stop him. And yeah, maybe I did kiss him back just a little. But—”

“That’s all I need to know.” Raw and bitter pain filled Perry’s color-changing eyes and for a second all Kylie could think about was feeling that same hurt when she’d seen Trey with his new girlfriend plastered at his side. Then there was the pain of seeing Mandy kiss Derek. And don’t forget when she learned that Lucas had run off with Fredericka.

“That’s not fair,” Miranda said.

“Oh, it’s not fair, but that’s just too bad,” Perry said. “It could have been good between us.” He turned around and walked away.

He got about ten feet down the path when Miranda called out to him. “Aren’t you curious about why I didn’t stop him?”

Perry turned around and faced her. “I’m more curious as to why you think I should care.”

Miranda’s breath seemed to catch at Perry’s words. She took several steps

closer to him. “I didn’t stop Kevin because ... because I was tired of waiting for you to kiss me.”

“Really?” Perry’s feet ate up the few feet between him and Miranda. His right arm swept around her and pulled her against him. He didn’t pause or even hesitate. He kissed her—not just a light peck, either. It looked to Kylie like the good kind of kiss, the kind Derek had given her last night. The kind of kiss a girl could feel all the way to her toes. And from the way Miranda leaned into Perry, Kylie could guess that Miranda’s toes were feeling it all.

“Wow,” Kylie muttered, and grinned.

“Yeah, wow.” Della leaned in closer. “I think Perry just grew a pair.”

Kylie bit down on her lip to keep from laughing. “If this was a movie, there would be some music playing in the background.”

“I could sing,” Della chuckled.

“And ruin it,” Kylie teased back. “I’ve heard you singing in the shower.” Both grinning, they looked back at the kissing couple.

Perry dropped his arms and stepped back. The abruptness with which the kiss ended seemed wrong. And it wasn’t just Kylie who thought so. Miranda barely managed to catch herself.

Perry stared at Miranda, his expression not exactly one a person expected to see on a guy’s face who’d just kissed a girl silly. The anger and hurt Kylie had noted earlier in Perry’s eyes hadn’t been wiped away with the kiss. If anything, he looked even angrier now.

“That,” Perry said, his tone mirroring the emotion in his eyes. “That was just to show you that I would have been worth waiting for.”

“Would have?” Miranda asked, her voice shaky.

“Yeah, would have.” Perry turned and started walking away. But he stuck his right hand back and shot her the bird.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Figure it out,” he said, but didn’t look back.

Miranda swung back toward Kylie and Della. She put a hand to her lips and her eyes grew bright with moisture.

“Oh, crap.” Kylie’s heart clutched for her friend.

“Jerk,” Della called out at Perry.

Holiday came running around the trail. She stopped and looked at the three of them and the departing Perry. "What just happened?" Holiday asked.

"Nothing," Della said.

Holiday glanced from Della to a teary-eyed Miranda who stood frozen watching Perry leave. Then the camp leader looked back at Della. "I heard it."

"Okay ... almost nothing," Della said, and shrugged.

Holiday, as if reading Miranda's emotional havoc, walked over and wrapped an arm around Miranda. "Come on, let's go talk?"

* * *

"What are you doing?" Della asked, stumbling into the kitchen at two a.m.

Kylie looked up from the computer screen. "Using a sledgehammer to make another window."

Della took a step back. "Are you having one of those funky dreams again?"

Kylie smiled. "No. I'm looking to see how many Brightens there are in the Dallas area."

"How many what?" Della dropped down at the kitchen table.

"Brightens. My dad's name was Brighten and Mom told me that his parents were in Dallas when they met. Since Daniel can't tell me what I am, I've got to find it out myself."

"But I thought ... Didn't you tell me he was adopted?"

"Yeah." Kylie looked back at the screen and frowned. "Damn, there are over a hundred Brightens in the metropolitan Dallas area. Who knew that was such a popular name?"

"If he was adopted then how is this going to help you figure out what you are?" Della leaned over to peer at the screen.

"Maybe they will help me find his real parents."

"I'd love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. 'Hey, Grandma and Grandpa, I'm your granddaughter you never knew you had, but not really since I know you adopted my dad who died before I was born and I really don't care about you guys, I just want to know my real grandparents.'"

Kylie frowned at Della. "You are not helping me any."

"I'm just calling it like I see it."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't." Kylie closed her eyes and tried to hold on to the tiniest bit of hope she had. But deep down she was afraid Della was right. The chances of actually finding the Brightens were near impossible. Getting them to tell her about his birth parents when she shouldn't even know he was adopted, well, it was probably going to take more than a sledgehammer to open that window.

"Hey," Della said, and nudged her shoulder. "Print up those numbers and Miranda and I can help you call them."

Kylie looked back at Della. "You would do that?"

"You gave me blood," Della said.

"Yeah, I did," Kylie said, and looked back at the computer screen. Then mentally she picked back up the sledgehammer and hit the print button.

* * *

"Let me go! Let me go!"

Two mornings later, something startled Kylie awake. Confused as to why she struggled in her own bed, she snapped open her eyes. The steam of her own breath floated above her face in snake-like patterns. The frigid air in the room told the time. Dawn.

She pulled the covers up to her neck and closed her eyes. And *bam*. The dream she'd just lived came crashing down on her.

Let me go! Let me go!

She heard her own scream like an echo, as if it was just now bouncing back from the dark corners of her bedroom. Her heart raced, pounded against her chest bone like a trapped animal. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

She wadded fistfuls of blanket in her hands and mentally fought being pulled back into the nightmare. Her efforts were futile. The dream became her reality.

Cloth ties cut into her arms as someone attempted to tie her down. Blinking, she tried to focus, but her vision seemed impaired. Everything seemed impaired. Her head swam. She counted one, two, maybe three

smearred and blurry figures standing over her. She kicked her legs, but an overwhelming sluggishness hampered her strength.

She pulled at the restraints, but the figures looming above multiplied. Their hands caught her limbs faster than she could move them. The ties around her wrists grew tighter. Unable to move, she watched in horror as another blurred figure came at her with a knife.

“No!” Her own scream jarred her from the nightmare. Snapping her eyes open, she clutched her fist and stared at the ceiling, afraid if she even blinked she’d be taken back.

“Just a dream. Just a dream.” She repeated the words over and over. Rolling to her side, she tried to stand, but the dizziness from the dream now plagued her body for real. She fell back to the bed.

“Just a dream. Just a dream.” She counted her breaths in and out, and only when the room’s temperature dropped did she try to get up again. The wave of dizziness had passed, but the panic hung on. Her mind flashed through the frightening images, sending volts of fear coursing through her veins. Then she realized with horror that in the dream she had been the woman. She had been the ghost.

Grabbing her jeans, she slipped them on under her nightshirt. Not bothering to put on shoes or a bra, she scurried out of her room and out of her cabin. Her heart hadn’t stopped racing when she came to the foot of the cabin steps. In spite of the hour, darkness hung like a cloak over the sky, only a glimmer of light clawing at the eastern horizon.

She started down the trail that led to Holiday’s cabin, but remembered Holiday saying that she went to the office at first light.

Swinging around, Kylie ran down the path to the office. The ease and speed with which she moved should have been comforting, but it just served as a reminder that everything in her life was changing. And she didn’t have a clue where those changes would lead her.

She’d gotten halfway to the office when her lungs finally demanded more oxygen. Drawing in deep breaths, she bent her knees slightly and rested her palms on her lower thighs. Staring down at her bare feet, she fought to keep images of the dreams from playing like a bad video in her head.

“Just a dream,” she whispered into the dark silence.

And that’s when she noticed it. The stillness. The dark dead silence.

The kind of silence that meant she wasn’t alone. The lack of cold told her this wasn’t a spirit. She remembered the vampire who’d dared to enter the camp. The one Burnett insisted could have fed on her if that had been its intent. Was it back to finish the job?

She stood erect. Her first instinct was to run.

Her second was to scream.

Her third instinct, not nearly as strong as the first two, was to pull up her big girl panties and face whoever—or whatever—it was.

Before she actually fully embraced option number three, the world around her came back to life. Finding comfort in the frogs, an occasional bird, and the chirp of insects, she pushed back the panic from her chest. No doubt the last few days had made her a bit suspicious. A second of silence in dawn’s symphony didn’t mean she was being followed.

Or at least not by a vampire. For some reason she remembered ... She cut her eyes to the edge of the path, where the trees loomed as if guarding the woods. No golden wolf eyes peered out at her from the darkness. No creatures of the night either. Obviously, the only thing following her right now was her own paranoia. Brought on stronger by the nightmare.

Letting go of another deep gulp of held-in oxygen, she started back down the path. She got a few more feet when she heard it. Before she could react, the whish of early morning air blasted past her.

Prepared to fight for her life, thinking only of rogue vampires, determined to prove she was not easy prey, she raised her arms.

Then she saw it.

Not a vampire.

The huge bird—a cross between a large blue heron and something that might have existed in prehistoric ages—parked its feathered ass in front of her. It flapped wings that had a seven- or eight-foot span. Shocked, and still not quite believing her eyes, Kylie gasped. The thing towered over her by a good two feet. Unsure what to do, she took one step back. The sparkles started forming immediately.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she felt stupid for not guessing right away. “That wasn’t funny,” she hissed when Perry appeared.

“What wasn’t funny?” he asked, in a serious tone that she’d seldom heard leave Perry’s lips.

“You scared the crap out of me, that’s what. I’m really sick and tired of —”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I saw you running. I wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

She didn’t know if it was his tone or his expression, but she knew he’d told the truth. He hadn’t been pulling a joke. He’d been concerned.

“Everything’s fine.” Yet when she got a better look into his eyes, she realized nothing was fine.

Perry, the practical jokester, was in a world of pain. Almost a mirror reflection of the pain she saw in Miranda’s eyes. And it was so stupid. If they both cared so much why didn’t they just move past the whole Kevin thing?

“She really likes you, Perry,” Kylie said before she could stop herself.

“She likes Kevin, too.”

“She doesn’t like Kevin. He kissed her, that’s all. And you two weren’t even going out.”

“She knew I liked her,” he said. “I sat with her almost every day at lunch.”

“Yeah, but a boyfriend is supposed to do more than just sit with you at lunch.”

“I know that,” he smarted back. “And I would have ... I was just waiting for the right time.”

“And why isn’t now the right time?”

“It’s too late,” he said.

She shook her head. “You’re really going to let a kiss come between you and someone you really care about? Are you that—”

“Stubborn?” he finished. “Yeah, it’s part of being a shape-shifter. Which, obviously, you know nothing about because you almost got yourself killed.”

“But if you care about her then—”

“Cared,” he said. “I cared about her. Miranda’s history.” Little flickers of

light started forming around him. “Oh,” he said. “Thanks for trying to protect me the other morning. But seriously, don’t ever do it again.” The giant bird reappeared. The flap of its wings moving past sent Kylie’s hair up in the air and at the same time a deep ache fluttered to the pit of her stomach.

* * *

The golden hue of light filling the office window met Kylie as she took that last turn. She stopped and let herself just stare at the window, remembering the somber look in Perry’s eyes and wishing she could change that.

Moving up the steps, she opened the door and called out Holiday’s name so she wouldn’t be worried about who visited at this ungodly hour.

“In my office,” Holiday called back, and Kylie moved into the room.

Holiday motioned for Kylie to sit down. Dropping into the chair, Kylie slumped back in the seat.

“Are you okay?” Holiday asked, sorting through a stack of mail.

Kylie sighed. “Miranda’s still depressed. I just ran into Perry, and I tried to talk to him but he’s not listening. Not that he doesn’t look as miserable as Miranda. He’s not even making any jokes. Della is PMSing and therefore is losing her patience with Miranda because all Miranda wants to do is eat ice cream and whimper over losing Perry.”

Kylie stopped to breathe for one second, then continued. She was babbling, but she couldn’t stop. “Not that it’s really Miranda or the PMS making Della so difficult. It’s the idea of going home for parents weekend and spending it with her family. But Miranda, even when she’s not depressed, has never liked dealing with Della’s mood swings. So now, Della and Miranda are threatening to rip each other’s hearts out and feed them to my cat. Actually, I think Della wanted Miranda’s liver, it was Miranda who’s going for Della’s heart. So to answer your question ... No, nothing is okay.”

Holiday looked up from the mail and offered one word. “Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?” Kylie had a vague flashback of being in Dr. Day’s office and being psychoanalyzed.

Holiday’s gaze shifted back to the mail. “Several things actually.” She set a piece of mail apart from the others before looking up again. “But let’s start

with the fact that I didn't ask about Miranda, or Della, or Perry. I asked how *you* were doing."

"So I'm a freak because I care about my friends?" Kylie asked, suddenly feeling annoyed. And yeah, she was about to start her period, too, so it might be a bit of PMS. Or it could just be the hundred other problems sitting on her shoulders like an unhappy gorilla.

"I didn't mean to imply you were a freak." Holiday's soft, caring tone aggravated Kylie more than the psychoanalytical one. Probably because it made Kylie feel less like a freak and more like a bitch.

Holiday dropped her chin in her hands, a gesture so Holiday-like, that in Kylie's mind the camp leader's chin was permanently in her hand. "I was implying that I think you hide your own problems from yourself by concentrating on the problems of everyone else."

Kylie recalled that her reasons for her early morning jaunt to the office were not exactly about Perry or Miranda. So okay, maybe Holiday had a point. Not that Kylie really felt up to admitting it right now.

"Then again, maybe I'm just a nice person." Kylie sank deeper in the chair and regretted getting pissy. None of Kylie's problems could be blamed on Holiday, and if anything, Holiday and their growing relationship was one of the few things that felt right in Kylie's life right now. For that reason, she offered an apologetic smile at the end of the sentence.

"Nice? Oh, I don't doubt that." Holiday grinned. "So, let's try this one more time. How are *you* doing, Kylie?"

Kylie sat up and propped both her elbows on the desk. "How much time do you have?"

"However much time you need." Holiday let a few silent seconds pass and then asked, "What's going on with you and Derek?"

"Nothing. Why?" Kylie asked.

Holiday arched a suspicious brow. "I saw you skip out of the dining hall yesterday when he walked in, and the same thing happened at dinner."

"I just didn't want to talk to him." It was the truth. Part of it. Neither did she want anyone with the ability to read her emotions or smell her hormones to know how turned on she got by just looking at him. Until she could get her

wayward thoughts in check, best not to be close to him in a crowd. Or alone, she admitted. And yeah, sooner or later she was going to have to explain that to Derek. Later being her first choice.

“So something is wrong?” Holiday asked.

Kylie crossed her arms over her chest. “Am I imagining things, or didn’t you just tell me to be careful not to...” She didn’t want to say it out loud. “You warned me to be careful around him? And now that I’m being careful, you act as if that’s wrong. What is it you want me to do?”

Holiday pursed her lips to the side in thought. “Careful, yes. But I didn’t mean for you to avoid him.”

“You might not have meant that, but right now this is my way of being careful. My way of dealing with it.”

Holiday held up her hand. “Fine. You deal with it your way.” She paused, then let go of another deep sigh that told Kylie she didn’t approve. “Have you spoken with your stepdad yet?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “Did my mom call you again? I swear. I don’t get why she thinks it’s such a great idea that I forgive the man, when she doesn’t have plans to forgive him anytime in the next century.”

Holiday’s mouth did another one of those twists to the right as if she was considering the words before she released them. “He’s divorcing your mom, not you.”

Yeah, Kylie’s mom had sort of said the same thing, but Kylie didn’t buy it. “It sure as heck doesn’t feel that way.” She could still remember begging him to let her go live with him. But no, he hadn’t wanted her, and why? She looked up at Holiday again. “Did my mom also tell you he’s screwing a girl who’s only a couple years older than I am?”

“No,” Holiday said. “But you told me. The day we went for ice cream.” Sympathy filled her eyes. “Look, Kylie, I’m not saying he hasn’t done something wrong. But this still isn’t about you and him. If I let the relationship between my father and mother affect how I felt about them, I’d hate them both.”

“I’m sorry, but I totally disagree. It might not be about him and me, but what he’s done affected me,” Kylie said. “It affected me in so many ways.

For example, my mom called me yesterday and told me she's considering selling our house. The house I grew up in, the place I've called home all my life."

Holiday leaned back in her chair. "That's tough. I can still remember how upset I got when my mom sold our house. But..."

"No buts," Kylie said. "My mom shouldn't push me to do something that she can't even do. She can't forgive him. Maybe I can't forgive him, either. So just tell her *that* the next time she calls. Or maybe I'll tell her myself."

Holiday frowned. "It wasn't your mom who called. It was your stepdad. And he said he's—"

"Oh, crap. He called you?" Kylie remembered how embarrassing it had been when her dad had hit on Holiday, gawking at her as if she was candy and he had a sweet tooth. "Please don't tell me he asked you out or anything?"

"No. He sounded genuinely worried. He said he keeps e-mailing and calling you but you don't answer."

"If he was so worried he could just show up for parents day. But does he do that? No. And you know why? I'll bet it's because his girlfriend doesn't want him to come. Her parents probably won't give her permission to leave town."

"Or maybe he doesn't show up because he thinks you don't want to see him." Holiday shook her head. "I just think ... maybe you should try talking to him." She bit down on her lip and then her mouth tightened to the right again. "Oh, hell. I've already tossed my two cents in. I might as well go for the quarter. I also think that you are using avoidance as a way of dealing with everything that's going wrong in your life right now. Your dad and now Derek. And frankly, I should add that avoidance is a poor excuse for a coping method. I know because I've tried it a time or two."

"Yeah," Kylie said, back to feeling pretty bitchy again, yet unable to stop. "But until another coping method magically appears in my bag of tricks, this one is going to have to do." She almost wanted to defend herself and tell Holiday that she wasn't avoiding everything. She'd spent the last day and a half calling Dallas area Brightens, trying to find her dad's adoptive parents,

so she might find his real parents, so she might find out what she was.

Holiday frowned. "We all have to learn lessons the hard way, don't we?"

"I guess so," Kylie said, not sure it could get any harder. "I'm just not ready to deal with my dad ... stepdad ... or with what I'm feeling about Derek. Is it too much to ask to just be given a reprieve?"

"No, it isn't too much to ask. But generally speaking, the longer you put off dealing with something, the harder it is to solve. Sometimes, you just have to face things head-on. My dad used to say that you should look trouble right in the face and spit in its eye."

"I never mastered the art of spitting," Kylie said.

Holiday smiled then glanced at the mail again. Sighing, she raised her gaze. "Do you want to avoid this as well?" She pushed a letter across the desk.

"What?" Kylie stared at the envelope and saw her name scribbled in a familiar script.

Lucas's script. He had written her another letter.

Chapter Eight

A part of Kylie wanted to push the letter back across the desk. Hadn't she promised to get over him? She knew Holiday wouldn't force her to take it. Didn't Kylie have enough on her plate right now? Why willingly take on more crap?

Holiday pulled the letter back to her side of the desk.

Looking up at Holiday, Kylie expected to see some disapproval in the camp leader's eyes because, once again, Kylie wasn't so eager to confront her problems head-on. But all she saw in Holiday's expression was empathy.

"I'm not sure I want to read it," Kylie confessed.

"Why?" Holiday asked.

"He ran off with another girl."

"I don't think he thinks of Fredericka as—"

"But she thinks of him like that. And if she throws herself at him ... well, he's a guy."

"I know," Holiday said. "However, not all guys—"

"But some are. And telling the difference is like math—it's hard. You think you understand it and then you get the answer wrong. And don't even try to disagree because it's the reason you won't give Burnett a shot."

Holiday dropped her chin back into her palm and didn't argue with Kylie's assessment. After several beats of silence, she said, "I could just stick it back in a drawer and if you decide you want to read it later, you can."

Yes, Holiday could do that, but could Kylie? Could she really walk out of here and not take that letter with her? Could she pretend that she didn't care about Lucas? That she hadn't worried about him since he'd left—worried about what it was that he couldn't tell her, and worried that some of what he

couldn't tell her involved Fredericka?

Oh, and if she still cared about Lucas, what did she really feel about Derek? Or was her feeling about Derek even her own feeling, or was he messing with her emotions?

Oh, hell. Could her life get any more messed up?

Might as well take the letter and let the chips fall where they may.

Kylie reached out and pulled the letter out from under Holiday's palm. After staring at it for a few seconds, Kylie folded it and stuffed it in the pocket of her jeans. Later, alone, when she felt like spitting that problem in the eye, she'd deal with it.

When she looked up, Holiday nodded as if somehow telling Kylie she'd done the right thing. Not that Kylie was sure about that. Very little in life felt like a sure thing right now.

The room went back to the awkward kind of silence and Holiday shifted to another subject that was just as disturbing. "Has the ghost given you anything new?"

"New, yes. Helpful, no." Kylie frowned and wished she could avoid this problem like she did her stepdad and Derek. But the violence and the threat issued by the ghost didn't leave Kylie any option. "I think she was tortured by her abductors."

"Ouch," Holiday said. "And you really think this happened, or do you think it's just her trying to communicate something to you?"

"I think it happened." Kylie bit down on her lip, her thoughts going to the warning that this would happen to someone she loved if she couldn't stop it. "It felt too real, sort of like the dream I had where Daniel got shot. I was her in the dream. And they were coming at me with weird knives. I felt drugged and when I tried to fight back they tied me down." Remembering the terror, Kylie felt her heart rate quicken. Panic once again started building in her chest.

Holiday reached over and touched Kylie's hand. Her touch sent calming warmth up Kylie's arm. The fear collecting in Kylie's heart ran away like scared mice. And just like that, the panic faded into something less overwhelming.

Kylie looked up at the camp leader. “Thanks, but that’s not going to fix anything. It’s like a Band-Aid on a bullet wound.”

“I know.” Holiday frowned. “But when all you have to offer someone is a comforting touch, you want to offer it.”

Kylie released a deep breath. “What’s going to happen if I don’t figure this out?”

Holiday’s hand, resting on Kylie’s wrist, grew warmer as if she sensed Kylie would need another shot of calm. “You accept that you did everything you could in your power to try to stop it and move on.”

The enormity of exactly what Holiday was saying, coupled with the responsibility that rested on Kylie’s shoulders, suddenly felt like too much. Kylie jerked her hand from under Holiday’s palm. “No. I couldn’t ... I couldn’t live with myself. I mean, if I understand this right, someone is going to die. Actually die and it’s not going to be an easy death, either.” All the problems in Kylie’s life started bouncing around her head like ping-pong balls. Tears filled her eyes. It still hurt to think about her grandmother’s funeral—she couldn’t lose someone else. “Failure isn’t an option.”

Kylie’s mind started racing, trying to figure out who she loved that could be in danger. Was it her mom? Was it someone from back home? Someone here at camp? It could even be Holiday. Oh lord, what if it was Lucas or Derek? She glanced at the door and fought the overwhelming desire to leave.

Holiday cleared her throat. “As much as we don’t ever want to fail, our gift isn’t a guarantee that we can help everyone. Sometimes we have to accept that we can’t fix things.”

Kylie shook her head. “You might be able to accept that, but I can’t.” She bit down on her lip until it hurt. “I should have refused this gift. I can’t do it. I should have sent it back with a big note that said thanks, but hell no.” The knot grew larger in her throat, crowding out her tonsils. “Is it too late to refuse it now?”

“I’m afraid so,” Holiday answered. “You opened yourself up when—”

Kylie jumped up so fast that the wooden chair shot out from beneath her and hit the floor, filling the small office with a loud crack.

“Kylie, wait.” Holiday’s voice chased Kylie as she hurried out the door,

but she didn't pay it any heed. Damn it. She had to figure out a way to decipher the ghost's message. Had to, because if not, someone she loved would die and Kylie couldn't live with herself if that happened.

* * *

With her throat still tight with emotion, Kylie moved up the steps of her cabin right about the time the sun finally crawled out of the corner of the eastern sky. The golden spray of light hit her back and cast her elongated shadow on the porch. As she took the next step, the sun must have risen higher because her shadow seemed to dance on the porch planks. Dancing shadows reminded her of ... the falls.

Kylie's breath caught. She needed to go to the falls. As crazy as it seemed, it was as if something was telling her that she'd find the answers there. She let the idea sink into her tired brain. And like the sun against her back, the first glimmer of hope started to grow.

Taking in a big gulp of air through her nose, she suddenly felt refreshed, energized.

She could do this. She just didn't want to do it alone. Her gaze returned to the cabin's front door. Why should she have to do it alone? She had friends. Ghost or no ghosts, they would help her if she asked.

Okay, sure, she'd asked them to go before and they'd turned her down flat, but this time was different. This time, she'd beg. They would do it, wouldn't they? There was only one way to find out.

She hurried through the front door, zipped past the ankle-chasing Socks, and yanked open Della's door. "I need you. Wake up." She watched Della raise her head and study her through sleepy, nocturnal eyes. Morning just wasn't Della's best time.

Next, Kylie rushed over to Miranda's door and slung it open. "Miranda. Wake up. I need you guys."

Miranda rose up on her elbow. Her eyes were puffy—crying puffy, as if she'd stayed awake half the night sobbing into her pillow—which, knowing Miranda, she probably had. Kylie's heart squeezed for her friend and she almost said, *Never mind*. But then Kylie batted back the desire to give in

because she really wanted both Miranda and Della with her. And maybe Della was right—it was time Miranda stopped moping and started moving past the pain.

“Please,” Kylie said before Miranda had a chance to whine.

* * *

Kylie went to the kitchen table to wait, but she felt too anxious to sit. So she paced around the kitchen, waiting for her two best friends to get up so she could commence her begging.

“This better be important,” Della said, and stumbled into the kitchen and dropped down in a chair. “Do you know what time it is? It’s not even six yet. This is when I get my best sleep.”

Miranda stepped out of her bedroom only seconds later, wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and bunny slippers. Kylie stared at Miranda’s slippers; the ears bounced with each step as the sleepy girl shuffled over to an empty chair. Once she settled in, she looked up. “What is it?” she muttered.

“We’re a team, right?” Kylie asked. “We’re there for each other. Isn’t that we’ve said?”

“Why is it that I think this is a setup?” Della dropped her head on the oak table, and her forehead thudded against the wood. If anyone else would have dropped her head that hard, it probably would have knocked her out, or at least left a goose egg or a knot. But not a vampire.

“Just tell us what it is.” Miranda folded her arms on the table and rested her chin on top of her wrist. Her multicolored hair feathered out onto the table.

Kylie glanced from Miranda to Della, still facedown on the table, and her heart picked up a notch. If they said no, it was going to sting.

Della must have heard the thumping of Kylie’s heart, because she raised her head and stared. “Spill it, ghost girl. How bad could it be?”

Swallowing, Kylie did it. Just spilled it. “I need you both to come with me to the falls. I just want—”

“Oh, hell no,” Della said.

“Not happening,” added Miranda at the same time, and sat up.

“But I have to go,” Kylie said.

“Then go.” Della waved her hand toward the door.

Kylie swallowed the knot down her throat. “I don’t want to go alone.”

“So you want us to sacrifice ourselves, too,” Della bit back.

“Nothing is going to happen,” Kylie insisted.

“Then why do we have to go?” Miranda asked, a frown marring her lips.

“Nothing bad is going to happen.” Kylie dropped into a chair, losing hope due to their attitude.

“Says who?” Della asked.

“Says me,” Kylie answered. “I just ... I don’t want to go alone.”

“Because you’re scared,” Della insisted. “And for a damn good reason. Don’t you know what death angels do?”

Kylie hesitated. “They are the ones who stand judgment of supernaturals.” She repeated what she had heard, but truth was, she didn’t completely understand death angels. How could she when no one really wanted to talk about them? Well, no one but Holiday, and most of what she would say was that she had never met one face-to-face.

“Yeah, they are the ones who stand judgment of us and sometimes they dish out the punishment, too,” Miranda said. “I knew a girl, Becca. She was ... toying around with spells on people who pissed her off. People who really didn’t deserve it. So maybe she was being bad, but damn, her spells were more an annoyance than anything else. Then two days later, she walked outside and her clothes caught fire. Poof, just like that, she went up in smoke. She’s disfigured now, scarred like crazy, and everyone says it was the death angels teaching her a lesson.”

“Or maybe it was someone she’d cast a spell on getting even with her,” Kylie said.

“They were all questioned by the witches council. Proven innocent.”

Kylie shook her head. “We don’t even know if death angels really exist. Chances are, they are just powerful ghosts,” Kylie said, repeating another thing Holiday had said. If Della and Miranda had heard even half of what Daniel had done by pulling her into his dreams, and pulling her out of her own body and into his so she could relive his death, well, they’d probably

think he was a death angel.

Della leaned her chair back on two legs. “If you don’t believe they exist, then why do you even want to go?”

“Because if there’s even the slightest chance that they exist, and are more powerful than regular ghosts, then they might be able to help me save someone I love.” She’d never explained any of this to Della or Miranda. How could she when the moment either of them heard the word *ghost* they freaked?

“Save who?” Della, balancing the chair on two legs, started looking around the room as if they had company.

“I don’t know. It could be you.” Kylie stared right into Della’s black eyes. “Or you.” She pointed at Miranda. “There’s a ghost who just keeps telling me someone I love is going to die. And it’s up to me—”

“I hope it’s not one of us,” Miranda said.

Della snorted. “Maybe it *is* one of us and we die because you take us and offer us up as a sacrifice to the death angels.”

“You know I wouldn’t do that.” Frustration buzzed around her gut even stronger than before. She tapped her left bare foot on the tile floor, trying to be patient, but her patience seemed to be in short supply lately.

Della shook her head. “I mean, it’s bad enough that we have to accept that you have ghosts popping in all the time, but to actually go looking for the death angels...” She dropped the chair down with a whack. “I don’t want to wind up with scars all over this face. Nope.”

Kylie glared from one friend to the other. “Okay, even if they exist, what have either of you two done that is so bad that ... that they would set you on fire?” She glanced at Miranda. “You aren’t casting spells on anyone.” She looked back to Della. “And you don’t—”

“You don’t know what I’ve done,” Della snapped, her eyes glowed brighter. “Hell, *I* don’t even know what I’ve done. There’s a time when you turn vampire that you lose it completely, and I lost it. I don’t know what happened for a whole two days. I don’t want to know. Which is why I don’t live in a glass house. Why I don’t waste a heck of a lot of time judging others. And why I don’t go to places where death angels are said to hang out.

Maybe you haven't ever sinned, but I'm not perfect."

Kylie heard the undercurrent of guilt in Della's voice. "I don't think you would have done anything that bad."

"I wouldn't bet on it." Miranda made a face. "Look how mean she's to me," Miranda mouthed off.

Della glared at Miranda. "Oh, please, I haven't ever been mean to you."

"Bull crappie," Miranda said. "That's all you've been to me these last few days. I'm hurting and all you've done is poke fun at me."

"Yeah, but I do it out of love. Hoping to make you see what a dumbass you're being. Grieving over a guy who gets his shorts in a wad just because one of his friends kissed you. You should be out kissing all his other friends just to show him that you don't care. Not whining—"

"I'm not a dumbass." Miranda held out her pinky finger.

"I told you never to point that damn pinky at me." Della jumped up and started screaming something about how all witches should be doomed to hell.

Kylie sat there, listening to them sling insults. Then frustrated and completely out of patience, she got up, collected her shoes by the door, and walked out. She stopped outside on the porch to put on her Reeboks.

Dropping her butt down on the porch, she slipped on her right shoe. Her toes felt cramped, just like her chest, and she loosened her laces before she tied them. Did Della or Miranda even realize she'd walked out? That's when she realized that frustration and impatience weren't the only emotions fighting for a spot in her chest. This hurt.

Didn't they realize how badly she needed them right now? Then taking her time to lace up her shoes, she hoped they'd have a change of heart.

That they'd decide their friendship meant enough to trust her on this.

Right shoe tied, Kylie slipped on the left and commenced the process. She could still hear them yelling at each other. They still hadn't realized she'd left. Or maybe they had and didn't care. That really hurt, too.

If either one of them had needed her, she'd have been there.

She stood, realized that she still wore her nightshirt over her jeans and was without a bra, but she didn't care. She jumped off the porch.

Taking off down the trail in a solid run, she wasn't even sure how to get

to the falls. But something in her gut said she'd find it. She'd do this. And she'd do it alone.

* * *

Kylie came to quick stop at the edge of the woods, unsure which way to go. She recalled hearing the falls at the rock where she and Derek had gone. She also recalled hearing it at the creek where the dinosaur tracks were. The falls had to be between the two, so she took off down the trail. She'd only moved a few feet beneath the thick umbrella of trees when the dusty dawn light faded to a foggy shade of purplish gray. She could feel the mist on her face.

The early morning heat chased away the night's coolness, forcing it to leave in the form of fog. But the cloudy haze clung to the trees and hung a few feet off the ground. Apprehension prickled the back of her neck. Believing she was slightly paranoid, she ignored the sensation and kept going. Going faster.

After about a quarter of a mile on the trail, she ventured off the cleared path, hoping the sound of the falls would call out to her as it had seemed to do before. She listened and she continued to sprint. No falls. Only the sound of the soles of her tennis shoes hitting the earth accompanied by the normal sounds of nature.

She kept moving between the trees, finding a path or making one as she went. The thorns in the thick brush snagged on to her jeans, as if trying to stop her from going any farther. She didn't slow down. Occasionally, a low-hanging branch would seemingly just appear in her way, but she either ducked in time or brushed it back with her arms.

She recalled trying to keep up with Della through a patch of woods very similar to this one on the night of the first campfire. She'd barely been able to walk it. That wasn't the case anymore. Her legs moved one after the other in succinct, effortless strides.

The thought hit again: change. Everything was changing. She felt it in how she moved, the speed with which she moved, she felt it in how her mouth pulled oxygen into her lungs. What else would change?

Not important, not right now, she told herself. The only thing that

mattered was her understanding the ghost's message. Saving someone's life took priority. Then she could worry about herself.

She blinked, and then knocked a low-hanging cluster of leaves from her face. A loud crack sounded, and she could swear it was the limb breaking, but she didn't believe it. The deeper she moved into the woods, the thicker the brush was and the faster she ran. The faster her heart pumped with a mixture of fear and anticipation. Her whole body tingled with adrenaline.

Was she crazy for going to the falls? What if Miranda and Della were right? What if death angels looked at her sins and chose to punish her?

Her mind searched for the wrongs she'd accumulated though her life: lying to her mom, standing by and watching some girl bully another kid in school, hitting a squirrel during driver's education. The more she thought the longer her list of sins seemed to be.

Was she asking for trouble by going to the falls? Or saving someone she loved from something terrible?

Then she heard it. Or rather, she didn't hear it. The only noises bouncing off the trees were the sound of her shoes and the thread-ripping sound of the vines catching and being torn from her jeans as she ran. She stopped, folding her arms over her middle. Winded, she bent over at the waist. As she drew in shaky breaths, a stillness invaded the woods. The soundless air hung heavy, even heavier than the fog that had risen a few more feet and now snaked through the trees. And just like that she knew. She had company.

Chapter Nine

The sound of twigs being crushed underfoot told Kylie her company stood behind her. She froze, air caught in her lungs, fear sank into the pit of her stomach. Had the death angels found her?

She hadn't decided her next move when she heard, "Holy crappers, that was fun."

Kylie recognized the singsong voice. She fought back the panic and turned around. She couldn't believe what she saw. Miranda clung to Della's back and her legs wrapped around the vampire's waist. "Ride's over. Open your eyes. We found her." Della unlocked Miranda's ankles and nudged Miranda off her back, but her gaze never left Kylie.

"You okay?" Della asked Kylie. "Your heart's really racing. Is something wrong?"

Even with raw panic still running through her veins, Kylie couldn't help but smile. They'd come. Emotion filled her chest and shot upward and knotted in her throat. Unwanted tears filled her eyes.

"You let her ride on your back?" Kylie asked, hoping they wouldn't notice her watery weakness.

"It was that or wait on her. She's slower than a three-legged turtle using a broken walker."

"Am not," Miranda said.

"Are too," Della countered.

Kylie tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

"What is it?" Miranda and Della asked at the same time, dashing Kylie's hopes that her emotion would go unnoticed. Not that it really mattered. They'd seen her cry before.

“We’re sorry we told you no,” Miranda piped up again, elbowing Della. “Aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Della said. “Are you really okay?” she asked. “Your heart’s running super fast. Really fast. Not human fast.”

Kylie blinked again. She did feel weird, but not completely a bad weird. “I’m fine. Actually, I’m better than fine now that you two are here. Thank you.” The words came with sentiment and more tears formed in her eyes.

Della shrugged. “Yeah, well, if I die or something, I’m coming back and haunting your ass.”

“Don’t worry,” Miranda said to Kylie and half smiled. “If she starts haunting you, I’ve got a spell that will lock her in purgatory for at least a dozen years.”

Della shot Miranda a mock frown and then she reached out and latched on to Kylie’s elbow. “Come on, let’s go track us down some death angels.”

“Can I climb on your back again?” Miranda asked, and rubbed her hands together.

“No. And if you tell anyone I gave you a ride, I’ll break your kneecaps. I’m not going to become everyone’s joyride.”

“Unless it’s a boy, right?” Miranda giggled.

“That’s gross,” Della said, and Miranda giggled harder.

Kylie looked at her friends and realized it was the first time in days she’d heard Miranda laugh. “I love you guys.”

“Yeah, we know,” Miranda said, and they all three started walking. The humorous mood slowly faded in the dark shade of the trees.

They walked without talking. A bird chirped above, the wind rustled the leaves. Kylie assumed she was going the right direction because Della never spoke up and she’d told Kylie earlier that she could find the falls just by listening to it.

As they moved, trampling over and sometimes through the thick brush, Kylie noticed her pace matched that of Della’s. It was Miranda who seemed to be struggling to keep up.

They made about a hundred feet, and Kylie noticed Della eyeing her under her lashes. Had she noticed Kylie’s newfound energy as well?

“What is it?” Kylie asked.

“Nothing,” Della said. “It’s just ... your heart’s still racing really fast and you look ... different.”

“Different?” Kylie asked, and looked from Della to Miranda and back. “How do I look different?”

Della continued walking but held her hands out in front of her boobs. “The girls.”

Kylie looked down at her chest. “You’ve seen me without my bra before.”

Della stopped. “It’s not that your girls aren’t supported. It’s that they’re bigger.”

“They are not.” Kylie stopped walking and protectively cupped her full size Bs in her palms. And the craziest thing happened. They didn’t feel right. They felt ... “Oh, damn.” They felt bigger.

“She’s right.” Miranda cupped her own boobs as if checking them.

“Oh, God,” muttered Kylie, staring down at herself.

“Hey, if you don’t want them, pass me a cup or two over here.” Della laughed.

Kylie recalled thinking that everything was changing. She just hadn’t expected that to mean her boobs.

“That’s not all,” Miranda added. “You’re taller, too. You must have had a growth spurt overnight.”

“A growth spurt?” Kylie stood straight and visually measured herself against both Della and Miranda. She did appear to be a bit taller. Right then, her shoes felt tight, too. What was happening to her?

“My aunt Faye used to tell me every other week, ‘You’ve just grown like a weed. Must have had a growth spurt.’”

Kylie wanted to believe that this was just a normal—human normal—growth spurt, but she didn’t believe it. Her gaze shot to Della. “Did you ... did you, like, get bigger right before you turned?”

Della looked down at her chest. “Do I look like I got bigger? I wish.”

Kylie looked back down at her boobs. “What if it doesn’t stop? What if I just keep getting bigger?”

“Then you’ll have boys lining up for miles.” Miranda snickered. “Hey,

you know how they feel about boobs. The more, the merrier.”

“You could always change your name to Barbie,” Della said, grinning. “My mom wouldn’t even let us play with Barbie because she said it was an unhealthy body image. I think it was because she knew that with us being part Asian, we would probably suffer from the no butt, no boobs syndrome. And she didn’t want us to get our body image from a stacked piece of plastic.”

“You’ve got a butt,” Miranda said.

“Yeah, thank God. I at least got that from my mom. She’s not short on bootie.” She looked down at her chest. “Unfortunately, I took my dad’s boobs.”

Kylie tried to appreciate their lighthearted reactions to her situation, but it didn’t dampen her concern. Okay, she’d admit that she’d occasionally wished she had a wee bit more up top. Especially when she compared herself to Sara, her best friend back home who no longer called, whose boobs were an eye magnet for guys. And sure, another few inches of height meant Kylie would look thinner.

None of that made her feel better. The idea that all this stemmed from some unknown, inhuman DNA she had coursing through her body made her nervous. Nervous because she didn’t know how far it would go, or what would come next.

Would she end up having to have her size F bras custom-made like Sara’s great-aunt did? Dear God, the woman nearly smothered Kylie when she hugged her at Sara’s family’s picnic.

Kylie still had her boobs in her hand when the chill ran down her back and up her arms, and her lips felt frosted from breathing in the icy air.

Company had arrived.

Standing right in front of her was the ghost. Only she looked even worse than before. She was emaciated, too thin. Even her cheekbones protruded from the sides of her face, giving her the appearance of a skeleton.

“You have to do something. Soon. You have to do something. They killed me. Killed me and they will kill her, too.” Then the ghost folded over and barfed all over Kylie’s too-tight tennis shoes and Della’s pretty white running

shoes.

“Gross.” Kylie jumped back and slammed into Miranda.

“Gross what?” Della said, and looked down, and then Miranda moved in to see what was happening.

Kylie couldn’t answer. She knew they wouldn’t see the barf, she knew it wasn’t really there, that as soon as the ghost left so would the vision, but Kylie was a bit of a sympathy puker, and real or not, right now it looked pretty damn real. Her gag reflex started to jump up and down in her throat. She looked away from her shoes.

“*Do something,*” the ghost repeated.

“Oh, shit,” blurted out Della. “They’re here, aren’t they?” Della started turning in circles, talking to things that weren’t there. “I swear, I swear I’m sorry for everything I’ve ever done.”

“Me, too,” Miranda said, her eyes shifting from left to right.

Kylie stared at the ghost and, not wanting to freak out Della or Miranda any more than they were, she spoke to the spirit in her mind. *I’m trying to do something. But you have to tell me who it is. I need more information.*

“*Killing me,*” said the ghost. Then she and her puke disappeared into the thin, icy air.

Kylie, realizing she still held her magically growing boobs in her hands, dropped her arms to her side. While she gave her chest one last look, her new boob size no longer seemed important. She had to get to the falls and see if the death angels could help her.

Glancing at Della and Miranda, Kylie said, “Let’s go.”

“I didn’t catch on fire,” Della said, sounding surprised. She elbowed Kylie. “Does that mean I didn’t do anything that bad those days right after I turned?”

“Maybe.” Kylie didn’t have the heart to tell her that it hadn’t been the death angels, so she just started walking. In a few seconds, she heard the almost hypnotic sound of the cascading water. She wasn’t sure if it was real or from some mystical calling, but she kept walking.

They traveled another five minutes in silence. Then Miranda tucked a strand of her straight multicolored hair behind her ear and looked at Kylie.

“Do you really think someone you love is going to die?”

“The ghost seems to think so,” Kylie said, trying not to sound frustrated.

“And she won’t tell you who?”

“According to Holiday, some ghosts have a hard time communicating.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah.” The overwhelming responsibility to save someone filled Kylie’s chest with a heavy ache. If someone died because she couldn’t figure this out, she wasn’t sure she could forgive herself.

“Do you really think that the death angels might help you?”

Kylie considered Miranda’s question. “I don’t know for sure, but yeah, for some reason I believe they will.”

“You really aren’t afraid of them?” Della asked.

“Sure I am,” Kylie said, but when she saw the fear appear in Della’s eyes, she qualified it. “But I don’t think they’re evil.”

Miranda piped up. “Do you think maybe you could ask them to ... to make Perry forgive me?”

“Oh, please,” Della said. “Perry just needs to pull his head out of his ass. You don’t need forgiving.”

“Not true,” Miranda said. “I’d have been mad if he kissed someone else.”

“Mad, yes. But to totally drop you because of it is ridiculous. I mean, it’s not like you slept with Kevin or like you even gave the guy a blow job. He kissed you ... big friggin’ deal.”

Kylie’s mind shot to kisses. To both Derek’s and Lucas’s. They had felt like big deals to her. *Don’t go there*, she told herself. But even as she tried to chase all thoughts of kissing from her mind, she remembered the letter she had in her pocket. Lucas’s letter.

One thing at a time, first save someone’s life, then worry about boys. And magically growing boobs. And the fact that she still didn’t know what type of DNA she had coursing through her non-human veins.

“If you are going to be asking favors,” Della said, “ask if they can get me out of going to see my parents for parents weekend. My parents are going to be watching my every move, trying to find the signs that I’m doing drugs. I’ll probably be peeing in a cup every two hours so they can see if I’m using. I

swear, if I make one wrong move, they'll yank me out of the camp and put me in a detox center with the washed-up child stars."

"I just want Perry to give me another chance. I..." Miranda continued talking, but Kylie tuned her out. Della grew quiet, as if lost in worry about spending time with her parents.

Kylie hated to let both her friends down, but right now she couldn't worry about their problems, not when it might even be one of their lives on the line. "I'm not going to be asking for favors. I just need to see if they can help the ghost communicate better with me. I've got to figure this out."

Miranda hurried her steps, still struggling to keep up. "Do you really believe it could be one of us that the ghost is trying to warn you about?"

"I don't know." The words the ghost had said replayed in Kylie's head. *"You have to do something. Soon. You have to do something. They killed me. Killed me and they will kill her, too."* That's when Kylie realized that for the first time, the ghost had referred to the person with a pronoun. She said *her*. Hope that more answers would soon be revealed began to build in her chest as she continued toward the falls.

* * *

"Okay, this place is totally freaking me out," Della spouted the moment they stepped through the clearing and got their first glimpse of the falls.

"I agree." Miranda took a step back. "I don't think we should be here. I feel it."

Kylie kept moving, her gaze moving left and right, trying to soak it all in. It was ... beautiful. No, more than beautiful. It looked picturesque. It looked photoshopped, as if someone had spent hours adding details. All those tiny details added up and created an ambience. The emotional essence of this place seemed as alive as the trees. As Kylie took in the fragrant air, it took her a minute to define what she felt. But she finally got it. The place breathed reverence—like an old temple or church.

Maybe it was the way the sun streamed through the trees as if spotlights from heaven. Maybe it was how the cascade of water tossed out tiny droplets of water that danced in the air and turned silver in the rays of light. Or how

the verdant plant life glistened with all the pinpoints of dew. Or perhaps it was the noise. The rush of water filled her ears until she felt the same vibration in her blood. Or it could be the way the moist air tickled her throat and filled her chest with warm emotion. Not bad emotion. Acceptance.

“Okay, we said we’d come here with you. We did. Now let’s go.” Miranda took a step back.

“Not yet,” Kylie said, unable to move her eyes from the rush of water falling from fifty feet above. Then, without thinking, as if she were being lured, she stepped into the creek bed. Just walked in, didn’t even stop and think about removing her shoes, or rolling up her jeans.

“Whoa. I’m not following you,” Della called out. “Really, we need to get back for breakfast. Let’s leave, okay?”

“Just wait on me. A few minutes.” Kylie didn’t look back. Her shoes and jeans soaked up the shin-deep water like a sponge. She took another step and then another.

“Are you sure you should go in there?” Miranda’s voice tightened with concern. “Come on, Kylie. Let’s go, okay?”

“If you go in there, you might not be able to come out,” Della warned.

Kylie didn’t answer, not when she could swear she saw someone or something move behind the spray of glistening water. The figure shifted again. Someone was definitely there. She just hoped that it was someone with answers. And not someone ready to make her spontaneously catch fire for any past sins. But just to be sure, as she took her next step, she sent up a prayer for forgiveness for anything bad she’d done.

The tiny droplets of moisture sprayed on her face as she drew closer. She took the final step. The gush of water splattered on her head and shoulders.

Walking through the falls into the cavern-like darkness, she wiped a hand over her face, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Her skin pickled with goose bumps, not the kind of goose bumps that came from ghosts; no, they were the kind that came from fear. She stood completely still and hoped with the return of her vision came a bit more courage.

The sound of the falls echoed and closed off any noise from the outside world. When she blinked, the darkness suddenly didn’t seem so blinding. She

realized that the mouth of the falls was really a cave. Just when her eyes seemed to distinguish shapes, she saw someone dip behind a rock wall.

“Hello?” Her voice seemed lost in the rush of the water. When no one answered, Kylie continued, “I know someone is here.”

“Then I guess I’ll just come out,” a voice boomed from behind the rock. It took Kylie a few minutes to recognize the voice, and she did recognize it, but she still couldn’t believe it when she saw him step forward.

Chapter Ten

“What are you doing here?” Kylie asked.

His tall masculine figure kept moving toward her and Kylie actually took a step back. She wasn’t so much frightened as she was surprised. And perhaps still awestruck at everything she felt. The whole reverent ambience felt even stronger in here.

“Probably the same thing you’re doing here,” Burnett answered. “Curiosity.”

It wasn’t her reason. She’d come for help, but she didn’t correct him—and not because she didn’t trust him. She met his gaze. If she were being completely honest with herself, she knew she hadn’t gotten over being intimidated by him, but she’d grown to respect him as had most everyone else in the camp. She respected him enough that she wished Holiday would reconsider her no-vamp rule where men were concerned. The two of them would make a great couple. His dark side to her light. His seriousness to her teasing manner.

She felt him watching her and knew he was expecting an answer.

But she had her own questions. She took a deep breath. “Curious about what?” she asked.

“The whole ghosts thing. The legend.” He tucked his hands into his jean pockets and looked around.

“That’s strange,” Kylie said.

“What’s strange?” He turned and looked back at the cave as if checking his surroundings for safety. Oddly enough, Kylie wasn’t worried about her own. The warm, good feeling filling her chest convinced her not to worry. She was safe here.

“Your being curious about ghosts. I thought ... I mean ... most supernaturals prefer to sort of stay in the dark about it all.”

“Yeah, but Holiday’s so fixated on them, I just thought...” His words faltered.

“That maybe understanding ghosts would help you understand her?” Kylie asked, somehow certain that she’d read him right. Again, she got a feeling that Burnett really cared about Holiday.

He nodded as if admitting it out loud might ding his macho ego. “Personally, I think she talks about it so much just to scare me.”

“Probably hoping to scare you off.” Kylie bit her lip when she realized she’d said that aloud.

He looked at her. “That, too.” He paused a few seconds and then asked, “You wouldn’t be willing to enlighten me on any of the reasons why she’d be doing that, would you?” Apparently he’d decided his macho ego could be damned.

Okay, now Kylie was up crap creek without a paddle and a huge leak in her canoe. Telling Burnett about Holiday’s past felt almost like betrayal. “I ... uh ... I...”

He held up his hand. “Say no more. I get it.” Shuffling his feet, he looked around again and then focused back at her. “So you’re like Holiday, right? You feel spirits, and see them?”

She nodded.

“Do you feel the death angels?”

She started to deny that she sensed a strong presence of someone or someones, but considering the whole church-like ambience, she decided against lying. “I feel something. Don’t know exactly how to describe it. It’s like—”

“Really?” he asked.

“Really.” She looked around and wondered if whatever she felt would give her the answers she needed. “You don’t feel anything?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be here now.” He chuckled, but Kylie could swear she heard a tad of nervousness in his tone.

“Doesn’t the legend say that they come here at dusk?” He ran his hand

through his dark hair that looked a shade darker than normal. Her gaze went back to the falls and she realized his hair was wet. She felt her own hair then, hanging damp on her shoulders and shifting back and forth on her back.

He took a few steps closer to one of the large boulders. His shoulders and arms shifted with corded muscle and appeared almost as hard as the rock walls. Once again, Kylie couldn't help but admire how attractive he was. Not that he made her body tingle the way Derek did, but she could appreciate the way he was put together. Holiday really should let herself fall for him.

"It says you can see them dancing on the walls at dusk. It doesn't mean they're not here at other times," Kylie answered honestly, hoping she was right. Hoping the presence she felt here was real and could give her answers.

He nodded and looked around again. "Why is it that the place wasn't so scary until you showed up?"

Kylie laughed. "It must be my magnetic personality."

He smiled. "Probably. You and Holiday." Just the way he said Holiday's name tugged at Kylie's heartstrings.

"It was another vampire," Kylie blurted out. "He hurt her a lot."

Burnett looked confused for a second, and then understanding filled his eyes. "So she's prejudiced against all vampires?" He sounded hurt.

"I would call it protective," she said. "And not all vampires. She doesn't seem to have a problem with any vampire but you."

He tilted his head to the side and looked at her. "You say that as if it's a good thing."

"It might be," Kylie said. "There has to be a reason you get on her bad side so quickly."

He seemed to consider her analogy. "I see what you mean." His gaze shifted to the wall of water again. "Why don't I walk back to the camp with you? Make sure—"

"Actually, I was hoping to stay here for a few minutes. Alone," she said before he offered to stay with her.

A frown pulled at his mouth. "I'm not sure you should be alone in the woods. Not after what happened the other night."

"I'm not alone," Kylie said. "Della and Miranda are right outside, waiting

on me.”

She thought he was going to say something completely macho, like tell her she should have brought a boy with her.

Instead he said, “Okay. Good.”

Yeah, good, Kylie thought. Della would have had a conniption fit if she knew he considered her less capable than the opposite sex.

He tilted his head to the side as if to listen. “That’s really strange. I can’t hear them. Or smell them in here.” His brow creased. “Then again, I didn’t hear you until you spoke.” His gaze cut around their surroundings. “Maybe this place is haunted.” A grin pulled at his mouth. “And on that note, I think I’ll head back to the camp.” He took two steps and then turned back. “Don’t be long. And make sure you guys stay together.”

“Got it,” she said.

He nodded and again tilted his head to the side and studied her. “Are you okay? Your heart ... it’s beating really fast.”

She shuffled her wet tennis shoes on the rock. “Della said the same thing. I think I’m okay,” Kylie said, not wanting to share her recent and unexpected all-natural but definitely not human boob job.

He studied her for a few minutes and Kylie got the craziest feeling he’d noticed more than her heartbeat, but he was careful not to make her feel uncomfortable. She appreciated that.

He started to walk out and then turned around. “Thank you for—”

“You’re welcome,” she said, not wanting to hear or think about how angry Holiday would be when she found out Kylie had told Burnett even the least bit about her past. And Holiday would find out, because Kylie had every intention of telling her. Keeping it a secret would make it feel like even more of a sin. And right now, right here, she especially didn’t want to up her quotient of sins.

* * *

Five minutes after Burnett left, Kylie stood in the same spot. “Look, I got a ghost who is saying someone I love is going to die. I’m supposed to save this person, but the ghost isn’t giving me a lot to work on. I’m getting scared.

Really scared.”

And she should feel sort of stupid talking to herself. Yet she didn’t. While she couldn’t see anyone here, she felt them.

“Can you ... like, help me out here?” She waited. She listened with her ears. With her heart.

No answer echoed back, not in her mind, her ears, or her heart. Unless you considered the sensation of calm and rightness that made her chest feel lighter, her problem less urgent, and her ability to deal with everything almost manageable.

Was this the answer? That everything was going to be okay? Or was this like Holiday’s and Derek’s touch—just a quick fix to the emotional havoc living and breathing inside her? Doubt tried to sweep away the calm.

She dropped down on the uneven earth beneath her, a mix of rock and moist dirt, and rested her palms behind her for support. Tilting her head back, she felt her damp hair sway slightly and tickle her back through her nightshirt. Low on her back. Lower than ever before. Sitting up again, she reached back to touch the ends of her hair. Her hair, like her boobs, must have undergone a growth spurt. What did all this mean?

Trying to embrace the soothing emotion this place produced, she stared at the wall of water not five feet from her and felt the tiny droplets moisten her skin. *Don’t worry, dear. Life is gonna be okay. One foot in front of the other.* She heard her grandmother’s words echo in her mind.

“You really here, Nana? Or am I just remembering?” She posed the questions aloud.

The lack of cold told her she was alone. A tiny part of her wanted to rebel, to demand an answer, not just to her ghost’s problem but to all her issues. Just as she was about to open her mouth, a bit of wisdom seemed to wiggle through the frustration. This, whatever “this” was making the falls feel special, wasn’t open to demands or rebellion. In addition to the calm, Kylie sensed a power.

Not evil, but firm.

Not uncaring, but unyielding.

Unyielding enough to set a girl aflame and scar her for life? Kylie didn’t

know that answer, and for her own sanity she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Then, realizing she was probably pushing Della's and Miranda's limit for waiting, she stood up. When she did, she felt the folded envelope in her pocket. Lucas's letter. Another thing she'd have to deal with soon. And while none of her issues had changed, she did somehow feel more confident about handling them. And maybe, Kylie thought, that was as much help as she was going to get.

* * *

The morning passed in a mind-numbing haze. Either due to her lack of sleep or the residuals from her growth spurt, Kylie wasn't sure. She dropped her lunch tray down beside Della and gave the dining hall a quick search for Derek.

His before-lunch group often got caught up in hiking and missed the meal. As her gaze swept the other side of the dining hall she realized how much she wanted to see him.

And how much she didn't want to see him.

God, she was so wishy-washy. If she was having a hard time dealing with her back-and-forth emotions, she could only wonder how Derek felt. He probably thought she was a few French fries short of a Happy Meal. And he'd be right, wouldn't he?

Without a doubt, the calm and confidence she'd gotten from this morning's trip to the falls was beginning to wane. When another visual sweep around the room didn't find Derek, she dropped in a chair and focused on Della, who sat there sipping her blood with very little interest. Then Kylie noted the empty seat next to Della.

"Where's Miranda?" Kylie asked.

"Don't know," Della muttered, and turned her glass in her hand.

Kylie tried not to stare at the blood in the glass for fear she'd recall how good it tasted. Instead, she picked up her ham sandwich and took a big bite. "You okay?" Kylie shifted the lump of bread in her mouth so she could speak.

“Yeah. Just mulling things over,” Della said.

“About going home in three weeks?”

“Actually, I wasn’t worrying about that, but now that you reminded me, I can add that to my worry agenda. Thanks.” Sarcasm laced Della’s voice.

“Sorry.” Kylie stared at the sandwich with disinterest. “So what are you worrying about?”

“Just stuff,” Della snapped.

“Ooookay,” Kylie said, letting Della know her mood wasn’t appreciated. Hey, Kylie got the whole vampire bad attitude, but at times—

“Sorry,” Della said. “It’s just that talk of death angels this morning got me worrying about ... things.”

“You mean about the time when you turned and can’t remember the details.”

“Yeah.” Della sounded relieved that Kylie remembered, and she looked at Kylie as if seeking help. “What if I did something really terrible?”

How terrible? Kylie almost asked. Was Della actually worried that she might have hurt someone? Then she remembered who she was talking about. “First, I don’t think you would do something really terrible. I mean, even the fact that you are worried you did something terrible means you’re not a terrible person.”

Della didn’t look convinced. “But when you turn, it’s so crazy.”

“But you’re not crazy,” Kylie said. “And you’re a good person.”

Della nodded and looked as if she wanted to say something else, but then she looked away. Kylie had a sneaking suspicion that there was more to Della’s concerns than met the eye. Did she remember more than she was saying? Whatever it was, Kylie wished she knew how to help.

“I wonder what’s up with Miranda?” Della said in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “God, I hope she hasn’t gone back into mourning over little boy wonder.”

“She seemed okay earlier.” Kylie looked to the table where most of the witches ate lunch to see if Miranda was there. She wasn’t.

While the camp was supposed to encourage intermingling between the species, and it did, there seemed to be something about mealtime that

encouraged the “birds of a feather flock together” mentality, the exception being a few interspecies couples and a few cabin friends. Helen and Jonathon took turns sitting with the vampires and the fairies. Until recently, it hadn’t been unusual for Perry to join Miranda at their table. And a couple times a week, Derek would sit with Kylie during meals.

At least once a week, and never on the same days, even Della and Miranda would opt out of sitting with her and sit with their kind. Kylie told them they didn’t have to sit with her. She understood if they wanted to sit with their same-feathered friends. They didn’t listen.

Whether it was out of loyalty or because they felt bad for her, Kylie didn’t know. But deep down, she appreciated it to no end. Who wanted to eat lunch alone? That would remind her too much of her old high school when Sara was sick or skipping school.

Thinking of Sara, Kylie pulled out her phone and checked to see if she had any messages from her best friend. It had been almost a week since Kylie had sent her several texts asking how things were going and telling her she would be home in three weeks for the weekend. It kind of hurt that Sara hadn’t even gotten back in touch. Did that mean Sara didn’t want to see her?

Sure, Kylie would be the first to admit that they no longer seemed to have a lot in common—Kylie not being human being at the top of the list—but what they had was a ten-year friendship, years of being each other’s best friend. Didn’t that merit her taking a few hours out of her weekend to at least pretend she still cared?

Kylie’s phone rang. Thinking it would be eerie cool, almost psychic, if it was Sara, Kylie waited for the number to come across the screen. Not Sara. She cut off her phone and set it on the table.

“Don’t tell me, either Trey or your stepdad,” Della said.

“Two points for being right.” Kylie grabbed her sandwich again.

“Which one?” Della asked.

“Dad. Stepdad.” Even after meeting and learning to love Daniel, she sometimes forgot that Tom Galen wasn’t her real father. Kylie sank her teeth into the soft bread, but didn’t taste anything.

“Is he still banging his intern?”

Kylie swallowed. "Don't know. Don't care."

"Liar," Della said.

"Okay, how about ... don't know, wish like hell I didn't care?"

"Now you're telling the truth." She studied Kylie and passed her glass of blood under Kylie's nose. "Do you want a sip?"

Kylie frowned and pushed the glass away. "No."

"You're lying again." Della arched a brow.

"Fine!" Kylie snapped, and even to her own ears, she sounded like Della had earlier. "I want it, but I don't want it. And don't go thinking it's because I think something's wrong with being vampire. I think it's fine. It's just that I ... I'm a bit overwhelmed with trying to figure out what I am."

"Believe it or not, I understand." Della continued to study her. "You know, your heart is still beating faster than normal."

"I know." Kylie pulled her hair over her shoulder. "And look. My hair grew, too." She sighed when she remembered how she'd only found one bra that allowed her to squeeze her size-bigger boobs into it.

"Damn." Della reached out and touched her hair. "Have you talked to Holiday about all this yet?" She glanced at Kylie's chest again. "I don't want to scare you or anything, but it's kind of weird."

Oh, great. Just when she'd almost convinced herself it was no big deal, Della was telling her differently. Kylie let out a deep breath. "No, I haven't told her yet. I have a meeting with her at two o'clock."

"You don't sound very happy about it," Della said.

"I'm not."

Della looked shocked. "What happened? You usually sing her praises. You pissed at her for something?"

"No. But she's gonna be pissed at me."

"For what? Going to the falls?"

"No. I don't think she'll be upset about me going to falls." At least Kylie didn't think she would. "It's what I did while I was there that's going to tick her off."

"What did you do?" Della looked confused as she sipped her blood.

"I kind of told Burnett about Holiday having had her heart broken by

another vampire.”

“Really? What happened?”

“He asked me about her and then—”

“Not that,” Della said. “I mean with the other vampire?”

“I ... don’t know it all.” Kylie realized she shouldn’t have told Della, either.

“Okay, so what’s wrong with telling Burnett that?” Della asked.

Kylie rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t my place to tell him. Or you. So don’t say anything.”

“My mouth is sealed.” Della reached over to Kylie’s plate and stole a chip. “You know why you told him, don’t you?” She studied the chip she held with the edge of her fingertips.

“Because I’m stupid,” Kylie answered.

“No, because it’s clear to you and everyone else that those two need to go bump uglies.” She popped the chip into her mouth and made a face. “I used to love potato chips and now ... ugg, they taste like toad ass.”

Kylie completely ignored the potato chip/toad ass commentary while she tried to understand. “To do what? Bump what?”

“Bump uglies, bang each other, burn off some of those flaming hormones they put out when they’re in the same room together.”

“Uglies?” Kylie still couldn’t wrap her head around it.

Della snickered. “I heard a comedian call it that. She was giving all the different names for doing the deed. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” Kylie said, but couldn’t be sure. Her sense of humor had taken a day off and so had her appetite. She stared at her sandwich, missing only a few bites. Was her loss of appetite a sign? Would she someday think potato chips tasted like toad ass?

“Speak of the horny little devils,” Della said.

Kylie looked up. Holiday and Burnett walked into the dining hall. Holiday led the way, and Burnett studied her from behind. For a second, Kylie feared Burnett had told Holiday what Kylie had said. She envisioned an angry and hurt Holiday giving her a good talking-to, and Kylie’s chest tightened. Oh, God, why had she said anything to Burnett? It had been wrong. So wrong.

Then Holiday met Kylie's gaze—no anger or hurt lingered in her green eyes, only a residual concern. Probably still worried about her and how she walked out of her office this morning. Holiday mouthed the words, "Two o'clock," and pointed to her watch.

Kylie nodded.

Holiday smiled and then walked up to the front of the dining hall and took a lunch plate. Burnett continued to follow her, his gaze taking in her every move, as if trying to memorize every inch of her body.

"Wait a minute," Kylie said. "If vampires can smell those hormones, how come Burnett doesn't seem to know Holiday feels that way about him? I mean, when I hinted that Holiday might be feeling something other than just annoyance, he seriously acted surprised."

"That's simple. We can't smell our own hormones and most of the time we can't smell the hormones of the people we're attracted to. I never smelled my boyfriend's." A sad smile touched her lips as if some memory had tiptoed across her mind. "And I know Lee felt them."

Kylie sensed that Della still cared about Lee, but she also got the feeling that her friend wasn't about to admit it, nor did she want to talk about it. "That's weird how that works."

"Yeah. It's as if when we're attracted to someone, the emotion triggers the off button of our hormone sensor. Now, if you aren't attracted to someone and they've got the hots for you—oh yeah, we can smell that like a bad fart."

Kylie chewed on that information for a few seconds and then said, "But then how come Derek can tell when I'm thinking about..." Okay, Kylie wasn't sure she wanted to say that aloud, but curiosity provoked her to continue. "Are you saying he's not attracted to me?"

"No." Della grinned. "He's not vampire. He's not even smelling anything. He's reading emotion. That's a completely different thing."

"Oh." Kylie looked back down at her plate and forced herself to eat a chip but her mind continued to churn. Once she swallowed, she forced herself to ask the question, in a very low voice, of course. "Do Derek and I ... do we really spill hormones all over the place? I mean, is it so bad that it's embarrassing?"

Della's eyes widened, but she didn't answer. Which was so unlike Della. She never hesitated to tell you like it was.

"Oh, crap. Is it that bad?" Kylie asked.

Della cut her eyes upward. Kylie was just about to figure out what that eye shift meant when a warm breath whispered across her neck.

"Is what bad?" Derek asked.

Chapter Eleven

“Nothing is bad,” Kylie answered Derek, and desperately tried not to emit any hormones or emotions that might have gone sailing in the air when her gaze locked on him. Problem was, she didn’t have a clue how to stop them. Where the hell was her sensor button?

Off! Off! Off! She mentally jabbed at the off button in her mind.

Derek shifted and dropped down in the chair beside her. She didn’t want to look at him, afraid that her doing so would increase the leakage of hormones, but not looking at a person was exceptionally rude. Or so said her mom.

“Everything okay?” Derek asked, probably aware she still hadn’t looked at him.

“*Don’t be rude,*” she could almost hear her mom say. “It’s fine.” She looked at him. And because she’d been avoiding him for the last few days, she practically gobbled up his image. Her breath caught. Holy moly, did he look good.

Oh, yeah, she was so gonna blame this on her mom!

He was a tad sweaty, not yucky sweaty, but yummy sweaty. His skin glowed a bit, and he smelled a little like sunshine, as if he’d soaked up all the good scents from his hike. She figured his skin would taste a little like salty sunshine if she pressed her lips against it. His brown hair curled up on the tips and looked windblown. He wore a dark green T-shirt that hugged his torso. And the jeans he wore were his favorite. Or at least, it was the pair he wore more than others. She recognized them both because the knees were faded and they fit him snuggier than most. And snug looked really, *really* good on him.

Della's snicker drew Kylie's attention away from Derek. The vampire grinned and waved a hand in front of her nose. Realizing what she meant, Kylie felt her face turn red.

When she stole another glance at Derek, his gaze had shifted and was now glued to her boobs. Which probably meant that he was at this second polluting the air with all kinds of pheromones as he tried to figure out how the girls had grown overnight.

"I ... I gotta go find Miranda." Kylie popped up from her chair and shot out of the dining room like someone wearing white and in desperate need of a tampon.

* * *

"Miranda, you here?" Kylie called out as she entered the cabin five minutes later.

Her friend came scurrying out of Kylie's bedroom. She had panic plastered on her face and tears filled her eyes. Tears in Miranda's lovesick eyes had pretty much been the norm these last few days, but something appeared different. Kylie sensed it right away. And yeah, it had a little something to do with the fact that she'd stormed out of *Kylie's* bedroom immersed in a cloud of guilt.

"I'm so sorry," Miranda said, and hiccupped. "Really, really sorry."

"Really, really sorry about what?" Had Miranda found Lucas's letters and read them? Purposely invaded her privacy?

"I didn't mean to do it."

"Didn't mean to do what?" Kylie insisted, feeling her patience seep out like a balloon with a pinhole. Those letters were private. Heck, she hadn't even read the second one. When she'd returned from the falls, she'd stuffed it in her drawer with the other one. Told herself she'd read it tonight, or maybe tomorrow, or maybe even never. She wasn't sure her heart could handle dealing with whatever Lucas might say on top of everything else she had on her plate.

"I've done it dozens of times before, and I never had a problem undoing it until now. Please, please don't be mad at me."

Kylie suddenly got the feeling this wasn't about Lucas's letter. "What did you do?"

Miranda's gaze shot back to Kylie's bedroom, but when Kylie took a step, Miranda moved in front of her. "I'll fix it. I swear I will. I'll figure it out. I won't sleep or eat until I fix this."

"Fix what?"

"Please don't be mad."

Kylie physically moved Miranda. Then she walked into her bedroom to find out what Miranda didn't want her to see and swore she would fix.

Kylie's gaze shot first to the bedside table where she stored her most private things. The drawer was closed. No letters were strewn on the nightstand. A movement on her bed caught her eye. She shifted her gaze.

She blinked.

She screamed.

Then she hauled ass out of her bedroom in less than a flicker of a second.

She ran right into Miranda, who caught her by her forearms. "I'm sorry. So sorry."

Kylie caught her breath. "Why...?" She inhaled. "Why is there a skunk in my bed?"

Kylie felt a familiar brush against her ankle. She looked down expecting to see Socks. But nope. No Socks.

Kylie screamed again and jumped clear across the room.

The skunk raised its pointed little head in the air, meowed, and came scurrying after her.

"I'm so sorry," Miranda cried.

Kylie looked up at Miranda and then down at the skunk quickly approaching her. Its paws pranced up in the air in a very familiar and very cute feline kind of way.

Socks?

"No," Kylie said. "Tell me that's not ... Oh crap, you didn't!"

"I'll fix it. I will," Miranda said.

* * *

Kylie had just returned from art hour with Helen and Jonathon. Pacing, she stood in front of the office, waiting for her two o'clock appointment with Holiday. How was Kylie going to tell the camp leader that she'd ratted out her past romance with a vampire?

By the way, did you know that Burnett didn't know you used to date a vampire? Nope, that wouldn't do.

Hey, Burnett and I were talking and I happened to mention how you had your heart chewed up by one of his kind. That didn't sound like it would go over too well, either.

"Kylie?" Derek called out to her.

Oh, crappers!

She saw him walk through a crowd of campers waiting to sign up for kayak classes and she resigned herself to facing him. However, she did take several steps away from the crowd.

"Hey." He stopped in front of her and studied her carefully.

"Hey." She moved in backward steps, continued to motion him to follow her another ten feet away from the crowd.

His gaze stayed glued to her eyes as she continued to move in reverse. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Then have you been smoking something? Because you're acting really weird."

She completely understood why he thought she'd lost track of reality. However, in her defense, her reality for the last six weeks was completely different from the one she'd grown up believing in.

"It's not ... it's..." She glanced around to make sure no one with super-hearing powers was in close range. "I'm embarrassed, okay?"

"Embarrassed about what?" His gaze lowered to her breasts. "That?"

She reached out, put her finger under his chin, and brought his face up. At least he had the decency to blush.

"Sorry. It's just they ... you're..."

"Bigger. I know."

He reached out and caught a handful of her hair. "And your hair is

longer.”

“I’m taller, too,” she said.

He took a visual measure of her and his eyes widened. “What happened?”

“I wish I knew.” She attempted to keep the frustration from her voice. It wasn’t his fault. “I woke up growing out of everything.”

He grinned and his gaze lowered for a nanosecond before glancing up. “It looks nice.”

“And why am I not surprised you feel that way?” She frowned.

His smile faded and he just stood there staring at her face. She wondered if it really took that much effort not to gawk at her breasts or if he had something else on his mind.

“Look, if I haven’t done anything, then why have you been running away from me for the last two days?”

She shuffled her feet, painfully aware that her shoes were pinching her toes at this moment. “I told you. I’m embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed ... about getting bigger?”

“No. Well, yeah, that’s embarrassing, too. But that’s not why ... why...”

“Why you’ve been avoiding me. Just say it. Because that’s what you’ve been doing.” He now sounded half mad, or at least half annoyed. But what she really heard in the tenor of his voice was insecurity. And honestly, she couldn’t blame him. She’d feel all those things if he’d been dodging her the way she’d been doing him.

She bit down on her lip. “I’m sorry. It’s not what you think.”

“So what is it? Because I’m lost here. I mean, your emotions mostly seem okay when I’m around you, they actually seem really great at times, but then you run off.”

“And ... that’s sort of why I’m running off,” she said.

His brow creased. “And ... I still don’t understand.”

Okay, she was going to spell it out for him. Her face flushed just thinking about it. “When I’m around you all I can think about is kissing and making out.” *And going further than I’ve ever gone with anyone.*

His brow creased deeper, but at least some of the chip he seemed to carry appeared to fall off his shoulders with his new posture. “Okay.” He tucked a

hand into his jeans pocket. “Now can you explain to me why that’s a bad thing?”

“It’s not so much a bad thing, but it’s ... a private thing. I don’t even want you to know what’s going on inside my head. Much less all the vampires and other fairies wandering around the camp.”

His shoulders tightened as if the chip had returned. “So you’re embarrassed because other people know you like me.”

“No. I mean ... liking you is one thing. Wanting to ... make out is another.”

“You want to make out with me?” He almost grinned, and then ran a hand through his hair. “You know, I didn’t think it was possible to feel complimented and insulted at the same time. But you’ve managed to make me feel both.”

“I didn’t insult you,” she said.

“You did if you mean that you’re embarrassed for people to know that you like me.”

“I told you it’s not about liking you.”

“Okay, you just don’t want people to know you’re attracted to me.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but wasn’t sure what to say. “Yeah. Sort of. I mean, it’s just private.”

“Private?” He hesitated as if trying to figure out what she meant. “It’s never all that private.”

“It is for humans,” she said. “And I may not be a hundred percent human, but ... I mean, let’s face it. I’ve had sixteen years of living as a human, and less than two months of trying to cope with being ... Oh wait, I don’t even know what I am yet.” She shook her head, feeling her frustration level rise. “But yeah, I kind of like how humans do this.”

“How they do what?” he asked, as if he wasn’t following her.

Not that she could totally blame him, because she wasn’t so certain she was following herself. “I like how humans keep their personal thoughts and feelings to themselves.”

He stood there chewing on what she said. She could tell that her argument wasn’t making sense to him.

“No,” he said. “You’re wrong.”

“Wrong about what?” Now she was confused.

“It’s not private for humans, either. They don’t keep everything to themselves.”

“Only if they chose to tell someone,” Kylie said.

“Bullshit!” he said. “Look at Helen and Jonathon over there. Are you going to tell me that you, the human part of you, can’t see that these two people are attracted to each other? And what about Burnett? You knew he was lovesick for Holiday before I did. You can see it.”

Okay, he had a point. But she didn’t like him jabbing her with it. “See it, yes. But I can’t feel their emotions or smell the pheromones they put out because they want to...” *bump uglies* “... get it on. And knowing other people can ... do that with me, well, it freaks me out a little, okay?”

He shook his head. “Are you sure it’s other people knowing it that’s freaking you out? Or is it you knowing what you feel for me that’s freaking you out?”

She stared at him. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, that I’m not so sure you want this.” He waved a hand between them.

“Want what?” Just like that, she got flashbacks. Flashbacks of having a similar argument with Trey. Oh, please. Not again.

“You and I. Us. You don’t want us to become an ‘us.’ Every time I feel as if we get a little closer, you end up pushing me away. I’ve asked you to go out with me at least six times and you never answer me. What’s up with this?”

Yup, she’d had almost this very conversation with Trey. “It’s always about sex, isn’t it?”

“What?” His mouth dropped open. “No. I wasn’t talking about that.”

“So you don’t want sex?” she asked, getting angrier by the second.

He stood there staring at her as if she’d grown two heads and a tail. And God help her, considering everything that had happened to her lately, she almost wanted to check the mirror to make sure she hadn’t sprouted a second head. Ditto for the tail.

“Where the hell is this coming from?” he asked.

Suddenly, she became aware that the crowd had gotten closer to them and several of the people in that crowd had the hearing of a gossip-hungry bat. She glanced at her watch and saw it was after two. “Sorry, I’m late.”

* * *

Kylie stormed into Holiday’s office. She dropped down in the seat across from the desk and looked her friend and camp leader right in the eyes. “I hate boys. I’m seriously considering going lesbian.”

Holiday’s expression was part grin, part groan. “If it was that easy, ninety percent of the women in the world would be gay.” She made a funny little face and then asked, “So ... boy problems?” She reached for a can of soda and took a sip.

“More like boys, skunk, and ghosts.”

Holiday choked on the diet drink. “Skunk?”

Kylie sank into the chair, feeling defeated and frazzled from her argument with Derek.

“Miranda turned Socks into a skunk. And she can’t figure out how to turn him back.” No sooner had the words left her lips than Kylie realized it sounded as if she was tattling. “Not that I want you to say anything.”

Holiday tried not to smile, but the edges of her mouth twisted up. “She was probably practicing for the show that her mom entered her into when she’s back home.”

“She explained why she did it. And I don’t want her to get in any trouble ... but what if she can’t figure out how to change him back? I’m going to be stuck with a skunk for a pet.”

Another smile threatened to appear on Holiday’s lips. “I’m sure she’ll figure it out.”

Kylie shook her head and then dropped her hands into her lap. “You have no idea how much I wish my life could just go back to normal. Like human normal? Nobody trying to read my thoughts, change my feelings, or making it my job to save someone’s life.”

Holiday leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms up as if she’d sat

too long in the same position. Hands still up in the air, she gave the papers scattered on her desk a frown. “Don’t know about human, but normal does sound good sometimes, doesn’t it?”

Something about Holiday’s mood had Kylie’s own concerns shifting. “Is everything okay?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine.” She dropped her hands and sat up a little straighter as if to put up a front. “It’s you I’m worried about, Kylie. You seemed very upset this morning.”

Kylie recalled how she’d stormed out of here. “I’m sorry. It sometimes ... it just feels as if it’s too much.”

“I know it feels like that. But it will work out,” Holiday said.

Kylie frowned. “You sound like my mom. She always says, ‘God won’t give you more than you can handle.’”

Holiday chuckled. “And we just wish He didn’t trust us so much, right?”

“Yeah.” Kylie saw the concern flare up in Holiday’s eyes again. “What about your problems?” She motioned to the desk, sensing Holiday was upset.

“It’ll be fine ... just have a lot of financial crap to figure out with us going full-time here at the camp. There are teachers to be hired. Heating units to put into the cabins. And I don’t have a clue how we’re going to manage it.”

“I thought the government, I mean the FRU, funded the camp.”

“They do to some degree, but when they agreed to let me open the boarding school, they put us on a tight budget. These days even government programs are cutting back.” She looked at the desk again. “It’s probably not as bad as I think it is. It’s just ... Sky used to do all the financial work, and now I’m stuck with it.”

“Burnett’s not good with doing that kind of stuff?” Kylie asked, hoping to ease into a conversation about him.

“I don’t know. But since he shouldn’t be helping out here for more than another month, I don’t see any reason for him to get involved with this side of the business.”

Take the sugarcoating off what Holiday said and it basically meant she didn’t trust Burnett. Was that because he was vampire, or could it be because she’d trusted Sky, her last co-camp leader, and Sky had let her down?

Holiday never talked about Sky much, but Kylie sensed her friend's betrayal had hurt her more than she wanted to admit.

"Have they hired a new camp leader?" Kylie asked.

Now Holiday's expression turned into a full groan. "No. But they've promised by the end of summer I should have someone. And that can't come soon enough."

"Is he really that unpleasant to work with?" Kylie sensed Holiday's frustration came from Burnett, which only made Kylie worry about how Holiday would take Kylie's confession.

"We're just too different." Holiday's gaze lowered to Kylie's chest and stayed there for a fraction of a second too long. Which meant Holiday had noticed the growth spurt.

Kylie's thoughts shot away from her confession and turned on her own issues. "Can you explain this?"

"Explain what?" Holiday asked innocently enough, but it didn't convince Kylie.

Kylie held out her hands in front of her boobs.

Holiday's brows wrinkled. "I was hoping you'd just gotten a new Wonderbra."

"Afraid not. There's my hair, too." Kylie pulled it over her shoulder. "Plus, my shoes are almost too tight and I'm pretty sure I'm a whole inch taller."

"Mmm." Holiday almost appeared as if she worked at keeping her expression unreadable.

"Mmm, what?" Kylie leaned forward, pressing her hands on the desk.

"Mmm, it's odd." Holiday said, but something about the way the camp leader glanced back to her papers hinted that she wasn't being one hundred percent up front with Kylie.

"Please don't do this now," Kylie insisted.

Holiday looked up. "Do what?"

"Hide something. It's happening to me. I have the right to know what the hell is going on."

"I'm not hiding..." Holiday stopped talking and sighed. "I don't consider

it hiding anything when I'm surmising, guessing. I'm not sure if it's fair to give you information when I'm not sure."

"What's not fair is to leave me completely in the dark. Because believe me, whatever you have to tell me isn't going to be half as bad as what I'm imagining."

Holiday nodded. "Okay, but just remember ... it's speculation. Even Burnett said he didn't see it being a sure sign."

Kylie had suspected that Burnett had noted her boob increase. To his credit he'd dealt with it well, but to think he and the others were discussing it, well, it felt like overkill. Really dead stinky overkill. "You two discussed my boobs?"

"No. Well, yes, but not ... Look, he said he noticed some changes in you when he ran into you at the falls. I insisted he tell me what they were."

The mere mention of Kylie seeing Burnett at the falls had Kylie remembering she needed to come clean, but first she had to know. "What's the speculation?"

"Some female werewolves—"

"Werewolf? Oh, damn! Not werewolf. Anything but werewolf."

Chapter Twelve

“Hey!” Holiday’s hand came to rest on Kylie’s arm. “You see, this is why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew you’d jump to conclusions.”

Kylie blinked. “What is it that some female werewolves do? Grow super boobs?”

“No. Well, sort of.” Holiday bit back a smile. “When they reach a certain level in maturity, when they are close to mating age, they’ll fill out rather quickly.”

Kylie’s heart pounded and all she could remember was what Miranda had said about seeing a werewolf change into wolf form, about how painful it appeared. “But that sounds just like what is happening to me. So how is this speculation or jumping to conclusions?”

Holiday shook her head. “Unless a werewolf had been turned, most start shifting into wolves when they are four or five. It would be very rare that it would happen to you at this age. And then there’s the fact that werewolves undergo some rather strong mood swings a few days before and after a full moon. Dr. Day reported that she saw you during a full moon and saw none of these signs. And I watched you on the last full moon just to see if perhaps she missed something. I didn’t note *any* changes in your behavior.”

“Maybe I’m just a late bloomer,” Kylie said, not that she was hoping it was true. “And I’ve never been one to let my emotions out too much. So maybe you just didn’t see me being moody.”

“There’s also ... your cat,” Holiday continued. “All felines have an aversion toward weres. Not so with you.”

Kylie recalled how, years ago, her cat had reacted to Lucas. She remembered how the kitten had reacted to Lucas the day he’d dropped it off.

But then suddenly Kylie remembered something that might be important.
“Oh crap. The wolf.”

“What ... wolf?”

“The other night ... when I ran off after I tasted blood. I ran into a wolf. He hung around me. Even showed up again later that night, but—”

“It wasn’t a full moon,” Holiday said. “It couldn’t have been a werewolf.”

“I know that’s why I didn’t think ... I mean, I just thought that it was someone’s half-tame wolf. He knelt down in front of me and tried to crawl forward, like he wanted me to touch him or something.” She had to remind herself to breathe. “Do you think that could mean something? Is it some kind of ritual that wolves hang out with werewolves before they turn for the first time?”

Holiday stared back at Kylie as if trying to think. “I’ve never heard of it. But I’m ... Sky was always the one who took care of counseling the weres. So I don’t have all the knowledge of it. But I’ll ask around. Burnett will know.”

“He’s not a werewolf.” Kylie wished Lucas were here. Here to advise her, to help her make sense of all this. But no, he’d run off with another she-wolf. And Kylie still hadn’t read his letter because she was so pissed that he’d done it.

“Burnett’s not were, but his job with FRU requires extensive research on all supernaturals. Believe it or not, he’s as smart as he is arrogant. And I hope you don’t think ... I mean, when he spoke to me about your increase in size, there was nothing in his tone but concern about how you were dealing with these changes.”

Even distraught about the idea of being werewolf, Kylie realized that Holiday was defending Burnett. Like it or not, Holiday had found some respect for the vampire. Not that this excused Kylie from the fact that she shared Holiday’s private information. But couldn’t Holiday see that she and Burnett should give the romance a shot? Just how mad was she going to be about Kylie telling him about her past relationship with another vampire?

“About the falls...”

“I understand,” Holiday said.

“Understand what?” Kylie asked, hoping it could be that easy. That Burnett had told Holiday about his and Kylie’s conversation and she wasn’t upset.

“I understand why you went there,” Holiday started, straightening some papers. “I go at least once a week myself. It’s the best place to go to ... think, to try to figure out things. Did you get any answers about the ghost this morning?”

Kylie shook her head. “Just a sense of rightness.”

“Then you have to have faith that you’re doing all you can,” Holiday said.

Kylie suddenly remembered. “You told me you hadn’t ever seen a death angel.”

“I haven’t,” Holiday said.

“But you said you weren’t even sure they were real.”

“I don’t think the version of the legends that everyone believes is real,” Holiday said.

“Then what makes the falls so ... special?”

Holiday hesitated as if trying to find the right words. “I think it’s a holy place. I think the Big Cheese running everything up there in the heavens created it for those of us who have to deal with spirits. It’s a place we can find some peace. And sometimes even answers.”

“Like a church?” Kylie asked, recalling the reverence she’d felt there.

“Yeah, sort of like a church. There’s a lot of spiritual power there. You felt it, right?” Holiday placed her hand over Kylie’s.

Kylie pulled her hand back. “Yeah. But ... why didn’t you tell me? I asked you about the falls and you didn’t say anything. I mean, I could have ... I could have been going there all along. Maybe I would have figured out more what the ghost is trying to tell me by now.”

Holiday dropped her hands on the desk, and empathy filled her green eyes. “You don’t tell someone about the falls, Kylie. The falls has to call you to it. And I’m assuming it called you or you wouldn’t have gone there.”

Kylie couldn’t deny she had felt the calling to go. Yet she still resented the fact that she had to figure everything out herself. What was wrong with a little direction, a little helping hand?

“I’m somewhat shocked that Burnett went there,” Holiday said. “The only supernaturals who get called to the falls are those with ghost-whispering powers. The other supernaturals find it too emotionally stimulating ... or I guess I could call it intimidating.”

Kylie recalled how Della and Miranda had reacted. Yeah, intimidating was about right.

“Even Sky wouldn’t go there.” Holiday looked up at Kylie. “Did Burnett actually go behind the falls?”

“He was there when I went in.” She hesitated. “He went there because of you,” Kylie said, using this as her opening. If she didn’t take it now, she might back out. Then her breach of confidence would be even worse.

“Me?”

“He wanted to understand you better. And I think he thought if he ... could understand the whole ghost thing, then—”

“He said that?” Surprise widened Holiday’s eyes.

“Yeah.” Kylie hesitated and then just blurted it out. “I told him that you had your heart broken by another vampire. That it was why you ... don’t want to get involved with him.”

Holiday’s brow furrowed instantly and her eyes grew tight. It wasn’t a look Kylie noted on Holiday’s face very often. “You told him what?”

“I know I shouldn’t have done it. But ... he asked and at first I didn’t tell him, but—”

“Why would he ... No, why would you tell him anything?”

“He really likes you, Holiday.”

“How he feels doesn’t matter. I didn’t share that with you to tell anyone else.” She stopped talking, but the frustration flared in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I am. And I know it was wrong, but I think ... I mean, it’s almost as if you’re letting what your fiancé did to you stop you from seeing the possibilities with Burnett. You’re punishing him for something that he didn’t do.”

Holiday’s expression didn’t soften. She swallowed a deep breath. “Kylie, what happens between Burnett and me isn’t...” She closed her mouth and the muscles in her jaw clenched. “Why don’t we stop this talk right now and

we'll take this up later. I need some time."

Kylie felt a huge hole open up in her chest. "Please don't ... don't be mad at me."

Holiday held up her hand. "I'm not exactly mad. I'm ... disappointed."

"That's even worse," Kylie said, and her chest grew tighter. "Really, I'm sorry."

Holiday stood up and motioned for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Tears prickled Kylie's eyes, and more than anything she wanted to argue, to beg Holiday to forgive her. To plead with her not to let her slip-up change the relationship they'd found. But something deep inside told Kylie it could be too late.

* * *

At almost nine that night Kylie lay in her bed staring at the ceiling with a dad-blasted skunk sharing her pillow. She'd opted out of going down to the dining hall and participating in pizza and basketball night. Burnett had put up a basketball court and all the guys had formed teams. With as little sleep as she'd gotten these last few days, you'd think she'd have been out like a blown bulb. Not.

She cut her eyes to the drawer where she'd placed Lucas's letter and for a flicker of a second her mind switched from her Holiday problems to her Lucas problems, and then it went to her Derek problems. Next her mind came against the idea of being werewolf. Oh, joy!

When her mind slapped against the whole issue of someone she loved being in danger, Kylie instantly recalled the feeling she'd gotten from the falls, that if she stayed on course, at least that problem would be okay.

Too bad all her other issues didn't seem so manageable.

The ring of her phone brought a moan to her lips—not that she couldn't use a mental break from juggling her problems. And maybe if she was lucky, it was Sara, finally calling her back. Sure they weren't as close as they once had been, but she still cared about Sara, and she'd been thinking about her a lot lately. But was she up to talking with her former best friend?

"Don't want to startle you," she told Socks, who may or may not have the

whole spraying thing down. “I need to reach for my phone.” The animal opened one beady eye and looked at her and then let out a poor excuse for a meow.

Miranda had spent all day attempting to change Socks back to his ol’ self. Kylie had finally told her to give it a rest. She even told her not to be so hard on herself, that this was just a hiccup. A huge, freaking hiccup, but Kylie didn’t tell her that.

The phone stopped ringing and Kylie wasn’t even compelled to check to see who’d called. She glanced at Socks again. “A really huge freaking hiccup,” Kylie muttered. But considering she hoped that Holiday would forgive her, she decided it might be best to practice what she preached, or at least practice what she prayed for ... forgiveness. And she had prayed. Remembering how Holiday had looked so betrayed brought a wave of pain to Kylie’s heart.

How could telling Burnett about Holiday have felt almost right at the time? And now feel so wrong? And yes, telling Burnett the truth had felt right. She’d been compelled to do it, as if her gut had given her the push. So much for listening to her gut!

Her phone rang again. Pulling her cell over, not certain she wanted to talk to anyone, Kylie studied the number ... and a sudden knot swelled in her chest.

Chapter Thirteen

Mom. The realization hit and hit hard, too. She never thought she'd feel this, but she missed her mom. Wished she were here to ... to just be here. And it wasn't just because they'd sort of found new ground with their relationship. Kylie even appreciated the old ground they'd had.

As much as Kylie had sworn her mom had never loved her, the longer Kylie was away from her the more she began to see things differently. Sure her mom had been emotionally distant, and sure Kylie wasn't really *anything* like her. But for some reason now, Kylie saw all the other ways her mom had shown love. The pancakes every Saturday morning. The loaning her the credit card anytime Kylie mentioned she needing anything. Even the stinkin' sex pamphlets showed her mom cared—not that Kylie wouldn't be happy if the pamphlets stopped, but still ...

Hitting the talk button, she fought back a wave of nostalgia. "Hi, Mom." Kylie swore she wasn't going to cry, and with effort she managed to keep her voice from shaking.

"Sweetheart?" The immediate concern in her mom's voice had the knot in Kylie's throat growing, and emotion stung her sinuses. "Are you okay?"

How could her mom know something was wrong when all Kylie had said was two words? Was her mom psychic? *No, she was only human.* It had to be maternal instinct. And her mom had never lacked that.

"I'm okay." Kylie bit the inside her cheek to keep from weeping.

"What happened, baby?"

Tears formed in Kylie's eyes. "It's nothing." She watched Socks reposition himself on the pillow and she prayed he wasn't about to spray her. Getting skunked by her skunk-cat would be the absolute last straw. "Just a

hard day, is all.”

“What kind of hard day? Do you want to come home? All you have to say is the word and I’ll drive up there tonight and pick you up.”

“No, Mom. I love it here.” Kylie recalled her mom hadn’t given her an absolute yes on signing her up for boarding school. Which meant Kylie shouldn’t be talking about anything negative concerning Shadow Falls right now. She really had to get her mom to agree—especially if ... if Kylie ended up being werewolf. How in the hell did one explain that to a human parent? “I just ... I made a mistake today and someone I really care about is upset with me.”

“We all make mistakes,” Mom said. “You just need to apologize.”

“I did.”

“And they didn’t forgive you? Are they still mad at you?” her mom asked.

“Not so much mad. Just disappointed in me.” Kylie’s chest swelled with regret as she recalled Holiday saying those words to her. Kylie knew what it felt like to be disappointed and hurt by someone you trusted. It was worse than being mad. Like her dad. Okay, with him she was both mad and hurt, but the “hurt” feelings had her heart breaking. While being mad and angry almost felt good, no good feelings came from feeling hurt. None.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” her mom asked, sounding as if she didn’t want to pry, but felt it was her maternal obligation to do so. Amazingly, Kylie wanted to answer. She couldn’t and wouldn’t tell her mother everything, but she could tell her some.

“Someone told me something in confidence. And I ... told someone else. At the time, I really thought telling it might help ... fix a problem. But...”

“But it didn’t help?” her mom asked.

“No,” Kylie said. “I mean, not that I can see yet.”

“Kylie, it sounds as if you were trying to do the right thing. I wouldn’t be so hard on yourself. This is just a little hiccup, girl.” Kylie almost laughed at her mother’s chosen words. Wasn’t that exactly what she’d told Miranda? Maybe Kylie was more like her mom than she knew. Tightness gripped her chest.

“I love you, Mom,” Kylie said without thinking.

“Oh, baby,” her mom said, now sounding as if she was going to cry. “I love you, too. Is there anything I can do to help? I’ll come there and kick ass if I have to.”

A tear rolled down Kylie’s cheek. “You’d kick ass for me?”

“In a New York minute.”

Kylie chuckled and sniffled at the same time.

“Are you ready for a change of subject? Something fun?” her mom asked, sounding excited. “It’s the reason I called.”

“Yes.” Kylie wiped her eyes. She really could use some good news.

“You’ll never guess what I signed us up for that Friday night when you’re back.”

“What?” Kylie asked, and realized she didn’t really dread going home anymore. It would be good to spend some time with Mom, to hopefully get away from the problems pressing down on her at the camp.

“You were the one who got me thinking about it.”

“Thinking about what, Mom?” Kylie asked, sensing her mom’s excitement.

“A ghost hunt. Remember, you mentioned the falls being haunted at the camp?”

“A ghost hunt?” Kylie couldn’t believe her ears.

“It’s a dinner at a reputedly haunted B&B and then they take us on a tour. Isn’t that totally cool?”

Kylie dropped back on her pillow and now she really wanted to cry. “Yeah. Totally...” *not* “... cool.”

* * *

Thirty minutes after Kylie had hung up, she started counting sheep, inviting sleep to come take her away. While sheep number one hundred took a flying leap across her bed, Kylie’s mind started replaying her argument with Holiday.

“How he feels doesn’t matter. I didn’t share that with you to tell anyone else,” Holiday had said.

“I’m sorry. I am,” Kylie had said. *“And I know it was wrong, but I*

think ... I mean, it's almost as if you're letting what your fiancé did to you stop you from seeing the possibilities with Burnett. You're punishing him for something that he didn't do."

You're punishing him for something that he didn't do.

You're punishing him for something that he didn't do.

Then her mind completely skipped to the argument she'd had with Derek.

"It's always about sex, isn't it?" she had said.

"No. I wasn't talking about that," he had countered.

Kylie recalled all the anger welling up inside at that moment. Bottled-up anger, leftover anger. Anger she'd felt toward ... Trey.

You're punishing him for something that he didn't do.

"Oh, shit!" She sat up. Had she done the same thing she'd accused Holiday of doing? The more she thought about it, the more she realized that Derek had never, not even once, pressured her about sex. His statement about her pulling away had everything to do with her dodging him. Not about her getting naked.

Then a bit of her mom's dialogue came into play. *"We all make mistakes. You just need to apologize."*

Mom was right. Which Kylie realized was another thing she never thought she'd ever catch herself thinking where her mom was concerned. But damn it, her mom was right. Kylie needed to apologize. Standing up, she shucked off her nightshirt and slipped back into her too-short jeans, her too-tight bra, too-tight tennis shoes, and a T-shirt, then went to find Derek.

* * *

The moment Kylie stepped outside, the humid hot air surrounded her. She started to head toward the dining hall and then stopped. Derek generally left the nighttime events early to call his mom. Not that he told everyone what he was doing. But he'd confided in her.

Warmth filled her chest. She liked that he'd confided in her. Oh, heck, she really, really liked Derek, and with all her heart, she hoped he'd accept her apology. Because she didn't want to go into what she had to say around super-hearing individuals, she headed toward his cabin. She set her pace at a

slow run, which only a couple of weeks ago would have been amazingly fast for her. As she moved, she felt the trees hovering above. She felt the wind stir her hair. She caught a glimpse of the bright stars, but she didn't care too much about the scenery. Instead she concentrated on what she would tell Derek when she saw him.

Halfway there, the feeling hit. The feeling as if someone was watching her. She slowed her pace and listened. The night was still chirping, there was no dead or unnatural silence, but she still felt it. Glancing from right to left to the edges of the woods, she checked to see if the wolf was back. There were no golden eyes peering back at her from the brush. She tried to convince herself it was nothing, but she picked up her pace, eager to find Derek—eager to have Derek's solid, bigger frame beside her.

His arms around her.

Her head on his shoulder.

Maybe his mouth melting against hers.

Oh yeah, thinking about Derek chased away her fears.

She made that last turn down the trail and saw there were lights on in his cabin. Someone was there. "Please let it be him."

She made it another hundred feet when she noticed that his cabin's front door was open. That was a little odd. When she got up the porch steps, she noted the smell. The ripe berry scent. She hadn't yet defined the aroma when her tennis shoe hit a slick spot and she went down.

Plopping down on her butt, she pressed her palm against the porch to lift up. But the sensation of something wet and thick beneath her palm gave her pause.

That's when she recognized the sweet berry scent.

Blood.

Her gaze shot to the porch.

A lot of blood.

The rectangle of light pouring from the doorway caught her attention and Kylie saw it. Dark red droplets led the way into the cabin like breadcrumbs in the forest.

Her heart stopped.

Oh, God. “Derek!” she screamed his name, but no answer bounced back.

She lunged to her feet and ran into the cabin, screaming his name over and over.

Chapter Fourteen

“Derek?” Her heart pounded. She followed the trail of blood, through the living room, down the hall. It led to a closed door. She grabbed the knob. Locked.

She heard a noise on the other side. “Derek?” she yelled. Again no answer.

Not thinking, driven by raw panic, she took a couple of steps back and rammed the door with her shoulder. Part of the door ripped off with the hinges; the other part splintered into two or three pieces and crashed on the bathroom floor. She crashed on top of it. Facedown.

That’s when she realized the noise she’d heard behind the closed door had been the shower. That’s when she saw a very naked and very wet Derek yank back the shower curtain.

His body was hard, corded with muscle. Defensiveness glinted in his eyes and his posture. He looked prepared to take on an intruder.

Which would be her, by the way.

He stared at her sprawled on top of the splintered piece of his bathroom door. She stared at him ... naked with the shower curtain still clutched in his fist.

“Uh, I ... I saw blood and thought...” *What had she thought?* Rogue vampire, ax murderer, serial killer on the loose. She hadn’t put a villain in her fears. Her concern had just been for Derek’s safety.

“You knocked the door down.” Disbelief rang in his matter-of-fact tone.

“I know,” she answered, unable to say anything else. Unable to look away from his body.

“But it’s solid oak.”

“I know.” She felt the solid oak beneath her and was a little shocked that she’d done it, too. If it mattered at all, her shoulder felt a little bruised. And it was the slight pain that brought some reality back into the moment.

“You don’t have any clothes on.” Oh, God, did she really say that?

“I know. I usually shower that way.”

Her face began to burn.

When he didn’t seem to worry about his lack of clothes, Kylie decided that maybe it was her place to worry. After all, she had been the one to storm into his bathroom and break down his door while he’d been showering.

She turned her back on him. A totally useless, unproductive move. It didn’t stop her from seeing him. The mirror hung over the low counter, which she now faced, offered her the same view.

A really awesome view, too. She’d seen naked men in the movies. Well, almost naked. And she’d seen naked statues. Beautifully posed, carved-in-stone statues that left nothing to the imagination. In person was definitely better. Oh, goodness, he looked good wet and without his clothes on.

Then she realized that while she’d been enjoying the view, he’d been watching her enjoying it. His gaze from the mirror locked with hers. That rush of blood returned to her face. She glanced away from his reflection in the mirror to her shoes just as he grabbed for a towel.

That’s when she decided to explain again. “I ... I saw blood and I panicked.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Chris gave me a bloody nose when he elbowed me in the face playing basketball.”

She looked up to the mirror to check out his face. “How bad was it?”

“Just a bloody nose.” Holding the towel around his waist, he reached for his jeans on the floor, and then he met her gaze back in the mirror. “I’m gonna put on some pants. So you might want to look down again.”

She did, and she blushed again, too. Only when she heard the zipper did she look up. He stood closer, right over her in fact, holding out his hand to help her up. She took it.

“Are you okay?” he asked as soon as she came to her feet.

She rubbed her shoulder. “Just a little bruised.”

“I would imagine.”

She saw him look back at the door. “I’ll tell Holiday I did it,” she said.

“It’s okay.” He picked up a piece of the wood and tried to bend it. When it didn’t move, he looked back at her. Then he reached out and touched her arm and his touch shifted slowly up to her elbow.

His touch felt warm and moist, much like the air in the bathroom. Tingles climbed up her arm and filled her chest. Her gaze went to his broad shoulders and she wanted to kiss him there, in the place where she had rested her head so often.

“You’re still warm,” he said. “Normally, a vampire doesn’t gain strength until after they’ve turned.”

Disappointment shattered the mood. His reason for touching her had been to check her body temperature, not because ... because he just felt compelled to do it, the way she felt compelled to touch him.

“I think that’s the problem,” she said. “I’m not normal.” She bit down on her lip and then decided to just tell him. “Holiday said ... she said some female werewolves have”—she glanced down at her breasts—“growth spurts around this age.”

“So she thinks you’re werewolf?” he asked.

“No, not really. She said that ... nothing else seems to point to werewolf. So we’re back at square one.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you want to figure it out.” He ran a hand up her elbow again, and this time she knew it wasn’t to check for temperature. The tingles and mood came back.

Letting go of a deep sigh, she met his beautiful green eyes. “That’s why I came here.”

“What’s why you came here?” he asked. He moved out of the bathroom and to the first door on the right. She followed him and stopped when she realized it was his bedroom. She watched him grab a shirt from his closet. He held it to his flat stomach but didn’t put it on. She had the craziest feeling that he’d left it off because he knew she enjoyed looking at him. He stepped closer to her. “Why did you come here?”

Focus. Focus. Quit thinking about his body. “To tell you I’m sorry. For

being such a bitch this afternoon. I was ... confused. I mean, Trey ... He did me wrong and when you said what you did, I just jumped back to what Trey did. What he did really hurt me, and I think I just projected it all on to you.”

He pulled her against him and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was hot, passionate, and she didn’t want it to end. And when it did, he was the one who pulled away, not her. She was happy, however, to see his breath was as uneven as hers.

“The answer is yes.” Derek’s lips were moist and still so close to hers that she felt the words whisper across her cheek.

“I’m ... I’m not sure what the question is,” Kylie said, thinking she’d missed something because she was drunk off his kisses.

“The last thing you asked me this afternoon was if I wanted sex. I want to make myself clear. I want you. I want you so badly that sometimes it’s all I can think about. Some nights I wake up and I’m so...” He bit back his words and let go of another deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is while I want you really badly, the last thing I’d try to do is pressure you into doing something that doesn’t feel right.”

“It does feel right.” She placed her hand on his chest. And oh my, did it feel right to touch his bare chest. The temptation to ask him to do it, to pull her over to the bed and teach her all about sex, was almost overpowering. However, there was still something that held her back.

“Or at least mostly right.” She pulled her hand from his bare skin. “I think I just need to figure out who I am first.” She stared at his chest, afraid if she looked him in the eyes, she’d turned candy apple red again. Unfortunately, he raised his hand and tilted her head back and forced her to look at him.

“I know who you are, Kylie. You’re warm, funny, and beautiful. You are so good to everyone, everyone likes you. And you’ve got tons of spunk. I really like spunk.”

“I mean *what* I am,” she corrected, feeling his fingers brushing against her neck.

“*What* you are doesn’t matter. Because what you are isn’t going to change *who* you are.” He dropped his hand from her chin. “And I’m not saying this to rush you to have sex. I just want you ... I wish you could see yourself

through my eyes. I wish you could see how special you are. And I don't care what you turn out to be."

Tears prickled her eyes and she wrapped her arm around his naked torso and pressed her cheek against his warm wall of chest that smelled clean, soapy, and moist. "You're the one who's special," she whispered.

"Nope," he answered, and chuckled. "If I was special I wouldn't be thinking about how I could change your mind about having sex right now. So let's get out of this room before I decide to tackle you on my bed."

She laughed and looked up into his eyes.

He smiled and ran his hand up under her shirt and to her bare back where he cupped his hand in the curve of her naked waist. "That whole breaking the door down was really a turn-on."

"And not the fact that you were naked?" Had she said that? Instantly, she wished the floor would swallow her up.

"Nope, it was definitely the door thing. Now if you'd been naked..." He let go of a deep gulp of air. "Okay, we'd better quit talking about this." He pulled away from her, caught her hand, and tugged her out of his bedroom.

She let him lead her out into the living room. He eyed the couch and then looked back at her. His eyes looked heavy, sleepy, and hot. "Almost as bad as the bed."

She grinned and he pulled her out onto the front porch. He slipped on his shirt, then dropped down and leaned against the cabin on the blood-free end of the porch. Once settled, he looked up and patted the spot on the porch beside him. She lowered herself beside him, and scooted over so her arm was against his. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she said, "Thanks."

He shifted and lifted his hand around her shoulder and pulled her a tad closer. "You're welcome."

Neither of them said anything for several minutes. She just sat there, close and absorbing the feel of him beside her. Questions tumbled around her head like a pair of tennis shoes in the dryer. But embarrassment kept her from voicing them.

"Go ahead and ask it," he said, almost as though he was reading her thoughts.

She raised her head off his shoulder. "Ask what?"

"Whatever it is that's making you feel embarrassed and curious. I can read your emotions, remember?"

She frowned. "And I hate that, too. I don't want you reading me."

"But I can't help it. I don't know how to not read you." He chuckled and looked down at her. And just like all the other times they were together, the night had a fairy-tale feel about it. The stars twinkled like diamonds in the sky. The trees looked too full. The moon, less than a week from being full, gave off enough light that she could see his face. "I think you're going to have a bruise." She touched the side of his nose.

He caught her hand in his and kissed the inside of her hand. "So, what is it that's making you embarrassed and curious?"

"I'm just..." If she didn't tell him now, he'd probably envision the worst. Then again, what she was curious about might be the worst.

"Just ask me." He nudged her with his shoulder.

She hesitated and then just blurted it out. "I'm curious about how many girls you've been with. I know you're almost eighteen and..." Her words faltered. Kylie knew he wasn't a virgin, and not just because he'd said something that led her to believe it, but just how ... he kissed.

His brow crinkled and she could tell he wished he hadn't pushed her to ask.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh?" she repeated. And now more than ever she wanted an answer. "You made me ask, now you have to answer."

He hesitated. "A few."

"That's vague." She pulled her fingers from his.

He breathed in and then out. "Okay, four."

"That's more than a few."

"Sorry." He didn't deny that he'd been lying. "It just feels awkward talking about it with you."

"Yeah, it does," she said, realizing she didn't like knowing. Didn't like thinking about him being with someone else. "Sorry I asked."

"Don't be." He leaned back against the cabin wall and went back to

listening to the night. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” A nervous flutter tickled her stomach. But considering how personal her own question had been, she couldn’t tell him no.

“If Lucas were still here, would you still be sitting next to me?”

Chapter Fifteen

His question ran across all sorts of nerves and not the good ones, either. “What kind of question is that?”

“Obviously a hard one.” He pulled his knee up to his chest and stared down at his toes.

Something told her he was reading her right now—trying to understand her emotions. But how could he when she didn’t understand them herself? “He’s not here,” Kylie said.

He looked over at her. “Rumor has it that he’s coming back.”

She felt her breath catch in her throat. “Doesn’t matter,” she forced herself to say. “He’s with Fredericka.”

“He’d drop her for you like this.” Derek snapped his fingers. “He’s not blind or stupid.”

She shook her head. “Well, maybe I don’t want anyone who’d run off with someone else.”

He arched an eyebrow. “It’s the ‘maybe’ in your answer that worries me more than the confusion you’re feeling right now.” He leaned his forehead down to hers. “Please don’t break my heart, Kylie.”

Her own heart almost broke right then. “It’s the last thing I want to do.”

He kissed her softly, then pulled back. “I should get you back to your cabin before everyone gets back here.”

She nodded and accepted his hand to help pull her up. They started to walk off the porch when he stopped. “Oh, I forgot. I got something to give you.” He ran back inside and returned after a few short seconds holding a piece of paper.

“What’s this?” she asked when he put it in her hands.

“It’s a telephone number of a private investigator.”

When he didn’t continue, she asked, “And I need it for...?”

“You said you were trying to find your real grandparents. This guy is good at finding people. If anyone can find them, he can.”

Kylie looked up from the paper. “Do you really think he could find them after all this time? I mean, I’ve been trying to just find Daniel’s adoptive parents, but I can’t even find them.”

“He’s that good,” Derek said.

Her heart started to sink. “And probably that expensive. I can’t afford him.” She started to give him back the paper.

He caught her hand. “He’s not charging you, Kylie. Call him.”

“Why wouldn’t he charge me? You said he was a PI.”

“Because he’s a friend of mine. And I used to do some work for him on the side.”

“You worked for a PI?”

“Yeah. I went to him to see if ... if he could help me locate my dad.”

That piece of news also surprised her. She didn’t think Derek wanted anything to do with his dad. “Did he find him?”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “You missed a great pizza tonight,” he added, making it clear he didn’t really want to talk about his dad.

But Kylie couldn’t stop herself from asking. “And did you see him?”

“No. I just wanted to know where the bastard was.”

Kylie sensed Derek’s pain. “So how did you end up working for the PI?”

“He found my skill of reading emotions very helpful.”

Still wanting to soothe away the look of hurt from Derek’s eyes, she reached up and planted another kiss on his lips. A good one. She pulled him close, so close that her one-cup-size-larger breasts were pressed against his chest. Derek’s hands came down to hold her around her waist. One of his palms slid up under her shirt and slowly shifted upward. He caressed her upper back, stopping right below her bra strap as if not wanting to cross a line. A line she almost wanted him to cross.

When she pulled away, her breathing came faster. “Thank you, for this.” She held up the paper.

“Wow,” he said, smiling, and touched her lips. “If he actually finds them, what do I get?”

She elbowed him in the ribs. He laughed and then wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they started back to her cabin.

* * *

At eight a.m. sharp the next morning, Kylie had one roommate out of the cabin—Della had left for her vampire rituals—and Kylie was working on getting rid of the other. She told Miranda to go on to breakfast without her. Kylie would catch up later. Miranda had stepped out the door but she’d stayed there for five minutes or so performing some kind of ritual. Kylie finally poked her head out the door to ask, “What are you doing?”

“I told you earlier, I’m just trying to protect our cabin.”

Kylie remembered her roommate claiming that an unwelcome presence lurked nearby, although Kylie hadn’t really felt anything. Other than when she’d been alone in the woods or paths.

“Protect it from what ... exactly?”

Miranda tossed up some kind of herbs in the air. They crackled and popped on their downward descent, telling Kylie they weren’t just regular herbs. “I don’t know ... exactly.”

“Didn’t you already do something to get rid of it?”

“Yup, but the bad boy is still here. Just won’t go away.”

Kylie didn’t want to ask, but she figured she had to. “Could it be a ghost?” Because if it was, Kylie wasn’t so sure Miranda should attempt to keep it away. Like it or not, dealing with ghosts was sort of Kylie’s job. Not that so far Miranda’s rituals had prevented the ghosts from visiting. However, if Miranda’s herbs were in any way keeping Daniel away, well, Kylie couldn’t have that. She really needed to talk to Daniel.

“No, it’s not like one of your spirits,” Miranda said.

“Then what is it like?” Kylie felt a tad apprehensive and remembering the unwelcomed vampire visitor from the other night. “I mean, wouldn’t Della know if it was like something rogue?”

“Yeah, but this isn’t ... normal. It’s involving magic. I can’t put my finger

on it yet, but I'm working on it," she said.

Working on it like she was working on changing Socks back to feline form? Kylie didn't say it, because that would have hurt Miranda, but Kylie couldn't help thinking it.

"Have you mentioned it to Holiday?" Kylie asked.

"Not yet. Let me try to deal with it first."

Kylie nodded, but she wasn't too sure.

"You ready to go yet?" Miranda asked after tossing up one more sprinkling of herbs.

"No." Kylie brushed a few of the tiny crackling herbs from her hair. "I ... got a few phone calls to make."

"Okay, but don't be too late. After Campmate Hour, we've got cooking together, and today we're supposed to bake brownies, and you're supposed to decorate them. And they won't let us eat them until after you've done your thing. And I love, love brownies. And don't want to have to wait."

"I won't be that late." Kylie was actually enjoying the food art lessons she'd signed up for last week. Who knew she'd get off on decorating cupcakes and such? Drawing with pen and paper had never been her thing, but working with icing was kind of cool. Then again, she'd always kind of enjoyed watching those cake-decorating shows on cable.

Miranda started to walk away and then turned back. "Who are you calling?"

Holding the phone number of the private detective in her hand, she almost told Miranda the truth, but decided she wasn't ready to share. "I'll explain later."

"Trey?" Miranda asked.

"No way," Kylie answered.

"Sara?" Miranda asked.

"I'll explain later." Kylie frowned, remembering Sara still hadn't tried to call her back.

"A secret admirer," Miranda continued as if were a game. "A hot stud muffin who kisses like no tomorrow that you haven't told us about? Oh, I want to meet him."

Kylie groaned. "I don't have a stud muffin."

"Really? The way you blushed when you talked about Derek naked, I thought he was your stud muffin."

"Go to breakfast." Kylie waved her off.

"Oookay," Miranda said, and started off.

Kylie shut the door and looked at the scrap of paper she held in her hand. She finally felt as if she might be closer to finding answers. She hadn't had any luck finding Daniel's adoptive parents, or even knew if they were still alive, and she didn't have a clue how to go about looking for his real ones. But if Derek was right ... if this guy was that good, then maybe he could find them. And because they were supernaturals, or at least one of them had to be, and considering they had a longer life expectancy, then there was a good chance they could be alive.

And if she found them, she would find her answers. She would finally know what she was. God, she really, really hoped this guy was as good as Derek believed.

Just thinking Derek's name, or maybe it was Miranda's whole stud muffin talk, either way, Kylie got flashbacks to last night. To the whole shower scene and to the hot kisses they'd shared.

"Wow. If he actually finds them, what do I get?"

Derek's question played in her head. She knew he was joking, he didn't expect payment of any kind for helping her. And perhaps that was part of the reason she wanted to reward him. Or not exactly reward him. She just wanted ...

Don't go there, she told herself. It was way too early to start thinking about those kinds of things. Think about decorating cupcakes. Or think about making the call.

Grabbing her phone off the kitchen counter, she sat down at the computer desk. Taking a deep breath, she dialed the PI's number.

"Brit Smith Agency," he answered.

"Hi." She didn't exactly know where to start. "Uh, my name is Kylie Galen."

"Derek's girl?" the man said.

Kylie felt her stomach wiggle at being called “Derek’s girl.” It sounded really nice, even though Kylie wasn’t officially his girl. Then again, seeing him naked ... *Don’t go there.*

“Derek said that you might be able to help me find someone.”

“Yeah, something about your dad being adopted. Let me get to my computer and I’ll take notes.”

“Sure.” While Kylie waited, she looked up at her computer and decided to check her e-mail. She moved the mouse to wake up the computer.

Seconds later, a *Springville Times* newspaper article appeared on the screen. When Kylie started reading, she realized it wasn’t just any article. It was the *Springville Times* obituaries. Springville? Wasn’t Della from Springville, Texas? But why was she ...

“Ready,” Mr. Smith said. “What’s your father’s name?”

Kylie looked away from the computer. “Daniel Brighten.”

“Parents’ names?”

“I don’t have their first names,” Kylie said.

“Okay,” he said. “What county was he born in?”

“I ... don’t know.”

“But it was Texas, right?”

Kylie started feeling less and less hopeful that this would lead her anywhere. “I’m not really sure.”

“Okay,” he said, and this time his okay sounded less enthusiastic. “Maybe we should start by you telling me what you do know.”

Her mind started gathering information. “His parents lived in Dallas when my mom met him. I’ve been ... calling all the Brightens in the Dallas area. So far I haven’t found anyone who claims they knew my father.” She went on and told him about how Daniel had died in the Gulf War. And even told him a little about how her mom and Daniel had first met. It wasn’t a lot to go on and she knew it.

“That’s not a lot to go on,” Mr. Smith said, just proving her point and making her even less enthusiastic. “But I’ll see what I can dig up. I’m working a big case right now, and it might take a while before I start on this, but when I have something I’ll let you know. Meanwhile you keep on asking

questions.”

“Questions to who?” Kylie asked.

“Your mom, of course.”

“I think she’s told me everything she knows,” Kylie said.

“Maybe,” Mr. Smith said. “But parents are funny about divulging info about relationships and things like this.”

Kylie bit down on her lip and wondered if he could be right. For certain her mom wasn’t the most open-book type of person. “I guess you could be right.”

“Yeah, and even if she’s not keeping something from you on purpose, she might not see something as important. She does know you’re looking into finding his family, doesn’t she?”

“Uhh. Not really.”

There was a silence. And she supposed Mr. Smith was wondering if he could get in trouble doing work for an underage kid.

“I plan to tell her,” Kylie said. “I just haven’t really had the chance.” *Or decided how to do it.*

“Good. Believe me when I say that these kinds of things work out best if you’re up front about them.”

“Yeah,” Kylie said, and tried to figure out how that conversation would go with her mom. How could she explain that she wanted to meet Daniel’s real parents, not just his adoptive parents, because she needed to know what species of supernatural she was?

Hanging up from the PI, Kylie sat there feeling let down. The PI thing didn’t sound like the answer anymore. And if that didn’t work, what would? If only she could get some more information from Daniel.

She looked up at the ceiling. “You wouldn’t be able to come for a visit, would you?”

No spiritual cold filled the room. Kylie was about to get up when her gaze went back to the computer screen and the obituaries. She noticed that the dates on the deaths were back eight months ago.

A terrible thought hit. Was Della looking at obituaries because ... she thought she might have killed someone during those blackout days when she

turned?

Kylie's gaze went back to the screen to faces of the people who had died. Only a few obituaries listed cause of death, and none said, "drained of blood." While her heart knew that she should feel bad for the deceased, she couldn't help but think of Della. How hard would it be to even think you might have killed someone?

* * *

The next few days passed in an uneventful blur. Kylie had tried to talk to Della about what she found on the computer, but Della refused to talk about it. She'd tried to ease into a conversation about Daniel with her mom, but her mom had brushed her off.

While every morning she woke up right at dawn to a blast of icy temperature, the spirit left without any visual or verbal contact. Nothing from Daniel either. So it appeared even everyone in the spirit world was giving Kylie the brush-off.

Kylie wasn't sure what that meant. She got Daniel's absence. He had said his time on earth was now very limited, but what about the female spirit who insisted that someone Kylie loved was about to die?

Holiday told Kylie not to worry, that when the spirit needed to talk, she would speak up. Holiday even tried assuring her that, more likely than not, the ghost's lack of presence was more good news than bad. Either she'd realized things weren't as imminent as she had first thought, or the situation had been handled. Kylie hoped it was the latter. But her gut told her not to get her hopes up.

While Holiday and Kylie had met twice since she'd confessed her mistake of passing info on to Burnett, Holiday had remained almost distant, very matter-of-fact. Kylie had tried apologizing again, but Holiday had stopped her and said it was forgotten.

Forgotten maybe, forgiven not so much. Kylie sensed it when she looked into the camp leader's eyes. And the pain of knowing that her mistake had altered their relationship left an empty spot in Kylie's chest. To make matters worse, there seemed to be even more tension between Holiday and Burnett.

Obviously, Kylie's interference not only hadn't helped, but it had made the rift between them even wider.

"You ready?" Kylie heard Miranda call out from the living room. Socks raised his little skunk face off the mattress and hissed. No doubt the kitten/skunk was tired of Miranda following him around and trying to undo her screw-up. Kylie wouldn't be surprised if Socks didn't end up spraying her. If he could spray, that is.

"No. I haven't even touched my hair," Kylie called back, and looked around for her hairbrush. "Why don't you go down to breakfast and meet up with Della and I'll meet you as soon as I can?"

"Got it!" Miranda called. "But hurry, I can't wait to head off. It feels like years since I've gotten to go shopping. And hey, when you leave, make sure you shut the door and don't just break it down."

Kylie frowned and wished she hadn't told Miranda and Della about the whole shower scene at Derek's. But not sharing didn't feel right, even if they teased her about it.

"Did Holiday say we had to be back at a certain time?" Miranda called out again.

"No," Kylie said.

Holiday, in spite of her emotional distance, had agreed to let Kylie, Della, and Miranda take one of the school vehicles into town and do some clothes shopping. It was either that or Kylie was going to have to borrow someone's shoes and bras. Thankfully, the growth spurt appeared to have come to an end. Not that it stopped Kylie from worrying. What did it all mean? And when would she know for sure what to expect next? The full moon would be here on Monday. The weres of the group had planned their show-and-tell event for that night, planning on allowing the group to actually watch one of them turn.

Every now and then, whenever Kylie let her mind go there, she worried she might be doing some show-and-telling that night, too. If her body's change was because she was werewolf, didn't that mean she might do a little morphing herself? Her heart raced at the thought. Would she know what to do? Would she remember who she was?

Kylie heard the cabin door shut and she reached for her phone to make sure she hadn't missed a call from Mr. Smith the PI. Looking at the phone, she realized she did have some messages. Her hope rose that it was him with good news.

But nope. No call from the PI. Two more messages from her stepdad and one from Trey. Great. Just friggin' great! She deleted all three messages without listening to them.

When she reached inside her drawer to find her brush, her eyes landed on Lucas's letter. Curiosity ate at her to open it, but another emotion—one Kylie could best describe as guilt—kept the letter sealed and unread.

Please don't break my heart, Kylie.

Derek's words played across her mind. She had no intention of breaking Derek's heart. She had no intention of getting involved with Lucas. So would someone please explain why she felt guilty about reading his letter?

Maybe because she kept dreaming about him. Almost dreamed about him. Oddly enough, the dreams always stopped before they really got started. However, Kylie had a feeling that was best. She somehow sensed that they would be all too similar to the dream she'd had about him before. Dreams that involved kissing and touching where clothes were considered optional.

Why did she keep almost dreaming of him?

Because you have unresolved feelings for him, a voice from within answered.

A voice Kylie really wished would keep her mouth shut. Kylie didn't want to have any feelings for Lucas. He was off with Fredericka. And Kylie was now with ... well, almost with Derek. They hadn't even kissed since the night she'd seen him naked. A memory that never ventured too far from her mind. However, since that night, he'd sort of kept his distance from her. Kylie didn't know if it was because he sensed she still felt embarrassed about everyone picking up on her uncontrollable desires for him, or if it was something else.

It could be his way of trying to show how it felt to be avoided. Though Derek didn't seem the type to play head games.

Maybe it was simply because she still hadn't made any verbal

commitment to being a couple, to going out with him. Not that this had anything to do with Lucas or his letter. Nope. Not at all. Lucas was history. Even if he came back. He'd made his choice when he took off with Fredericka.

Not that she would be rude to Lucas if he did come back. They could even be ... friends. If his little she-wolf allowed it.

Thinking of Fredericka shot Kylie back to the night she'd been trapped in the bedroom with the lion. The Blood Brothers, a rogue vampire gang, had started terrorizing and killing the wildlife at the animal preserve next door hoping the FRU would blame the camp and then close it down. They had sent the lion into the camp as part of the setup. However, Kylie couldn't help but think that someone had made sure that lion had gotten in her bedroom. That someone would be Fredericka. Was she wrong to suspect her? Kylie didn't think so.

Oh, heck, this trip down memory lane was stupid. So was the fact that she hadn't opened Lucas's letter. She snatched up the envelope, opened the seal, and was just about to pull the letter out when her phone rang.

Dropping the letter on the bed and checking the number, she took the call. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart." Her mom sighed. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"What is it?" Right then, the room's temperature dropped. Kylie felt her stomach twist into a tight knot. Had someone she loved been hurt, like the ghost had warned? "Are you okay, Mom?" Kylie asked as panic began to pull at her heartstrings.

"No. I'm not okay."

Oh, God! The temperature in the room dropped another ten degrees. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I just received an e-mail and my company is insisting I fly out today to a meeting in New York. It's with a big client and ... I'm going to miss seeing you on parents day. I checked to see if there was a red-eye flight back and it's already booked."

The chill hung on, even as Kylie's panic lessened. "It's okay." Kylie looked around to see if the ghost had materialized. She hadn't. Kylie reached

over and petted Socks, who looked around with nervous, beady skunk eyes. Socks always knew when a spirit was here.

“I wanted to see you. I feel as if I haven’t seen you in months.”

“It hasn’t been months,” Kylie said. “Just two weeks.” Yet deep down, Kylie realized she was going to miss seeing her mom, too. “I’ll be coming home in a couple of weeks for the weekend, anyway. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up then.”

“And we have the haunted B&B dinner and tour,” her mom added, sounding so thrilled.

“Yeah. That, too.” Kylie tried not to let her dread leak out in her tone.

They talked a few minutes about her mom’s schedule and about her mom’s cousin who wanted to come down for a visit. Kylie almost brought up Daniel again, but couldn’t figure out how to turn the conversation that way.

As they talked, Kylie pulled the blanket up closer. The cold from the spirit lingered and even grew colder, but she still didn’t materialize.

“Oh, guess who I saw at the grocery store?” her mom asked.

“Who?” God, it was getting even colder.

“Sara.”

Kylie’s heartstrings gave her emotions another tug. “How’s she doing?”

“Actually, she didn’t look good at all.”

“What did she do, dye her hair or get a nose ring?” Kylie asked, knowing how Mom felt about such things. She might have suddenly found common ground with her mom, but that didn’t make the woman perfect or change the fact that she was judgmental.

“Not that,” her mom said. “Sara’s not that kind of girl.”

Her mom would be surprised at some of the things Sara had done with drinking and boys—not that it made Sara a bad person. She was just ... going through something.

“She just didn’t look ... good,” her mom continued. “She’s thinner than she should be. I hate it that you girls feel as if you have to be size zero to look good. I hope you aren’t losing weight.”

“Nope, if anything, I think I’m growing.” Frowning, Kylie looked down at her boobs, a tad worried what her mom would say when she saw her.

“Which reminds me, have you gone shopping yet?” her mom asked. “Your camp leader called and confirmed it was okay if you drove to town. I told her I’d already given you permission.”

“Actually, we’re going today.” Kylie shivered again from the ghostly cold.

“Well, have fun. And keep it reasonable.” The maternal tone filled her voice.

“I will,” Kylie promised. “Under a hundred dollars. I remember what you said.”

“Okay, go up to a hundred and fifty. But no higher.”

“Mom, I didn’t ask—”

“I know.” Her mom chuckled. “But I’m offering.” She grew quiet a second. “Ahh, my baby is growing up.” Her mom let go of a deep, heartfelt sigh. “Oh, I forgot to mention it, I told Sara you were coming down. She said you’d texted her and told her and that she owed you a text. And she’d probably be in touch in the next few days.”

Sara owed her about four text messages, not including the phone calls and e-mails, Kylie thought.

She and her mom chatted a few more minutes. Mostly about her selling the house—another subject Kylie had to bite her tongue on. “I’ll still do my best to come see you on Saturday. Maybe I can get a flight out first thing in the morning. If I get in by ten, I might be able to make it. Even if I’m a little late.”

“Mom, it’s okay. Don’t worry. And they’re pretty strict about visiting hours here.” *As in if you come in without a pass, you might be taken down by a vampire.* “So really, don’t worry, okay?”

“I just miss you,” her mom whimpered.

“I miss you, too.”

When Kylie hung up, the spirit’s chill still lingered in the air. Kylie got the crazy sensation she’d been listening in on the conversation. But why?

“Do you have something to say?” Kylie asked. “Something to show me?” she muttered with less enthusiasm. Kylie really didn’t like the freaky visions or dreams, but if that was what it took to solve this and protect someone she

loved, she'd do that and more.

No answer filled the cold air and a few seconds later, the chill faded. She looked at her clock on the bedside table and moaned. She was late, which meant Della and Miranda were probably already pissed.

She grabbed her brush, phone, and purse and headed out. Right before she shut the door, she looked back at Lucas's letter on her bed.

"No time now," she muttered, and shut the door and left, but as she took off in a run down the trail she could almost hear Holiday: *"Avoidance isn't a very good coping method."*

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Kylie thought. One thing at a time.

* * *

"Hey," Miranda called from the dressing room three hours later. "You two still out there?"

Kylie and Della, both checking out some tops on a nearby rack, walked back to the dressing room area. "Yeah, we're here," Kylie answered.

They were two hours into their shopping spree, and were having a great day so far. The only negative blemish had been seeing the sidewalk where she'd watched her dad and his slutty intern getting it on.

Miranda stepped out of the dressing room modeling a pair of jeans. "Okay, tell the truth. Do these make my butt look good?"

"Turn around," Kylie said.

"Did you say good or big?" Della asked, and grinned.

Kylie would admit the few downtown Fallen stores didn't offer the same experience that shopping at her mall back home did, but it hadn't stopped them from having a blast. Kylie would even admit the town had a certain quaint charm about it. Obviously, she had really needed some time away from the camp.

"Is that a slam because I don't have much of an ass?" Miranda looked over her shoulder as if to see her butt.

"They look great," Kylie interjected.

"Hey," Della said. "Considering I'm lacking in one department," she glanced down at her chest, "I don't pick on body parts. Unless they're really

bloody and then—”

“Shh,” Kylie said, realizing a couple of other teens were lurking nearby.

Della, not appreciating being hushed, frowned. The frown added to the overall intimidating don’t-screw-with-me air she carried on her shoulders all day. Not that the air was intended for her and Miranda. Nope. Rumor had it that the homegrown teens, as well as some of the campers in the area, had it out for all the Shadow Falls teens. Kylie hadn’t experienced it the few times she’d come into town, but Holiday had mentioned it at their last camp meeting, so Kylie knew the stories had merit.

“Shh, why?” Della asked.

Kylie cut her eyes to the two girls. Della’s frown deepened to a full-blown scowl.

Kylie wondered if Della hadn’t picked her all-black outfit on purpose, as if dressing like trouble would keep trouble away. In truth, Kylie wasn’t sure the outfit didn’t do more harm than good, but arguing with Della was useless, so Kylie hadn’t said a thing.

One of the girls started moving closer, and Kylie sent up a quick prayer that this wasn’t going to spoil their day.

“Hi, my name’s Amber Logan,” the cute redhead said, looking at Kylie. “Are you new in town or here with one of the ... camps?” The way she said *camps* led Kylie to believe this wasn’t going to end well.

“A camp.” Kylie put a bit of extra nice into her voice, hoping to ward off any trouble.

“Which one?” the tall blonde standing behind Amber asked, and she cut Della a cold look.

Nope, this wasn’t going to end well.

“Shadow Falls,” Della answered with attitude, and her dark eyes grew a little golden. Kylie just hoped the girls didn’t notice

“Boners,” the blonde whispered to Amber.

“What did you say?” asked Della, her shoulders coming back as she took a defensive step forward.

Blondie grinned. “The camp used to be named Bone Creek Camp. So they call you guys ... boners. It’s not personal.”

“It feels personal,” Della growled.

Both Amber and Blondie took a step back.

Kylie saw Miranda stick out her little pinky as if ready to cast a spell. Kylie shot her a warning glance, but it wasn’t Miranda who Kylie worried about.

“Nice to meet you,” Kylie told the girls, and latched a hand on Della’s elbow, hoping the touch would help her see reason. She couldn’t go vampire badass on these girls. She couldn’t even threaten to kill them without stirring up a whole big pot of trouble.

“Bye,” Kylie added, and motioned for them to leave with her free hand.

Amber shot Della another calculating look. From the spark of fear in her eyes, Kylie figured the girl wasn’t all that stupid. She turned around, nudged her blond friend, and the two went their own way.

“You better tuck your tails and run,” Della muttered, pulling away from Kylie.

“I could have given them the worse case of pimples you’ve ever seen,” Miranda snapped.

“Oh, I could have done much worse,” Della snarled.

“But you didn’t.” Kylie latched a hand around each girl’s arm, just in case they changed their minds. “You both showed an amazing amount of restraint. I’m very proud of you.”

Della shot Kylie a huge frown. “Don’t you ever just lose it? I mean, don’t you ever just wanna rip somebody’s heart out and beat them over the head with it?”

“I get mad, yes,” Kylie said, and grinned. “Don’t know if I’ve ever wanted to bludgeon someone to death with their own heart, but I have my moments.”

“Yeah, what do you do when you’re really pissed? Frown at someone?” Della chuckled.

“Yeah,” Miranda piped in. “But have you seen her frown? It’s very effective.”

They all laughed.

An hour later, after shoe shopping and trying on a few more pairs of

jeans, they moved to the lingerie section. Because she'd already spent close to a hundred dollars, Kylie headed to the clearance rack. They all dropped their packages and browsed through the array of underwear.

"Do either of you wear thongs?" Miranda held up a red stringy pair of panties.

"Not me," Kylie said. "I like regular bikini."

"Personally for me, wearing a thong is like flossing your ass," Della said, and all three of them burst out laughing.

After the giggles subsided, they went back to checking out bras.

A store attendant walked up. "Would you like me to measure you to make sure what size you are?" she asked Kylie.

Kylie looked up at the store clerk and back at the four bras she held in her hands. "Uhh, no ... thank you. I think I can figure it out."

"Okay, but it's very important you get the right size."

Kylie nodded. "I will."

"It will only take a minute," the attendant said, a tad more insistent that time.

"I know ... but I'm fine. Thank you," Kylie added.

The woman's expression said Kylie was making a mistake, but she walked off.

"Ugg, no way would I let a stranger handle my girls," Miranda whispered. "These are virgin girls." She giggled.

"I think the ol' biddy just wanted to see your boobs." Della growled at the clerk's back.

Kylie elbowed Della and tried not to snicker. "She was just doing her job."

"Duh, she was like eyeing your boobs like they were candy, and I'm standing here holding a bra and she didn't even ask to measure me!"

"I think there might be a reason for that." Miranda snickered again.

"Bitch!" Della said it with a smile.

Relief swept through Kylie when she saw Della's smile. The last thing Kylie wanted now was for Miranda and Della to start smacking each other around verbally.

Della cupped her A-cup boobs. “At least these puppies aren’t virgin. And believe me, Lee didn’t complain.”

Miranda laughed. “I’m surprised you didn’t tell me that I didn’t have an ass.”

“I’m saving that insult for next time,” Della said.

“I’m going to try on these.” Kylie studied the bras she held. “Can you hold these?” Kylie handed Miranda her bags containing two pairs of jeans and two pairs of shoes.

“Here, try this one on, too.” Della held a bra out.

“I don’t like black bras,” Kylie said.

“Yeah, but I’ll bet Derek does.” She grinned and wiggled her brows.

Kylie rolled her eyes. But she snatched the bra from Della and headed off to the dressing room. Behind her, she heard Della and Miranda laughing.

Trying on bras reminded Kylie of the Goldilocks fairy tale. One felt a bit too big. One was a bit too lacy, and one, the black one, was a bit too ... sexy.

Now to decide which ones to take home. Kylie glanced down at the pile of bras and had just slipped the strap of her old bra up onto her shoulder, when she heard:

“I like the black one best.”

The deep male voice that came from behind her had her heart leaping into her throat. Her eyes shot to the mirror.

Before she saw his face, she saw the blood.

He stood right behind her. Big splotches of red color stained his shirt. Even his auburn-colored hair was soaked in it.

His eyes flashed a vivid red color. He shot her an evil smile and his elongated canines showed at the edges of his mouth. Recognition hit—Blood Brothers.

Chapter Sixteen

Kylie opened her mouth to scream, but neither air nor words came out. Panic gripped her throat and blocked off all oxygen and verbal communication. She swung around, not certain if it was to fight or to run.

He wasn't there. Her gaze shot back to the mirror as if only his reflection had been real. He wasn't there, either.

Her gaze shot to the open door to the dressing room. It had been closed. He'd really been here.

She slammed the door. Sucked a bit of oxygen into her lungs. Tried to scream again, but stopped when the dressing room door swung open and whacked against the wall.

Every muscle in her body clenched. *Fight*. The one-word command echoed inside her. Then Della appeared behind the door that now hung half off the hinges.

"Was someone here?" Della asked. Her eyes shined bright amber. Her canines appeared sharp and threatening under her raised upper lip.

Still unable to speak, Kylie nodded.

Della careened forward when Miranda rammed into her back.

"What happened?" Miranda peered over Della's shoulder. "Why did you take off like that?"

Tears stung Kylie's eyes. She sometimes cried when she was scared, and she had been scared—mortified, actually—but these weren't frightened tears. These were tears of anger. No, make that fury. Fury from feeling violated. *I like the black one best.*

His words rang in her ears. How long had that slimeball been watching her try on bras?

“Is someone here?” Miranda asked. “Ghost? Non-ghost?”

“Vampire,” Della snapped at Miranda, and looked back at Kylie. “You okay?”

Kylie nodded again. “Is he gone?”

“For now.” Della snatched up Kylie’s purse and bras and handed them to Miranda. “Go pay for these while she gets dressed.”

Miranda took off. Della looked back at Kylie. “You really okay?”

“I think I’m mad enough to rip out someone’s heart and beat him with it.” She bit down on her lip to keep from crying. “How long was he here playing Peeping Tom?”

“Just seconds.” Della’s color grew paler. “It wasn’t Chan, was it? I mean, it didn’t smell like him, but ... all I could mostly smell was blood.”

“No.” Kylie grabbed her shirt and yanked it over her head. Her mind flashed the image of the blood dripping from the guy’s hair.

“So you did see him?” Della asked.

Kylie poked her head through her T-shirt and met Della’s eyes. “It was ... it was that creep that we fought at the wildlife park. The one who grabbed me.”

Della lifted her nose in the air. “Oh, shit!”

“Is he coming back?”

“Somebody is.” She grabbed Kylie by the arm and hurried her out.

When they walked out of the dressing room, Miranda was taking the package from the woman at the checkout counter. Della motioned her to follow and she did without questioning. Obviously, Miranda could see panic in both of their eyes.

“What’s going on?” Miranda asked.

“We have to get back to camp,” Della said.

“Is he here again?”

“Let’s just go,” Della snapped.

The moment they stepped out of the door, a black SUV came to a screeching stop in front of the store. Della growled and then pushed Kylie and Miranda behind her.

The window lowered and Burnett stared out. His own eyes were a fierce

golden color. "Get in."

"What about the car we drove?" Kylie asked, though she didn't know how she could even think, let alone drive responsibly with the panic still bouncing around her gut.

"Get in!" Burnett's tone demanded obedience.

And they complied.

* * *

"What's going on?" Della asked Burnett once they'd all piled into the backseat.

Burnett didn't answer. He focused on driving. The SUV took off before Kylie realized someone was sitting in the front seat with him. It was a dark-haired woman around Burnett's age. She looked familiar and Kylie realized she'd been among the crowd of FRU the night of the fight at the wildlife park.

"Toss them the scrubs," Burnett told the woman.

Three plastic bags with what looked like a pair of hospital scrubs tucked inside each were thrown in the backseat. "What are these for?" Kylie asked.

"Take your clothes off," Burnett ordered. "Put all your clothes back in the bag. Shoes, socks, underwear. Everything. Then put the scrubs on."

"Do ... what?" Kylie asked.

"You heard me," he snapped.

"Why?" Kylie and Della asked the same question.

"Do it," the woman ordered.

Della and Miranda started to undress, but Kylie grabbed their hands and stopped them.

"No. We're not taking our clothes off until you explain why. And it better be a damn good reason because I don't take my clothes off just because someone tells me to. Just ask my ex-boyfriend!"

The woman turned in her seat and glared. Her eyebrows twitched as if trying to get a reading on Kylie. Too bad it wouldn't work.

Not that the woman gave up immediately. She continued to stare. Her amber-colored eyes grew a bit brighter, and somehow Kylie suspected that

she was werewolf. Pissed-off werewolf. “Do it,” the woman insisted.

“No.” Amazingly, Kylie didn’t feel intimidated. She glared right back. She even did her own twitching and tried to see the woman’s brain pattern. It didn’t work, but the were didn’t know that.

“Do as he said! Or I’ll do it for you,” she ordered.

Burnett caught the woman by the shoulder. “Selynn, let me handle this.” His gaze shot to the mirror and Kylie met his golden reflection. “Kylie, please...”

“No!” Kylie honestly didn’t know where her newfound gumption stemmed from, but it felt good. It gave her some small sense of control. She really needed to feel in control to help combat the feeling of being victimized.

“Do you realize what you’re asking?” Kylie continued to hold both Della’s and Miranda’s hands. “For us to take our clothes off in a car with a man sitting in the front seat with a rearview mirror. And you aren’t going to explain why?”

Burnett reached up and ripped the mirror from the car’s window.

“Damn!” Miranda said.

“Two girls were killed in town,” Burnett said.

“Shit,” Della said.

“Oh, hell,” Miranda said.

The only thing that came out of Kylie’s mouth was a gasp.

Burnett continued, “I need your clothes to prove that you three weren’t involved with their murders. The FBI and FRU will demand it. So, please, do as I say.”

Kylie let go of their hands and started undressing. In a few minutes, all three of them sat in green scrubs, looking like surgical doctors. No one said a word during the process.

Miranda collected the three bags and handed them to Selynn. “Here.”

“Do you really think anyone will think we had anything to do with this?” Kylie asked, remembering the blood all over the rogue vampire’s head and shirt.

“No,” Della said. “But they’ll believe I did.” She sounded hurt. “It was a vampire kill, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Burnett said. “But I don’t believe you did this. I’m just taking precautions until we know who did.”

“We already know who did it,” Della said. “Kylie saw him.”

“Saw who?” Both Selynn and Burnett swung around.

“It was the rogue vampire,” Kylie said. “The one who attacked me at the wildlife park.”

“Damn it!” After almost running off the road, Burnett pulled over and rammed the car into park. He twisted in his seat again and met Kylie’s eyes. “You aren’t hurt, are you?” His eyes shot to her neck as if ...

“No. I’m not hurt.” A big wave of I-wanna-cry, I-wanna-cry-right-now filled her chest.

“Did he say anything?” Burnett asked.

I like the black one best. “No,” she said.

Burnett’s stare deepened. “Now isn’t the time to be lying.”

Kylie swallowed. “He didn’t say anything that would be helpful.”

“Let us be the judge of that?” Ms. Badass Werewolf sitting in the front seat said.

Kylie frowned. “He said he liked the black bra best. I was in the dressing room.” The feeling of being violated hit strong again and the anger accompanying it welled up in her chest.

Burnett’s expression changed from demanding to empathetic in a split second. “Are you sure you’re okay? He didn’t...”

“I’m fine,” she managed to say, but she felt the tears fill her eyes and looked away from Burnett’s concerned expression.

“He came and left so fast that by the time I sensed he was there he was gone,” Della said.

The memory of his reflection in the mirror filled Kylie’s head. “He had blood ... all over him. His shirt. His hair.”

Miranda slipped her hand into Kylie’s and gave it a squeeze as if offering moral support.

Burnett’s frown deepened and he turned back around and started the car. He looked over at Selynn sitting in the seat beside him. “Make the call. Tell them it’s a Code Red.”

“You sure you want to attempt that?” Selynn asked.

“What’s a Code Red?” Della asked right before Kylie posed the question.

Burnett answered hesitantly. “Right now, the only ones who know about this are the FRU. Code Red means we’ll fix it so it looks like a car accident.”

“You’re going to let him get away with it?” Kylie asked.

“No,” Burnett said. “But neither can we let something like this leak out. Any rumors start floating around, making higher-ups nervous, and they’ll close down the school.”

Selynn held up her hand as if to silence everyone. Then she spoke into the phone. “It’s a Code Red.” She paused. “I know.” She cut her eyes to Burnett. “He gave the order, I’m just the messenger.”

Burnett frowned and Kylie got the impression that whatever Burnett was doing, he was doing it for the school and maybe even Holiday. But she couldn’t help but wonder about the good of the townspeople—the human people who would never know that a murderer had come and taken two of their own.

* * *

When they walked into Holiday’s office thirty minutes later, Holiday practically leapt out of her chair and ran over to them. “Thank you, God,” she yelped, and wrapped her arms around all of them in a group hug. Della was the first to pull away.

“We’re fine,” Della said.

Speak for yourself, Kylie thought. She could have used a few more seconds of a hug. It was the closest she’d felt to Holiday since the whole Burnett issue.

“Look.” Della pointed to the television screen mounted on the wall.

Kylie glanced up and her breath caught. The screen showed a wrecked car and then two pictures of girls. *It couldn’t be*. She felt suddenly nauseous.

Holiday grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

“Two girls were killed today in an automobile accident. It appeared...” the reporter continued.

“We met them in town,” Kylie blurted out, her chest filled with heaviness.

“We talked to them.” For some crazy reason, that short encounter made their deaths even more personal. “The redhead is named Amber. I don’t know the blonde’s name.”

“They weren’t very nice.” Della voice sounded tight. “But they didn’t deserve to die.”

“No, they didn’t.” Miranda put her hand over her lips and just stared at the screen.

Kylie would have verbally agreed, but she couldn’t. She recalled with clarity the blood on the rogue vampire’s shirt and emotion closed her voice box. It had been their blood she’d seen. When the tears prickled Kylie eyes, she felt like a crybaby, but then she noticed both Della and Miranda had a wet sheen to their eyes, too.

“I feel...” Kylie forced the words out. “I feel as if it’s somehow my fault.”

Holiday stabbed at the remote and turned it off. “It’s a terrible thing. But the only person responsible for this is the rogue who did it.” Then she just stared at each of them as if needing to visually memorize them. “When I heard two girls were found ... I thought...” Holiday’s eyes pooled with tears. And that pretty much made it a cry fest. Even Della joined in the tear party.

Right then, Burnett walked into the office. His gaze went from one female to the other. Kylie could almost hear him groaning inwardly.

“I ... I’ll be ... right out here.” Obviously even a hard-bodied vampire trained by the FRU wasn’t capable of dealing with four crying women.

Fifteen minutes later, Burnett poked his head back in the room, and when he saw they were no longer in tears, he walked in. On his heels came Selynn, the werewolf who’d been with him in the car. She stood so close to Burnett’s side that her shoulders brushed up against his forearm. Burnett stepped to the side and started explaining that he needed to interview them separately. He opened the door and told Kylie and Miranda to wait outside of Holiday’s office.

As the two of them started out, Selynn looked over at Holiday. “You should leave as well.” Selynn’s voice held such a condescending tone that Kylie decided right there and then that she really didn’t like her. Not even a

little bit.

Holiday shot the woman a look that Kylie could only describe as fiercely protective. “Sorry, but I don’t take orders from anyone when it involves my campers. Or has Burnett not informed you of this?”

“She can stay,” Burnett interjected.

Selynn placed a palm on Burnett’s forearm. “I really don’t think that’s wise.”

“The girls will feel more comfortable with her here.” He stepped away from her touch. But Kylie noticed Holiday’s gaze take in the familiar way the woman treated Burnett.

Jealousy flashed in Holiday’s eyes. Not that it lingered more than a second. One blink and the emotion vanished. And probably for a reason, too. Selynn glanced at Holiday as if looking for a reaction. Which led Kylie to assume that Selynn had feelings for Burnett. Not that Kylie sensed that Burnett returned any of the feelings.

Then again, he might just be good at hiding his emotions. Could this be part of the reason Holiday refused to get too close to Burnett, because she knew he was already involved with someone? Instant distrust for Burnett stirred inside Kylie.

Burnett motioned for Kylie and Miranda to leave. Kylie, suspicious of Burnett for Holiday’s sake, didn’t move until Holiday confirmed the order.

“Who do they think is in charge?” Selynn asked, annoyed at Kylie’s show of authority for Holiday.

“Can we please just get started?” Burnett said.

Kylie and Miranda walked out into the front room of the office.

“He’s checking to see if we’re lying. That’s why he wants to talk to us separately,” Miranda whispered.

“I don’t think he thinks we’re guilty.” Kylie defended him, though she wasn’t so sure she could say the same about Selynn. Then Kylie wondered again about the relationship between Burnett and the rude were.

“God, it sucks.” Emotion gave Miranda’s voice a raspy tone. “I can’t believe we actually met the girls who were killed.”

“I know,” Kylie said but, honestly, she didn’t want to think about it. She

still had this overwhelming feeling that it was her fault. She dropped down onto one of the two desk chairs filling the small entry room and stared at her hands. Was this the bad thing that the ghosts had been talking about? No, the ghost had insisted it was someone Kylie loved. That thought sent another wave of sorrow sloshing in her gut. She hadn't loved those girls, but someone had. They had mothers, friends ... Closing her eyes, Kylie tried to reconnect to the calm she'd found at the falls. How long could she hang on to that feeling when bad shit just kept happening?

"It could have been us." Miranda pulled at a thread attached to her light green scrubs.

"I know." Kylie gripped her hands together.

It was only a few minutes before Selynn and Della walked out. Kylie stood up. Selynn motioned at Miranda to follow her. Then she turned to Kylie and Della. "We prefer if you don't speak. And Burnett can hear you if you do." She practically smirked before following Miranda into the office.

Della snarled at the werewolf's back. "Bitch," she mouthed the word. And when the werewolf was in the other room, Della said it out loud. "Bitch." She glanced at the office door. "I don't care if you can hear me, Burnett. She's a bitch. You know it. I know it. And Holiday knows it."

Footsteps sounded on the office's front porch. Kylie glanced toward the door just as it opened and Derek rushed in. "Thank God." He stopped and just stared at her as if noting the hospital scrubs. Right behind him followed Perry, looking just as worried.

Perry's gaze shot around the room. "Where's Miranda?" Fear and some other deep emotion filled his now copper-colored eyes.

Kylie didn't have a chance to answer because Derek swooped her into a big hug. She let him hold her, even rested her head on his chest and sighed at how good it felt to be this close to him.

"Why do you want to know?" Della mouthed off. "You don't like her, remember?"

"Is she okay?" Perry demanded, his voice a deep rumble of emotions. Kylie didn't bother to pull away to see, but she imagined his eyes were changing colors as he spoke. She'd noticed his eyes shifted with his

emotions.

“Don’t go all T. rex on me.” Della lost her smartass tone. Whether out of fear of Perry or if she heard the emotion in his voice, Kylie didn’t know.

“You okay?” Derek whispered in her ear.

“Yeah.” *Hell, no.* Kylie pulled back to look in his eyes and she saw the same concern flashing there that she noted in Perry’s. A rush of calm flowed from Derek into her. She didn’t argue this time. She really needed it.

The door to Holiday’s office opened. Miranda walked out. Perry met her eyes, then he turned and left the building. Miranda watched him go. “What did he want?” she asked.

“To make sure you were okay,” Derek answered, and slipped a hand around Kylie’s waist. “I saw him right after I heard what happened and I told him. He was worried about you.”

“But not worried enough to even speak to me, huh?” The look on Miranda’s face was half sad and half angry. She met Kylie’s gaze again. “Your turn.” She pointed to the office door. “Watch out, the she-wolf bites.”

Kylie gave Derek’s hand a tight squeeze and then walked into the room to face Burnett and the she-wolf. Kylie was no longer as intimidated by Burnett as she was the first time she’d been interrogated by him, but a nervous tickle still fluttered in her chest.

Chapter Seventeen

Burnett made Kylie go over what happened several times. Then he asked specific questions. “You said the rogue vampire was bloody. Did it look like fresh blood? How much time passed from when you saw the girls to when he appeared?”

Then Burnett asked the same questions in a slightly different way. At one time she’d have thought he was trying to catch her in a lie, but now she suspected his intent was to make sure she wasn’t forgetting something and hoping a slightly different question might lead her to remember some minor detail that could be useful. Problem was, Kylie didn’t want to remember. She longed to forget, to wipe it from her memory forever. And seriously, what else could she tell him that might be helpful?

“Could you describe the blood to me?” Burnett straddled a straight-backed chair in front of Kylie, reminding her of their first interrogation. Only this time she sat on the sofa with Holiday beside her.

“I already did.” She felt her patience being pulled like a tight rubber band.

“One more time.” His tone demanded obedience.

It was the tone that finally made Kylie snap. “You know who did this. You know who his victims were. So is any of this *really* necessary?” She gritted her teeth and tried not to start crying again.

“We decide what’s necessary,” Selynn answered in her haughty tone, moving in behind Burnett.

Kylie glared up at the werewolf, not trying to hide her contempt. Selynn’s tone annoyed Kylie even more than Burnett’s harsh tenor. At least with Burnett, she heard real concern. With Selynn, it seemed to be all about power. She liked having it and enjoyed using it.

“You think we did this, don’t you?” Kylie asked Selynn.

“I think—”

“Stop.” Burnett frowned at Selynn, then glanced back at Kylie. “Kylie, I know you didn’t do this. And I know this isn’t easy. However, blood patterns might tell us if he was killing for sport or for food.”

His statement made her stomach churn. “And why does that make a difference? Those girls are dead no matter what his reasons were for killing them.”

“I think she’s had enough questions.” Holiday placed her hand on Kylie’s wrist, offering moral support and a strong surge of calm. The rush of peaceful energy slowed Kylie’s heartbeat and lessened the tightness in her chest. Not that it could make it all go away. Kylie didn’t think that power existed.

Burnett looked at Holiday, then at Kylie. “It won’t change what happened. But right now, we need all the information we can get on this creep to be able to catch him. To stop him before he does this again.”

Burnett’s words shifted around inside her head and pulled at her conscience. Two girls had died. Violently died. Was it too much to ask for Kylie to suffer through a few more minutes of questions? No, it wasn’t. Taking in a breath, she sat up straighter.

Holiday stiffened. “For a vampire, your hearing is really bad. I said she’s had enough.”

“It’s okay.” Kylie turned her palm over and gave the camp leader’s hand a squeeze. “If it helps stop this guy, I can do it.” But she didn’t let go of Holiday’s hand.

Ten minutes later, apparently when Burnett felt he’d drawn every detail about the incident he could out of her, he stood up and looked down at her. “Thank you, Kylie. I know this wasn’t easy.”

She nodded and after she let herself breathe in and out a couple of times, she decided it was her turn to ask the questions. “Do you think he wanted it to look as if we’d killed these girls? Like they tried to frame someone at the camp for killing the animals?”

Burnett shook his head. “No. There’s nothing to lead us to conclude that.”

“Do you think ... do you think he followed us into town?”

He considered her question for a second. “No, I don’t. I think it was a coincidence that he ran across you.”

Holiday squeezed Kylie’s hand. “I told you, this isn’t your fault.”

“No, it isn’t,” Burnett said. “This has nothing to do with you, Kylie.”

“Then how come it feels so ... personal?” Kylie asked. “I mean, he keeps showing back up. At the park and then last Friday. I didn’t actually see him then, but I’m assuming it was him. And even after that I ... I’ve felt as if someone was following me.”

“When did you feel this?” Burnett asked.

“Yesterday morning when I came to the office before breakfast. At first, I thought it was the wolf but—”

“Wolf?” both Burnett and Selynn said at the same time. While Burnett looked concerned, Selynn immediately started twitching, trying to read Kylie again. It took everything Kylie had not to reach up and cover her forehead. Maybe even give the woman the finger.

“When was this?” Burnett asked.

“A couple of days ago,” Holiday answered. “It wasn’t a werewolf. Kylie said it appeared to be semi-tame. Nonthreatening.”

“Was it a shifter?” Burnett asked.

“I’m ... not sure. But I know it wasn’t Perry.” Kylie hesitated and then recalled what this conversation was really about. “But the wolf isn’t important. Two girls are dead and I ... I feel as if it’s somehow my fault. I think he was after me, not them.”

Burnett dropped back down in the chair facing her. “I can understand how you might feel that way. But if he was out to hurt you, he could have done so the other night in the woods. I don’t think this is personal. Not toward you. To the camp as a whole ... maybe.”

“Then why does he keep coming to see me? It doesn’t sound like a coincidence.”

Burnett frowned. “It’s not a coincidence. You put yourself in situations that offered him the best opportunity with the least of amount of risk. And the first time, he didn’t come to you. You had gone to the wildlife park where the Blood Brothers were. And if he was here the other night, and we’re not sure it

was him, then he probably spotted you when you ran off in the woods and saw it as an opportunity. And today, he was probably ... hunting when he sensed other supernaturals in town. Again, you were the one alone in the dressing room. He took advantage of it.”

And got himself an eyeful, Kylie thought. “But you even said that if he’d wanted to kill me the other night, he could have but he didn’t even try. So what did he want with me then?”

Burnett hesitated. “I think he wanted to send a message to the camp. To let us know that the gang hasn’t moved on. I’m sure the arrest of several of their gang members has dented their egos. If they pulled out right away, it would appear as if they lacked courage. If they stay around, they at least save face. I’m sure he realized that killing you would have brought too much trouble down on the gang.”

Kylie tried to grasp exactly what Burnett was saying. “But he killed those girls. Are you saying that didn’t cause trouble? That doesn’t make sense.”

Burnett looked at Holiday as if asking for her help.

Holiday squeezed Kylie’s hand. “When a supernatural kills another supernatural, it’s easier to deal with the offense. We have our own justice system.”

“And when they kill a human? What happens?” Don’t let them say “nothing,” Kylie thought. Please God, don’t let them say “nothing.” She might be part supernatural, but she was still part human.

“That’s part of the FRU’s job,” Burnett said. “But as you might guess, it can make getting justice tricky.”

Kylie felt her shoulders getting tighter. “Are you telling me that he’s actually going to get away with this?”

“No.” Burnett said in a deeper tone. “You have my word, Kylie, I will do everything I can to make sure this guy pays for this.”

Exactly how Burnett intended to make him pay wasn’t clear. Nor was Kylie sure she even wanted to know. But something about the way he said those words told her this wasn’t a promise he made lightly. And for that, she was grateful.

* * *

That night, the camp leaders held a meeting of all the campers at the dining hall and served up both pizza and sage advice. Burnett spoke about being extra careful. “Stay on the main paths and trails and don’t go through the woods without having someone with you,” he explained. “Depending on how dense the trees are or how the wind is blowing, an intruder’s scent could go undetected.”

Della shot a grin at Kylie and then turned back to Burnett. “Maybe you should cancel parents weekend,” she suggested.

Burnett looked at Della. “That’s over two weeks away. I hope to have this problem resolved by then.”

“Hey, can’t blame a girl for trying,” Della muttered.

“I have a meeting with the High Council next week,” Burnett said. “I’m hoping I’ll get some assistance to deal with what happened here.”

Kylie leaned in closer to Della. “Who are the High Council?”

“Sort of like the Senate, made up of a bunch of elders from the different species.” Della smiled. “I just learned about it this afternoon. Chris did a talk about it in our vamp meeting.”

“A Senate? I didn’t think all the species got along,” Kylie said.

“They don’t. But neither do the Democrats and Republicans and they still meet.”

“I guess so,” Kylie said, and then another question popped up. “What kind of assistance will they offer us?”

“Depends. Chris said the council has to vote to even look into the case.”

“Vote? Two girls murdered, how can they say no?”

Della shrugged. “You have to remember that not all the elders are in line with the government’s way of thinking. ”

“You mean some of them are rogue?”

Della nodded. “According to Chris, most of the elders respect the government, but don’t want to be controlled by it. So they follow some of the rules, but not all of them.” One of Della’s eyebrows rose upward.

Kylie shook her head. She had enough trouble trying to understand human

politics—did she really have it in her to grasp this, too? “If they take the case, then what?”

“They either allow the council of the accused species to do the punishing and deal with things or they turn the guy over to the FRU. And I don’t want to think about what happens to them then.”

“Me, either,” Kylie admitted.

Della glanced over to the door and her mood seemed to have changed. “I’m going to head on back to the cabin. I’ve got some stuff I want to do.”

“What kind of stuff?” Kylie remembered the obituaries she’d found on the computer screen.

“Just stuff,” Della snapped.

Kylie leaned in. “You could never do anything like this.”

Della glared at her. “I’ll see you later.”

“Do you want me to walk with you?” Kylie asked, remembering Burnett’s caution to stay together whenever possible.

“Are you kidding me?” Della asked. “If something attacked, I’d just end up having to protect both of us.”

“Hey ... I’m not so helpless anymore.” After thinking about what those girls might have gone through, Kylie wasn’t so upset about her new found strength, either.

“Just because you broke one door in, and don’t lag behind when hiking through the woods, doesn’t mean crap.” She grinned, letting Kylie know she was mostly teasing. “I’m fine. I’ll see you later.”

Della took off, and Kylie watched her go. Her heart ached for Della. Then she saw her vampire friend turn and give a couple of boys the finger. No doubt they’d probably said something rude and crude.

“Hey.” Holiday stopped beside Kylie. “Is Della okay?”

“I hope so.” Kylie realized that ever since they’d returned from town, the distance that had seemed to come between her and Holiday because of the whole Burnett issue had vanished. Had they bridged a gap, and could Kylie keep it from reappearing?

“Are you doing okay?” Holiday asked.

“I’ve been better,” Kylie said honestly. “I just keep thinking about those

girls.”

“Maybe Sunday we can take a walk to the falls,” Holiday said.

“That sounds good.” The thought of going there with someone who could feel the same thing Kylie did seemed nice.

Right then, Burnett looked over at them and Kylie saw Holiday notice it, too. Kylie cringed, worrying that Holiday would remember she was mad at her.

“I should apologize,” Holiday said, obviously reading Kylie’s emotions again. “I ... I overreacted about the whole thing with Burnett.”

Shocked, Kylie looked at her. “No you didn’t. I was wrong to say anything to him.”

“Maybe, but your heart was in the right place. When we care about people, we sometimes overstep our grounds. I of all people should know that. I’m a famous overstepper.” Holiday’s voice tightened. “Today when Burnett first came to me and said they had two teens down and I thought ... Well, let’s just say our issue really felt stupid.” Holiday put her arm around Kylie and gave her a sweet, sisterly hug.

“Thank you.” Kylie fought the swell of emotion in her throat. “But you are going to make me cry.”

Holiday looked up toward Burnett. “Hey, if you cry, maybe it will send him running again. If I knew all it took were a few tears to get him to leave, I’d have been crying for the last seven weeks. ”

Kylie grinned and when she looked up at Burnett, she saw Selynn walk up to him and say something. “What’s she still doing here?”

“Don’t know for sure,” Holiday said in a whisper. “I’m sure she wants something. And I bet it starts with a B and is tall, dark, and good-looking.”

Burnett listened to something Selynn said and then walked out the door with her. “And she may have just got it,” Holiday said, her voice revealing rejection.

Kylie hesitated to ask, but then it just popped out. “Are those two ... you know?”

“Dirtying up the sheets?” Holiday said.

“Yeah.” Kylie mentally added that to Della’s list of ways to say getting it

on.

“This afternoon he came into my office and made the announcement, ‘I know how things looked between Selynn and me. And it’s not that way. Or at least not anymore.’”

“So they were together and they broke up?” Kylie asked.

“He said they ended it two months ago. That they were never serious.”

Kylie raised her eyebrows. “And how long ago was it that you met him?”

“Two months,” she said.

“Hmm,” Kylie said.

“Hmm, what?” Holiday asked.

“Just a meaningless hmm,” Kylie lied. “So what did you tell him?”

“I told him that I didn’t have a clue why he felt as if he needed to tell me about Selynn.”

“Could he tell you were lying?” Kylie asked.

“Yup,” Holiday chuckled. They just stood there for a minute looking out at the crowd. “Any more info from the ghost lately?”

“Nothing,” Kylie said. “It scares me that ... I’ve messed up somehow.”

“I don’t think that’s it at all. She’s probably trying to figure out how to tell you what she needs you to know.”

“I hope so,” Kylie said.

Angry sounds exploded from across the room. “What did you call me?” a loud voice boomed. Kylie and Holiday looked up. Two werewolves stood nose-to-nose, about to go fist-to-fist.

“My work is never done,” Holiday said, and took off to break up the fight.

Kylie watched her go—watched her calm the tempers of two very high-spirited boys. After a few minutes of feeling a bit like a lone ranger, she spotted Miranda hanging with her witch sisters. She knew Miranda wouldn’t mind if she joined them, but Kylie decided against it. Helen and Jonathon sat at a table playing chess. She could go watch Helen embarrass Jonathon again with her natural talent for chess, but for some the reason, the two seemed to be enjoying being alone.

Another sweep of the room and Kylie found Derek. He leaned against a wall, arms crossed, watching her. A slow smile widened his lips. Something

in his smile told her he could really use some company.

She gave the room a quick check to see how many individuals could either smell her hormones or read her emotions. They were everywhere. What to do? What to do?

She glanced back at Derek, remembered how good it had felt when he'd held her those few minutes in the office, and she thought ... *what the hell*. She started walking toward him.

* * *

"Wanna go eat pizza in the moonlight?" Derek whispered in her ear when she stopped in front of him.

Standing this close, she could smell his freshly showered skin. A vision of what he'd looked like standing in the buff wearing only a few water droplets filled her mind. She blinked the vision away.

"Is that like dancing in the moonlight? It's supposed to be seductive." She smiled and then bit her tongue. Why was it when she got within three feet of him, all she could think about was ... him?

He grinned. "It could be. With the right person. And the right pizza." He laughed. "Hey, I'm hungry."

They got themselves two slices each of pizza and a couple of drinks and walked out of the dining hall.

"I know the perfect place," he said as they left the chatter of voices and the air-conditioning behind in the dining hall. The night air was warm and smooth. He pointed to the two large, white rocking chairs at the front of the office. She followed him. She was just about to sit down when the phone in her pocket chimed.

Sitting her drink down, she balanced her plate in one hand and pulled out her phone to check the number. She frowned when she saw her dad's number and she hit the off button.

"Who was it?" Derek moved the second rocker over so they faced each other.

"My dad ... I mean, my stepdad," she corrected herself.

"You still aren't talking to him?" Derek sat down and picked up a piece of

pepperoni pizza and took a big bite.

“Nooooo.” She stuffed her phone back in her pocket and dropped down in her rocker. Their knees touched and it felt nice.

“Why not?” Derek asked between bites of pizza.

Kylie stared at him. “Why would I want to talk to him?” She positioned the plate in her lap.

He finished chewing and swallowed. “Because you care about him. Because up until the shit hit the fan with your parents’ marriage, he was a pretty good dad.” He held up his finger. “You’re the one that told me that.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t tell you to use it against me.” She picked up the slice of pizza and stared down at the oozing cheese. Her mouth watered and her stomach grumbled. Thankfully, she was finally hungry. For a while there, she thought the blood had ruined her for eating regular food.

“I’m not using it against you.” He took a sip of his drink. “I’m just ... trying to help. Because when you saw it was his number, your emotions went all lonely and sad. I felt them all the way to my gut. Maybe if you talked to him, you wouldn’t have to feel that anymore.”

“He cheated on my mom.” She fought back the slight annoyance she felt toward Derek and took a small bite of pizza. The spicy sauce along with the gooey cheese made her taste buds jump up and down.

“That’s just it,” Derek said, taking another bite of his slice. “He cheated on your mom. Not you.”

Kylie swallowed the pizza and frowned. “Why does everyone keep saying that as if his infidelity didn’t affect me? It broke their marriage up. Nothing is the same for me anymore.”

Derek studied her over the rim of his drink and started his rocker moving. “Maybe if you spoke with him, some of it would be the same. The relationship between you and him could be the same.”

She dropped her pizza back on her plate, frustration chasing away her first sign of hunger in days. “You know, for a guy who won’t even think about talking to his dad, you’re a fine one to talk. I mean, you had a detective find your dad, and you still won’t even contact him.”

His jaw tightened. “And your point?”

She narrowed her own eyes and steadied her stare at him. “My point is, back off, okay?”

Derek scraped his feet on the porch, brought his rocker to a fast halt, and stared at her. “How far back do you want me to go? I’m already scared to even talk to you in public. Isn’t that far enough?” Frustration filled his voice, but it was the hurt in his eyes that made her see reason.

Why was she being such a B with an itch?

“I’m sorry.” Kylie said. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you. And I don’t mean that you can’t ever talk to me in public. I just ... I’m just ... I’m so moody.” Kylie remembered what Holiday had said about the mood swings in werewolves before the full moon. Was that why she was acting this way? She looked up at the dark navy sky and focused on what almost appeared to be a full moon. Come Monday she’d know, wouldn’t she?

When she glanced back at Derek, he’d continued eating. Not that he looked all that happy. He wouldn’t even look at her. Her thoughts shifted from what might happen on Monday to the anger that had just passed between them.

“Hey,” she said to get his attention.

When he looked up, his discontent showed more on his face.

“I’m really sorry,” she said again.

He dropped what was left of his pizza back on his plate. “You shouldn’t be,” he muttered, and used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth. He closed his eyes for a second. “You’re right. I wouldn’t want you trying to tell me I needed to call my father. It’s just...”

“Just what?” she asked.

“I feel everything you feel and it can be a tad overwhelming.”

“Bad overwhelming?” she asked.

“Not really,” he said, and glanced away.

“So we’re okay? I’m forgiven for being a bitch?” she said in a soft, pleading voice.

“I don’t think you’ve hit the bitch mark yet.” He smiled. “But yeah, you’re forgiven for being grumpy.” He set his plate on the porch and stood up. Bracketing his palms on the arms of the rocking chair, he leaned down

and kissed her. The kiss wasn't overly sexy, but the soft way his lips brushed against hers had her heart swelling with emotion. Emotion that was as gooey as the cheese pizza she'd abandoned.

"Mm." He pulled back, smiling. "I don't know if it's you, or the pizza, but something tastes good."

She touched his cheek. "Will you still like me if I'm werewolf?"

"What do you think?" His lips met hers again. This kiss came with a touch of his tongue and had her pulse racing even faster than its abnormally fast pace.

But when he pulled back this time, he wasn't smiling. He didn't look happy.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing." He sat back down in his rocking chair.

She looked at his expression through the moonlight. "I hate it when people do that."

"Do what?" he asked.

"Say nothing, when it's sooo obvious that it's something."

He let go of a sigh. "Okay, if you must know. It just occurred to me that maybe I wouldn't be so thrilled if you turn out to be werewolf."

"Because I'll get all hairy?" Kylie asked.

"No." His expression darkened. "Because ... because Lucas is werewolf."

Chapter Eighteen

Later, after Derek walked her back to her cabin in an uncomfortable silence, Kylie decided to go to bed early. She'd only been in bed a few hours when she felt herself having a dream. She knew it had to be a dream from the moment she became aware of the floating sensation. She rolled over and tried to force herself awake, but then she saw ...

Him.

Again.

Lucas.

He looked at her and smiled. His bright blue eyes looked heavy, sleepy. She realized that she was no longer above him, but stood beside him. He wore jeans and a light blue button-down shirt that wasn't buttoned. Her gaze went to his chest and then up again. All the way up, away from his open shirt. His black hair looked mussed, as if he'd just gotten out of bed himself, and the dark strands appeared to be a tad longer. It even had a bit of waviness to it.

"You came," he said.

"Came where?" she asked, feeling out of her comfort zone.

He didn't answer her, instead he said, "Come on, let's go for walk." He held out his hand as if wanting her to take it.

She hesitated. The idea of touching him tempted her, but she remembered she was angry at him, although she couldn't quite recall why.

"I don't bite." He smiled again.

It was just a dream, she told herself, and slipped her hand into his, forgetting about the hint of anger she felt inside. His palm felt so warm against hers that it made her giddy.

“I missed you,” he said.

She didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything. Or at least not about missing him. But she had, she knew she had.

“Where are we going?” she asked when he started walking.

He stopped. “Where would you like to go?”

All of a sudden, Kylie realized they were standing in a patch of woods; large trees with sweet-smelling flowers hung overhead.

“Paris? The mall?” He looked around as if just noticing the scenery. “Or would you like to go back to the lake, like in the last dream?” His voice grew deeper, huskier. “Is that where we’re going?”

Blood rushed to her face. *How did he know about that dream?* Then she remembered this was just a dream. Nothing had to make sense. Right? Yet this dream seemed even stranger. Different.

He laced his fingers through hers. “We could go anywhere, as long as I’m with you.” His irises appeared to darken and his eyelids looked heavier.

She recognized the emotion. Desire. Hunger. Passion. She’d seen it in his eyes the day they’d kissed at the creek by the dinosaur footprints. But that wasn’t the first time she’d seen that look. She’d seen it first in her dream. The dream of them swimming—of him touching her.

“We can even do anything ... because...”—he moved in closer —“because this is just a dream. It’s not real. Just like the first one. But it’s your choice. You’re the one in the driver’s seat.”

His head dipped down an inch, and his face felt lightly scratchy against hers. Then his lips brushed across her cheeks until he found her lips. She let him kiss her. At first, she didn’t respond. At least not until his tongue slipped between her lips.

Unable to think of anything else, she gave in and started kissing him back. It was hot. It was wonderful. It was just a dream. His hands were on her back, and then shifted to her front. Her breasts felt swollen when he brushed his palm across them.

Then ... she remembered Derek. Strong, kind, beautiful Derek. And then she remembered Fredericka. Yeah, that was why she was mad at Lucas.

She jerked back. She was breathing hard. He was breathing hard, too.

She started floating away.

“Don’t go, Kylie,” he said. “Come back. Please.”

Kylie suddenly became fully awake. She jackknifed into a sitting position. Her heart raced as if she’d run a marathon. Her palms felt sweaty. Her body tingled in front. It tingled darn near everywhere.

Socks, still in skunk form, meowed from the foot of the bed.

“Weird dream,” she said aloud, and it felt good to hear her own voice. “A very weird dream.”

Then she remembered Lucas’s letter. His first letter.

Dream of me, he’d signed it.

Was it a coincidence?

Crazy possibilities started forming in her head. What if...? What if werewolves had the power to get inside one’s dreams? What if these weren’t just dreams, but something more? Did that kind of power even exist?

The more she thought about it, the more she started to believe it, and the angrier she got. How dare he just come into her dreams and ... kiss her. Touch her. Wasn’t Fredericka enough for him? Did the she-wolf know Lucas was skipping out on her to come visit Kylie in her dreams?

So many questions and no answers. She realized one place she could look for answers.

Turning on the light, she yanked open the drawer and pulled out his letter. She’d already unsealed it and it slipped from the envelope easily enough. She blinked to adjust her eyes.

Hi Kylie,

Another letter from me. For all I know I’m the last person in the world you want to hear from. But it doesn’t stop me from writing you. Or from thinking about you. But damn, I think about you all the time—wonder if you have discovered what you are and the many talents that you have. I’ve spoken to Burnett and when I asked about you, he only said you were fine. I think he knew I wanted details but for some reason, he wasn’t willing to give them. It makes me wonder what you’re doing that Burnett won’t share. I don’t want to think about it too much, because I’ll start worrying.

You could say that I feel very possessive of you. I’m not saying it’s right, but I did meet you first.

Do you remember when we met? You were in your front yard, lying on the ground, staring up

at the sky. When I came over, you didn't even say hello. You looked at me with your big, curious eyes and asked if I saw the elephant. At first I thought you were crazy, but then you pointed to the clouds.

Kylie stopped reading as the tiny piece of memory started floating around her head. She did ... remember. Taking a deep breath, she went back to reading.

I remember I told you I didn't see the elephant in the clouds. But I did. I don't know why I lied, probably because you made me nervous. I could see you weren't human, but I couldn't tell what you were and it seemed strange. Not really a bad strange. You were just like a puzzle I wanted to figure out. Ha! It's been ten years, and here I'm still trying to figure you out. Part of me wonders if it's because you are a female, girls are always a mystery, or if you are really that big of a puzzle.

Anyway, I hope you'll think this is good news, but I may be able to come back to the camp. I've spoken with Burnett about it and he said he has to get clearance from a couple other people and if they say it's okay, I'll be back. Hopefully, I'll be able to explain more then.

Okay, I hope to see you soon, but until then ... dream of me.

Your admirer and friend forever,

Lucas

Kylie dropped the letter and just stared at those three words.

Dream of me.

Exactly what did he mean by "dream of me"?

Did it mean anything? It had to, didn't it? Kylie folded the letter and stuffed it back in her drawer. Her emotions ran all over the place. Then she realized a second place she could look for answers. The place she always went for answers. Holiday.

Kylie looked at the red glowing numbers on her clock. Still too early. It wasn't quite ... five.

But what happened to the regular cold that always came at dawn?

She looked at the window and saw the vaguest sign of sunrise. For some reason, her mind moved away from ghosts and to the two girls who'd died yesterday. They would never see another sunrise. Never experience another day. Or have another dream. She clutched two handfuls of blanket and fought back the emotion.

She'd just gotten her breathing back to normal when the cold crept into her bedroom like a bad omen.

"Okay," Kylie said, searching for patience that she seemed in short supply of lately. "How about let's have a talk? What can you tell me that I don't know? Give me something. You gotta give me something so I can help whoever it is that needs help."

"You can save her." The ghost's words filled the frigid air and her spirit appeared. Her long dark hair flowed over her shoulders. She didn't appear as thin or sick this time. And there was something about her, something that looked vaguely familiar. Kylie wondered if that meant anything.

"You can save her. You don't know you can, but you have the ability," the ghost said.

"How am I going to save her?" Kylie asked, hoping this might lead her to understand the identity of the person. She needed something, damn it—something to help her figure this out. "Who do I need to save?"

"She's scared. She needs you."

"Who?" Kylie gritted her teeth. "Just tell me who, and I promise I'll do everything I can to save her. Can you understand that I can't save anyone until I know..." The ghost vanished.

"Damn it!" Kylie dropped back on the bed. She breathed in and out and tried not to think about her frustration with the ghost. Tried not to think about the frustration with Lucas and the so-called dream. Tried not to think about the girls who'd lost their lives yesterday.

With so many limitations on what she could think about, she found one she could. Today was parents day.

That sent a whole new wave of frustration over her. Her mother wouldn't be here. Her dad ... her stepdad ... was off bumping uglies with a girl practically Kylie's own age, and Kylie would probably be the only one whose parents didn't show up.

Didn't that make her feel special?

"Daniel?" she said her father's name aloud. "Could you maybe drop in a minute?" *For moral support. Maybe answer a few questions about your parents?* "Please." No answer came. She counted to ten. Said a prayer. And

waited another minute before she lost her patience.

She pounded her fists on the mattress. It felt like a juvenile and stupid thing to do, but in her mood, it also felt good. So good, she continued to do it for a few more minutes.

Socks let out a frightened cry and Kylie felt him take a flying leap off the bed. She might have felt sorry for him if she wasn't in such a piss-poor mood. And that's when she remembered what the whole mood swings problem could possibly mean. She, Kylie Galen, might be morphing into a wolf in two days. Could life get any more friggin', fraggin' messed up?

Chapter Nineteen

After Kylie had given her mattress a good beating, she got dressed, apologized to Socks for acting silly, and left her cabin in search of Holiday.

The mornings were getting hotter and muggier. Welcome to July in Texas, Kylie thought as she made her way to the office to ask questions. The frustration buzzing in Kylie's gut encouraged her to run, but as eager as she was to find answers about the dreams, she was equally uneager to ask the questions. Holiday, with her emotion meter, would probably read what kind of dreams Kylie was talking about.

However, her need for answers obviously weighed in more than her need to avoid embarrassment, because she kept walking.

The moment Kylie stepped onto the office cabin porch, she heard angry voices coming from inside. She stopped by the white rockers where she and Derek had eaten pizza last night and listened. Not to eavesdrop, but to make sure Holiday was okay.

"What the hell is wrong with my money?" a male voice boomed, and Kylie immediately recognized it as Burnett.

"Nothing is wrong with it," Holiday answered. *"I didn't say I wasn't going to accept it. I said give me a few weeks to decide."*

"A few weeks to try to find another investor, you mean. Tell me that isn't what you're doing."

"Fine," Holiday answered back. *"That's what I'm doing, but—"*

"Do you hate me and vampires so much that you'd risk having Shadows Falls shut down?"

Kylie flinched when she realized she had shifted from concern for Holiday to ... eavesdropping. Not wanting to infringe on Holiday's privacy

any more than she already had, Kylie stepped off the porch and moved a good fifteen feet out of hearing range.

"I'm not going to let Shadow Falls close down!" Holiday's voice still reached Kylie's ears. Wincing, Kylie turned and moved another twenty feet back.

"But you won't deny hating me, will you?" Burnett snapped.

"Hate is pretty powerful word," Holiday said.

Kylie looked at the office in the distance, frowned, and moved another ten feet back.

"Damn it," Burnett said, his voice, loud and clear, still reaching Kylie's ears. It was as if ... as if he stood right next to her.

"Not good," Kylie muttered, realizing she shouldn't still be able to hear Burnett and Holiday. They were inside. She was outside. And a good—she measured her distance—a good fifty feet from the office.

Oh crappers! Things must be changing ... again. Kylie grabbed her boobs to make sure they hadn't grown another cup size. Thankfully, they felt the same.

"I just want to help," Burnett continued, and so did Kylie. She continued to move back. Back. Back. Back far enough so the conversation wouldn't reach her ears.

"Then help me by trying to understand," Holiday countered.

"What the hell am I'm supposed to understand? That you'll do anything to get rid of me? That's why you're doing it, isn't it?"

"I don't..." Holiday's voice wavered.

"Because you're afraid if you take my money you'll have to put up with me. Are you so attracted to me that it's that difficult to be around me? Hell, let's just have sex and get it out of your system. Maybe then you can stand being with me!"

"You are so arrogant," Holiday snapped. *"Having sex with you is the last thing I want."*

"Ahh, finally. Now, I know you're lying," he said. *"You are attracted to me."*

"La, la, la, la." Kylie started singing and covered her ears. She didn't want

to hear this. Nope. Not even a little bit. She turned away and started back to the trail that led to her cabin.

Seconds later, she heard a door slam shut. Felt a whish of air. She blinked and when her eyes opened Burnett stood there raking a hand through his hair. “That woman is the most difficult, the most stubborn redhead I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting.”

He shot off, leaving only a blurry streak in his wake.

“And you’re falling in love with her,” Kylie whispered. She didn’t know how she knew it, but she did. And somehow she realized she’d sensed it back at the falls, too. The genuine emotion she’d heard in Burnett’s voice and seen in his eyes had been what encouraged Kylie to tell him the truth about Holiday’s past. Not that it nullified the fact that it wasn’t her place to tell. Still ...

Kylie looked back at the office and remembered her questions about her dream, remembered her newly discovered hearing abilities, too. Was this a werewolf talent? She recalled asking Lucas if he could hear her heart beating and he’d told her that weres’ hearing wasn’t really set to do that, but to hear enemies approaching. What kind of hearing ability had Kylie just experienced? Was it werewolf or vampire?

Turning her head to the side, she listened to see what else she could hear. Nothing. Sure, she heard the normal noises, but nothing seemed too loud or out of the ordinary. Della had said she could hear the animals at the wildlife park. Kylie couldn’t hear that. So why had she been able to hear Holiday and Burnett’s fight? What did this mean?

Staring up at the sky soaked with pale early morning colors, she tried to accept all the things about herself that were changing. Problem was, to completely understand, she needed to know what the hell she was! With a chest full of emotion, she started walking back to the office, praying Holiday might have the answers.

* * *

“Holiday, it’s me.” Kylie called out when she stepped inside the main office ten seconds later.

“In my office,” Holiday answered.

When Kylie stopped at the door, Holiday swept her palms over her cheeks. She was crying. Or she had been.

Her eyes were still washed with wet sadness, and her face looked red. Angst and sorrow filled Kylie’s chest. “Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing.” Holiday waved a hand in the air. “Burnett and I just had ... words.”

“I know,” Kylie said, deciding the best approach was to come clean. “I heard.”

A frown appeared on Holiday’s lips and Kylie wasn’t sure if it was because she thought Kylie had been intruding or if the expression stemmed from her lingering frustration with Burnett.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Kylie said quickly. “When I stepped up on the porch and heard arguing, I wanted to see if you were okay, but then I moved off the porch, but I could still ... hear. So I moved farther. And I could still hear.” A little of her panic crept in Kylie’s voice.

Holiday’s frown deepened. “Were we that loud?”

“No. And that’s what’s so freaky. I shouldn’t have been able to hear you. I kept getting farther back and I...”

Holiday’s eyes widened. “And you could still hear us? Are you sure we weren’t just loud?”

“Positive,” Kylie said. “I was at the beginning of the trail.”

“Wow,” Holiday said.

“Yeah, wow!” Kylie dropped down into a chair. Her gaze shifted to the bills strewn out over the desk. Holiday’s emotion and frustration still filled the room. Kylie looked at Holiday. “Are we really in financial trouble?”

Holiday eyed the stacks of bills. “A little bit. But it’ll work out in the wash.”

“Are you going to take Burnett’s money?”

Holiday’s eyes tightened in worry. “I will before I let Shadow Falls suffer. But this issue isn’t important right now. You’re important. Are you okay with ... this?” She studied Kylie. “I mean your sensitive hearing.”

“Do I have a choice?” Kylie batted back a bad mood. “If I say I’m not

okay with it, will it just stop?”

Holiday shot her a sympathetic smile. “I can only guess how hard this must be on you. I mean, I grew up knowing certain things would happen and expecting there to be some surprises, but I’m sure for you, it’s really a shock. These last few weeks have been a real eye-opener for you, haven’t they?”

“Just a little bit,” Kylie said sarcastically, and pushed her palms into her eye sockets. When she looked up, Holiday studied her. “I just want to know what I am. If I knew that, then ... I think I could deal with it. I’m so tired of thinking I’m this, and thinking I’m that.” She gripped her hands together. “I’ve been ... so moody lately. A real bitch. I grew a cup size, half a shoe size, and added an inch to my height overnight, and now I’m hearing things I shouldn’t be hearing. Do you think this means I’m werewolf?”

Holiday chewed on her bottom lip as if considering. “Sensitive hearing is one of the gifts of being werewolf, but it’s also part of being vampire—though I’m told they each have different types of hearing.”

Kylie hung on Holiday’s every word, hoping she would tell her something Kylie didn’t know. But some of it she already knew.

“Like I told you,” Holiday continued, “when you mix human with supernaturals, or different species mix, sometimes the offspring are born with different abilities, but they always inherit the DNA and the main gifts from the dominant parent. And they fit into one pattern of a species. I’m sure your pattern will emerge soon. With all the changes happening to you so quickly, it’s bound to become apparent any time.”

Kylie struggled to understand. “But you also said if I was werewolf or vampire you thought I’d already have experienced some of the basic transitions.”

“I did say that,” Holiday admitted. “But I also said I’ve never seen a case like yours.”

“I’m just a freak.”

“No. You are unique.”

“I don’t want to be unique.” Kylie sighed. “Do fairies ever have sensitive hearing?” She looked at Holiday.

A smile whispered across Holiday’s lips. “Not commonly.” She continued

to study Kylie as if reading her disappointment. “You want to be fairy?”

“Yeah. I mean, if I have a choice, I’d go with that or a witch. Something that doesn’t ... you know ... change me or my body temperature.” Kylie thought of Della and how she’d feel if she knew Kylie felt this way.

“Am I terrible for wanting that?” Kylie asked. “I love Della and I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but I just ... I’d rather be witch or fairy. I mean, most of the gifts they get are not so complicated, not so hard to live with.”

Holiday chuckled. “Are you forgetting about the ghosts? That’s mainly seen in fairies or elves. And believe me, most supernaturals would die before wanting to deal with spirits.”

“True.” Kylie blinked. “I did sort of forget about that. And yeah, it’s a royal pain in the ass. At first, it terrified me, but now that I’ve had some time to deal with it...” She paused and remembered the ghost’s little visit this morning and the nightmare from the other morning. “Okay, it sometimes still terrifies me and frustrates me. But at least now I’m almost used to it.”

Holiday leaned her elbows on her desk. “Whatever you are, whatever gifts you end up getting, you’ll find that time will make those changes less scary as well. Whatever happens on Monday, I know—”

“Monday? Because it’s a full moon. You think I’m werewolf now?”

Holiday held up her hand. “I don’t know. I do know that you are an amazing young lady and no matter how things end up, you’re going to be okay.”

Kylie leaned her head back in the chair, stared at Holiday, and moaned. “I hate this. I really, really hate this.” Then she remembered the reason she’d come here this morning. She sat up again and took a deep breath.

Then she nipped at her bottom lip, trying to remember how she’d planned to ask about it. Hadn’t she come up with a less embarrassing way to approach the dreams? “One more thing...”

Holiday sat there, patiently waiting.

“Dreams...?” Kylie only got out the one word.

“What about them?” Her expression grew concerned. “Has the ghost been giving you more dreams?”

“No.”

“Night terrors?” Holiday asked.

“No.” Oddly enough, Kylie hadn’t had one of those in a long time. That is, if you didn’t call the vision dreams with the ghost night terrors.

“Are you sleepwalking again?” Holiday asked.

Okay, it was going to get weirder if she didn’t start talking. “I’ve been having strange dreams. I know I’m dreaming in the dream. And in the dream the people I’m dreaming about know it’s a dream, too. I almost feel as if ... as if he’s breaking into my dreams.”

“He?” Holiday asked.

“Lucas.” Kylie felt her face flush. “Is it possible for someone, for Lucas, to actually come into my dreams? To actually ... visit me? It feels so real. And I ... if it is real, I want him to stop doing it. I mean, in both letters he mentioned dreams. And if it’s real, he needs to stop it.”

Holiday’s eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything.

“What is it?” Kylie asked.

“I...” Holiday stumbled as if trying to decide what to say.

“Don’t lie to me, or keep something from me, even if you’re just guessing. Just tell me what you think is the truth.” She reached across the desk and placed her hand on top of Holiday’s. “Please.”

Holiday’s brow creased in concern. “Okay, but you probably aren’t going to like this.”

Oh, great. That was not what she wanted to hear.

Chapter Twenty

“He’s really doing it, isn’t he? He’s breaking into my dreams.” Kylie’s heart filled with resentment.

Holiday slowly shook her head. “I don’t think ... I mean. I’m only guessing, but it’s probably not him.”

“Oh, it’s him. I saw him.” She put her hand in front of her face about an inch away from her nose. “He was this close to me.” *And closer.* She recalled how he’d kissed her.

“No, I didn’t mean it wasn’t him in the dream. I mean, it’s not him coming into your dreams.”

Kylie tried to wrap her head around what Holiday was saying to her.

Holiday continued. “What you’re talking about is what we call dreamscaping, and I’ve never heard of a werewolf with this gift.”

“Well, you’ve heard of one now.” Kylie felt herself getting angrier, remembering the dream with them swimming. “And the thing he’s doing ... he shouldn’t be doing.”

Holiday held up her hand. “However, it is a very common gift with those of us who share the gift of ghost whispering.”

Kylie sat there, staring at Holiday, not wanting to believe the camp leader. “Are you saying that ... I’m ... I’m doing this?”

Okay, Kylie had put her foot in her mouth before, but she’d never had it in there so deep she felt her toes wiggling against her tonsils.

Holiday leaned in, her expression almost one of apology. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying, Kylie.”

Kylie nearly choked on a big breath of air. “So the person I’m dreaming about, do they ... I mean, can they remember the dreams?” Her heart stopped

as she recalled the first dream, the one of them swimming, the one where she'd practically flashed the girls at him.

Okay, so she'd totally flashed the girls at him.

"Some do," Holiday said. "Some don't."

Thank you, Jeeesus! She was definitely going with the "some don't."

Holiday continued, "However, supernaturals would remember."

Okay, I take back that thank-you.

Kylie really wanted to die now. Then she recalled Lucas saying, *You're the one in the driver's seat.*

"So ... whatever happens in these dreams ... Am I, like, in charge of it? Am I responsible for what happens in the dream?"

From Holiday's expression, she must have just realized what kinds of things Kylie was eluding to. "Our emotions often guide our dreamscapes just as they do our dreams."

"Our?" Kylie asked. "Do you ... do this, too?" Hey, misery loved company.

Holiday held out her right hand, her thumb and index finger pinched close together. "I'm slightly gifted in this area, but yes, I've experienced it some." She waited a few seconds before continuing. "Ultimately, you are the one in control—if you are in control of your emotions."

Well, that pretty much left Kylie in the dark. How many times had she admitted feeling no control when it came to boys and kissing, let alone ...

Holiday continued, "The dreamscaper sort of sets the stage for the dream. You offer a script to the person you are dreaming about and, depending on the strength of your abilities, and the person you are dreaming about, he or she can either refuse the script or attempt to alter it."

Kylie's head started to throb. No doubt from stress. "But it feels so real."

"It is real, but it's not." Holiday reached over and took her hand. A lot of Kylie's stress began to fade. "Think of it as going to see a movie. If you go see a movie with someone, you both share the experience. You live through the emotions, but it didn't actually happen."

Holiday released Kylie's hand, and then leaned back in her chair. "I'm impressed by this new ability of yours, Kylie. Really. If someone is highly

skilled in dreamscaping, it's considered a very powerful gift. You can learn a lot from it and even teach others through the use of dreamscapes. And very few of us are lucky to have it."

"Lucky me," Kylie said with zero enthusiasm. "I don't suppose it's one of those returnable gifts?" she asked, feeling overwhelmed.

"Not returnable. I'm afraid the time has already passed to refuse your gifts. When you accepted your role as a ghost whisperer, you pretty much accepted it all." Holiday smiled. "But believe me, in time you will probably feel more in control of it. Seriously, Kylie, this is a very special gift."

Kylie crossed her arms over her special extra-size breasts and tried to take it all in. Holiday's words replayed in her head. *I've never heard of a werewolf with this gift.* "So ... if I am gifted with this, does it mean I'm not going to be morphing into a werewolf this Monday?"

Holiday didn't say anything, but Kylie saw that look on the camp leader's face again. The one that said she was either trying to figure out if she should say something, and if she did, how to say it in a way to soften the blow.

"Just spill it," Kylie told her. At this point, she might as well hear everything.

Holiday wrinkled her brows. "You are good at reading me," she said. "Really, too good," she said as if that could mean something, too.

But Kylie was too focused on the werewolf issue to care what other things Holiday was thinking. "What are you telling me now?"

Holiday shook her head. "I was going to talk to you about this later. But first, I want to say up-front that it's still surmising." She paused.

"Okay..." Kylie waved her hand to hurry Holiday along.

"After our talk yesterday where you mentioned the wolf ... Well, Selynn and Burnett told me that ... there's an old legend about real wolves being drawn to weres who are supposed to be in the hierarchy of the pack."

"So, I'm like an important werewolf?" Damn, she didn't even want to be a regular werewolf—she for sure didn't want to be an important one.

"I said it was just surmising on our part. Because frankly, Kylie, all the other stuff, the fact that you've never turned, that your other gifts aren't those common with weres, it doesn't line up. Especially when you realize that most

all hierarchies in a were group are full-blooded. No human blood. So, you see, I don't want you to start thinking this really means anything. Because frankly, I'm not sure it does."

"Or it could mean a really big something," Kylie said, and wondered if she'd ever figure it all out. Or if she was destined to go through her life not knowing who or what she really was.

* * *

Before Kylie left Holiday's office, the camp leader asked Kylie to help her greet the visitors, deliver cold water and hot coffee, and keep peace in the dining hall during parents day. She got the feeling Holiday didn't need her help as much as she worried Kylie would go back to her cabin, fall into bed, and crawl into a deep state of insurmountable depression. Since Holiday could actually read Kylie's emotions, that was a big possibility.

Now, prepared to play the part of a greeter, the door to the dining hall opened and several parents came rushing in and looking around for their kids.

Kylie realized a problem with Holiday's no-depression plan. Seeing eager parents walk in and embrace their kids wasn't exactly cheering her up. Remembering the call with her mom and how upset her mom was about having to miss the visitation helped chase away some of her melancholy. But then her mind shot to her stepdad and the reasons he wasn't going to show up. Too busy bumping uglies with his skanky girlfriend!

Kylie turned around and went to the table to start pouring glasses of iced water.

Ten minutes later, the noise in the dining hall rose as more parents arrived. Kylie looked around and her thoughts went to her mom again. Not that her mind lingered on Mom too long. Nope. She had better things to knock around in the batting cage of her mind. Like the realization that Kylie had been barging into Lucas's dreams and handing him a dream script that read: let's get naked, go for a swim, and make out.

Not that he'd exactly been complaining about it.

Oh, and the best part, according to Holiday, was that Lucas would remember these dreams, too. So when he came back to the camp—if he came

back—she'd have to face him.

Nope. She definitely didn't want to think about that.

She grabbed another tray and started lining up glasses to fill with water.

"It's Kylie, right?" A soft voice spoke beside her.

Kylie glanced up from the tray. The woman appeared to be in her early fifties. She wore her dark hair short in a classic older lady cut, and her soft green eyes studied Kylie with a smile.

"Yes, it's Kylie." She forced herself to smile back and she was glad she did. It took her only another second after noticing the eye color to recognize the woman. "Hi, Mrs. Lakes."

Kylie looked around to see if she could find Derek, thinking his mom was obviously looking for him. "I haven't seen him, but I'm sure—"

"Oh, he's right over there." She pointed in the opposite direction from where Kylie looked. Kylie was tempted to turn around and find him, but something kept her from it. She recognized the emotion right off the bat. Guilt. Guilt about her dreams.

Please don't break my heart. Derek's words echoed in her head and she realized it would break her heart if she knew Derek was skinny-dipping in his dreams with some other girl.

Staring back down at the plastic glasses lined up like dominos on the tray, she hoped Derek wasn't close enough to read her emotions.

The woman put a hand on Kylie's arm and leaned in. "I told him I wanted to snag a glass of water."

"Oh, here," Kylie reached down and picked up a glass.

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Lakes said, but she winked. "Actually, I just wanted to say hello and tell you..." She leaned in again. "You are practically all he ever talks about."

The guilt in Kylie's chest doubled, but this time she couldn't stop herself from looking over the woman's shoulder at Derek. He made a face at her as if he was worried about what his mom might be saying.

"I think my son is sweet on you," Mrs. Lakes said.

Kylie shifted her focus back to Mrs. Lakes but she didn't know how to answer. "I..."

The woman smiled. "I'm so glad he found nice friends here." She looked down at her glass. "Now, I'll leave and stop embarrassing you. Thank you for the water."

As Kylie watched the woman walk away, she muttered, "I'm sweet on him, too." And she was. What wasn't to like about Derek? She liked him for his easygoing ways, she liked the way he was nice to everyone and didn't think he was better than anyone else. She liked him in other ways, too.

The vision of him standing naked in the shower filled her mind. She was really, really sweet on Derek.

So, why hadn't she barged into *his* dreams? Why wasn't Derek the one whom her subconscious went to for fulfilling some kind of naughty fantasy? Feeling her face heat up just thinking about this in public, she looked back down at the glasses of ice water.

"Hi, Pumpkin."

Thoughts of fantasies immediately took flight. *Hi, Pumpkin. Hi, Pumpkin.* Realizing who stood right behind her, she froze. Even if she hadn't recognized the voice, only one person called her pumpkin.

She turned and lifted her eyes to her dad ... stepdad. "What are you doing here?" she blurted out, and damn it if she didn't want to drop to the floor, curl up in a ball, and start to cry.

"What do you think I'm doing? I came to see my girl." He smiled and looked at her the way he used to when she did something cute, or when she showed him a good report card.

Yup, she wanted to cry all right. The tightness in her throat made that crystal clear. "You didn't tell me you were coming." Was that enough of a reason to walk away? "You should have told me."

The loving father look on his face quickly changed to an unhappy father look. "I would have told you if you'd taken my calls," he said in a disgruntled voice. It was a voice he didn't use a lot, because her mom had always been the heavy.

"I've been busy," she answered.

His eyes tightened. "We both know I left you about seven voicemails, two texts, and a couple of e-mails. And I don't think you've been so busy that you

couldn't have returned just one of them. I even called your camp leader."

The tears she didn't want to come started filling her eyes just as anger started filling her chest. But she welcomed the anger, because it crowded out the hurt. She looked into his eyes. He had no right getting angry at her. No right to tell her what she'd done wrong when his wrongs had totally ruined her life. Ruined her mother's life, too.

"Do you really want to talk about right and wrong?" she asked.

To his credit, his expression went from annoyed to ashamed in zero flat. "I guess your mom's been talking to you. Damn it! She really shouldn't have told you about our problems."

"What? Are you kidding me? Are you seriously going to stand here and blame this on Mom?"

He blinked. "I just ... I don't think she should have said any—"

"Stop." Kylie gripped her hands to keep them from trembling ... or from punching him in the nose. Right then, she wasn't sure which was more likely to happen. "Mom didn't tell me anything." Tears spilled down her face. "Mom didn't have to tell me anything. *You* told me. No, wait. I misspoke. You didn't *tell* me anything. You showed me."

"What are talking about, Kylie?" He leaned in and lowered his voice as if hinting she should do the same.

But she was too mad, too hurt to care who heard their argument. He'd left her. He'd left her and her mom for some bimbo. The vision of him and his slutty little intern making out in front of the downtown B&B filled her head.

"Well, first you hit on Holiday when you came to visit me," she said. "That was embarrassing enough, but then I saw you in town later that day. You hadn't come alone. And I saw you and your intern standing in the middle of downtown Fallen. You want to know why I remember it so well, Dad?"

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but nothing came out.

So she continued, "Because you had your *tongue* shoved down her throat while she had her *hand* jammed down your pants." Kylie blinked and felt more tears spilling over onto her cheeks. "Lovely," she seethed. "It was such a lovely sight, seeing your dad practically get a hand job in public."

Instantly, she realized that the entire room had gone deadly silent. *Damn!* Had she really screamed that out in the middle of the entire camp and their parents?

She glanced out at the crowd. Staring at her and her father. And from the look on everyone's face, yeah, she had.

Okay, now she really, *really* wished she'd taken her dad's hint about lowering her voice. Turning around, not looking at her dad, not looking at the crowd, she walked out of the dining room, hoping she could get outside before she started crying in earnest.

She would have run, but exhibiting her superfast supernatural running skills would have caused even more of a scene.

So she walked slowly toward the exit and pretended she didn't feel the tears gliding down her cheeks.

She pretended her heart wasn't breaking.

She pretended that she didn't know that about one hundred pairs of eyes were watching her go.

But pretending could only take her so far.

This ... this was too damn real, and it hurt her too much.

Chapter Twenty-one

The knock sounded on her bedroom door not three minutes after she crawled into her bed and pulled the covers over her face and continued to cry. “Go away,” Kylie called out.

The door opened. She yanked the cover from her face, expecting to see Holiday. But nope, Derek stood there with a heck of a lot concern for her shimmering in his eyes.

Seeing it only made her start crying harder. She cried because of her dad, and she cried because she felt bad about the dreams she’d had about Lucas. Derek rushed over to the bed and pulled her against him. If he read any of her emotions about guilt, he didn’t say it. He just held her. And she loved him for doing that, too.

She buried her head on his shoulder and continued to sob in his arms. She didn’t care that she was getting tears and snot all over his shirt. His arms felt so good wrapped around her and while he didn’t say it, the way he held her said he didn’t care about his shirt, either. Good thing, because when she got through crying, it was really going to be a mess.

“Hey?” Another voice came from the open door.

Kylie pulled away and saw Della and Miranda standing there.

“I could turn him into a toad if you want,” Miranda said, waving her pinky. “Or maybe a skunk. I could use the practice.”

Socks, who’d been sleeping at the foot of the bed, raised his head, meowed loudly as if in agreement, and then shot off to hide under the bed.

Della snarled. “I could pick him up and drag him up a tree and then drop him on his head a few times until he comes to his senses.”

Kylie cried harder and then for some reason she started laughing. She

wiped her eyes and looked at three of the most beautiful people in her world right now. “Did I really say that in front of all your parents?”

“Yup. I think my dad had a stroke,” Della said, grinning from ear to ear. “It came just at the right time, too. He’d been grilling me about drugs again.”

“My mom passed out cold,” Derek teased.

Then they all started laughing. Kylie collapsed against Derek again. When she pulled back, she wiped her face and looked up.

And that’s when it happened. That’s when Kylie’s whole world opened up in a way it never had opened up before.

She blinked. At first, she thought there was just something wrong with her eyes. But nope. There was no mistaking it. She could see inside their foreheads. She could see into them the way she’d seen into Daniel’s head in the vision. She, Kylie Galen, could finally see supernatural patterns.

“I’m doing it, guys! I’m finally doing it!” She started bouncing up and down on the bed. “Holy crap, I’m really doing it.”

“Doing what?” a familiar voice asked from the doorway.

He didn’t call her pumpkin this time, but she recognized her dad’s voice. He stood beside Holiday, who glanced at Kylie with a huge apology in her eyes. Obviously, her father had demanded she bring him here.

“Can I have a word with my daughter alone?” He stepped inside her bedroom.

“Only if that’s what she wants,” Derek said, sounding defensive and older.

Kylie rested her hand on Derek’s arm. “It’s okay.”

Derek stood from the bed, but he didn’t stop glaring at her dad for one minute. To her dad’s credit, he just stood there and took Derek’s angry stare as if he knew he deserved it. Della actually growled, and Miranda twitched her little finger at him.

Kylie hoped she remembered to give each of them a big hug later.

“Come on, guys,” Holiday said, and motioned for them to leave. They all stepped out of the room. Then Holiday reached in, her concerned gaze meeting Kylie’s eyes right before she closed the door.

* * *

Kylie pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. Her heart must have dropped to her stomach because she could feel it pound in the pit of her gut. She stared at the top of her jeans-covered knees and not at him, because looking at him hurt too much.

Besides, if she looked at him, she might start crying again, and she didn't want to do that.

He sat down beside her on the twin bed. From the corner of her eye, she saw him fold his hands together in his lap. She heard him breathe. She heard herself breathe, too.

She closed her eyes.

Sooner or later, one of them had to talk. But for once Kylie decided not to be the bigger person here. Let him do all the work.

"I screwed up," he finally said. "I never dreamed I could screw up so badly."

Opening her eyes, she forced herself to look at him. The first thing she noticed was that he looked like her dad again. He wasn't wearing those tight jeans. His hair was combed like it should be and not spiked. He still had the highlights in his hair, but alone, they weren't so bad.

"I don't blame you for being furious at me, but I do love you, Pumpkin." He rested his hand on her knee and his touch sent tiny pinpricks of pain rushing to her heart. Tears filled her eyes.

She blinked, but didn't trust her voice to say anything just yet. And even if she did trust it, she wasn't sure what to say.

"I never wanted to hurt you," he continued. "I never dreamed that you'd be in town that day." He shook his head, closed his eyes, and when he opened them back up, she saw something she'd never seen before. Her dad was crying. Real live tears, too. The ache in her chest doubled.

"I don't know what got into me, Kylie. I lost my head. I turned forty and then your grandmother got sick and she died." He inhaled. "All I could think about was getting old. Then Amy—the girl at the office—she started flirting and it made me forget everything for a little while." His breath caught. "It

made me forget that the most important people in the world to me are you and your mom.”

Kylie knew it was her turn to talk, but she still didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t say she forgave him, because she didn’t. Then a thought struck.

“Did your girlfriend break up with you?” Was that the only reason he was here now?

“Yeah.” He looked embarrassed. Kylie was surprised he hadn’t tried to deny it. “But that’s not why ... I’d already realized how badly I’d screwed up before we broke up.”

She remembered her mom telling her how her dad had deserved someone to love him as much he had loved her all those years. That’s when Kylie felt a small part of herself give in. She couldn’t stay mad at him forever. She just couldn’t. Maybe she *was* ready to forgive.

He reached over and ran his hand over her head, the way he’d done all her life. “I love you, Kylie. You’re my daughter.”

No, I’m not. She remembered that he’d made her mother promise not to tell her about her real father and her anger returned.

She batted at her cheeks to remove her tears. Then she offered him the only thing she could. “I’m hurt and I’m really mad at you right now. As soon as it stops hurting so much, I might be able to forgive you. But not now.”

He nodded. She watched a tear slip from his lashes. He wiped it away. Then he leaned in and pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. “I love you, Pumpkin. Just remember that.”

As Kylie watched him get up to leave, she realized that just because you couldn’t forgive someone didn’t mean you stopped loving them. She bounced off her bed and wrapped her arms around her daddy. He hugged her back. He hugged her so tight. And it felt so good, she wept on his shoulder. Big tears. Dinosaur tears he’d called them when she was young.

She knew that in just a second she was going to have to let go, and that she still wouldn’t tell him he was forgiven, because he wasn’t. But for just a few seconds she wanted to feel that her daddy loved her. And while she wasn’t up to saying it yet, she hoped he understood she still loved him, too.

* * *

A few minutes after her dad left, Kylie was still stretched out on her bed when Holiday knocked on her door.

“You okay?” Holiday poked her head in the door.

“I’m working on it.” Kylie had stopped crying. Something about her daddy’s hug had eased some of the ache.

“You mind company, or would you like to be alone?”

“Company would be nice.” She tried to see around Holiday. “Is everyone still out there?”

Holiday stepped into the room. “Just me. I made them go back and visit with their parents for a while.”

“Good,” Kylie said, and then recalled the scene she’d caused in the dining room. “I’m sorry about everything. I just lost it.”

“Please.” Holiday dropped onto the bed beside Kylie. “We needed a little excitement. I mean, if something crazy doesn’t happen every fifteen minutes, it just doesn’t feel right.” She giggled.

Kylie grinned and then she remembered, excitement buzzing in her chest. “I did it. I...” She twitched her eyebrows and looked at Holiday. “I’m doing it now. I can see your pattern. You’ve got some horizontal lines and then ... and then triangle shapes on the left.”

“That’s great!” Holiday hugged her. “I knew it would happen for you. Congratulations.”

“But does this mean I’m opening up, too? That people can read me now and I won’t come across like a snooty bitch anymore? And can ... oh, man!” Hope started to build. “Can you see what I am? Look and tell me.”

Holiday stared at Kylie’s forehead. Her expression told Kylie the answer before Holiday spoke.

“Sorry. You’re still a snooty bitch.” Holiday grinned. “But it will happen any time now. Opening up takes more practice. Are you still doing your visualization exercises?”

“Not as often as I should,” Kylie admitted. “But I’ll start being better, I promise.”

“Have you experienced any more of the sensitive hearing?”

“No. Why? Does that mean anything?” Did Holiday know something she wasn’t saying? Did she think Kylie was back to being a werewolf now?

“No. I was just curious.” Holiday reached up and tucked a strand of Kylie’s hair behind her ear. “Are you really okay? You’ve had a rough few days.”

“Tell me about it.” Kylie’s thoughts went back to the girls who were killed. She looked at Holiday. “What if ... What do I do if those girls from town—their ghosts, I mean—come to me to help them?”

Holiday gripped Kylie’s hand. “That won’t happen.”

“How can you be so sure? If their spirits are still here and—”

“It won’t happen,” Holiday said with more certainty this time.

And that’s when Kylie understood. “They came to you?”

She nodded. “I’m helping them cross over.” Then Holiday gave Kylie a feel-better hug. Its soothing effects did wonders.

“Now, let’s go back to you,” Holiday said. “Are you okay?”

“Not completely okay,” Kylie said, and then admitted a piece of truth that Holiday deserved to hear. “You were right. I feel a little better after seeing my dad. I didn’t let him off the hook, either. I’m still furious at him, but ... I know he loves me. And I love him and sooner or later, I’m sure we’ll be back to something that is almost normal.”

Holiday leaned back on Kylie’s pillow. “Normal is overrated, anyway.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if I’d even recognize normal now.” Kylie raised her thumb to her mouth and nipped at the corner of her nail.

“Well, if you did recognize it, you probably wouldn’t like it anymore,” Holiday teased.

“I just want to figure out this whole mystery with the ghost, if someone really needs me or doesn’t need me. Do these ghosts have a clue what they put us through?”

“I don’t think so.” Holiday touched Kylie’s arm again. “But I really believe everything is going to be okay.”

For the next few minutes, only silence filled the room. Kylie looked down at Holiday resting on the bed. “Can I ask you something?”

Holiday cocked an eyebrow at her. "It doesn't involve Burnett, does it?"

"No," Kylie said. "But it's about boys."

"Okay, shoot." Holiday sat up.

"Is it ... normal if you really like one guy to still be infatuated with another?"

"The whole Derek and Lucas issue, huh?"

"Yeah." Kylie frowned. "But I liked it better when I didn't name them."

"Okay, no names. Two guys." She held out one finger. "First, we can't always control our attractions to other people. Take my aunt Stella, for example. She's been married to my uncle for fifty years, but the woman is goo-goo over Tom Selleck. Owns every movie and TV show he ever made, she spends hours every week watching him strut across her fifty-two-inch flat screen." Holiday gave Kylie a soft look as if she realized the whole Tom Selleck talk wasn't working. "I think I've said this to you before. You are too young to worry about things like this."

"You're wrong," Kylie said. "Why wouldn't I worry? Just because a person is young doesn't mean that being loyal to someone isn't important. And it still hurts if someone isn't loyal to you. It hurt like hell when Trey hooked up with another girl. It hurt Perry when Miranda kissed another guy, and they weren't even going out yet. Okay, I admit that at this age, it might not bring about the same disastrous outcome as ... as my dad cheating on my mom, but it still hurts. So I have to worry, because I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Wow." Holiday frowned and sat back up. "When you put it like that, you are so right, and I am so wrong. I'm sorry."

Kylie stared at the camp leader for a moment. "I appreciate your admitting you were wrong," Kylie said. *Adults don't always do that.*

"Is it okay if I try again to offer some advice?" Holiday asked.

Kylie nodded.

Holiday paused in thought for a second. "Can I guess that this is all about the dream you had with Lucas?"

"You could guess," Kylie said. "But I won't confirm or deny it."

Holiday smiled. "Kylie, you didn't intentionally seek out the dream. You

didn't even know you could do it. So you really aren't to blame. And the fact that you find yourself attracted to more than one guy is completely normal. I've got three guys right now that all I have to do is think about and I start tingling all over."

Kylie gave Holiday's words serious thought. "But did you feel that when you thought you really cared about someone else?"

"Yeah. Even when I was engaged, I still could appreciate a good-looking guy." She paused. "Being committed or loyal to someone doesn't mean you won't ever be attracted to someone else. It means you won't physically act upon the attraction." She grinned. "My aunt Stella, she used to tell my uncle he'd better pray Tom Selleck didn't show up on her doorstep asking her to run away with him. But the truth is, I know she'd turn Tom down flat. She loves my uncle Harry."

Holiday made a face. "Don't ask me why, though—he's bald, has a gut, and snores." She chuckled. "That said, I'll bet that woman has had some really hot fantasies about Tom."

Kylie laughed and then they both reclined back on the bed. The twin-size mattress offered just enough room for them both to stretch out with their shoulders pressed against each other. For a second they didn't talk. Kylie stared at the ceiling and finally posed another question. "Is Burnett one of the guys who makes you tingle all over?"

"No Burnett questions, remember?"

"Okay," Kylie said. "But if I was older, he'd make me tingle."

Holiday laughed. "You and half the world. Including Selynn." The humor in her voice faded.

Silence reigned again. Maybe it was thinking about Selynn and Burnett that brought on Kylie's next question. "Lucas told me in his letters that he was trying to get permission to come back to the camp. Do you know if he's coming back?"

Holiday hesitated. "He'll be here either tomorrow or Tuesday."

"Is Fredericka coming with him?"

"Yeah," Holiday said.

"Great," Kylie muttered. So if she did morph into a werewolf, Fredericka,

who would also be in wolf form, would probably chase her down and rip her wolf ass to shreds.

Her day was just getting better and better.

Chapter Twenty-two

That afternoon, Kylie decided to skip the picnic dinner at the swimming hole. First, she didn't have a bathing suit that would fit; second, she really wanted to make a few calls to see if she could locate any Brightens who might know something about her real dad. And third, well, she hoped the ghost would drop by again. Something about the way she'd shown up when Kylie had been talking to her mom felt odd.

Kylie knew she couldn't start fixating on trying to guess who the ghost was talking about being in danger. But deep down, the fixating had bit. Could the ghost be talking about her mom? Could her mom be in danger?

Worried that it might be true, Kylie had called her mom. Twice. But her phone was turned off. Probably because she was in mid-flight. Kylie sat down at the computer desk, telling herself everything was fine, and pulled out the printed list of phone numbers. Her cell rang. Hoping it was her mom, she took the call without checking the caller ID.

"Mom?" Kylie asked.

"Not Mom. It's Sara."

"Oh, hi," Kylie said, trying to figure out which one of the multitude of emotions about Sara she should let control the conversation. There was the hurt she felt that Sara—whom she'd considered her best friend for years—hadn't returned any of her calls in almost a month. There was the concern she felt knowing that Sara was ... going through something. And then there was the melancholy she felt because she knew her friendship with Sara would never be the same again.

When the silence seemed awkward, Kylie jumped in. "My mom said she saw you in the grocery store the other day."

“Yeah, she did. She’s looking good, too. I like her new look and hairstyle. She said you talked her into getting a makeover.”

“Did she do it?” Kylie asked. “She hasn’t told me she did it.”

“Oh, I hope I didn’t ruin her surprise.”

“Nah, I appreciate the warning. Does she look good? Or dumb?”

“Good. She looks ... younger, I guess. You know, kind of like she might be about to start dating.”

“Dating?” Kylie knew this was a possibility, she’d even suggested it, but for some reason now the idea hit her stomach like a bad piece of chicken. “Did she say that or are you just guessing?”

“No, she didn’t say it. She just looked, you know, like a woman who wanted to be noticed by a man. Tighter jeans and a fitted top that showed off her girls. I almost didn’t recognize her.”

Was Sara saying her mom was dressing like a ho? That wasn’t the makeover Kylie had suggested. Realizing the conversation had gone quiet again, Kylie started talking to fill the silence. “Mom said you looked...” Kylie had almost lied and said good, but at the last minute decided not to do it. “... thinner. Are you on some new diet again?”

Sara was the first to try every new diet endorsed by Hollywood: low carbs, no carbs, all fruit on Tuesday, all brown rice on Wednesday, the crazier the better.

Not that she ever stayed on any of them.

“Not really,” Sara said. “I think it’s the birth control pills. I heard they’d cause me to gain weight, but they seem to be doing the opposite with me.”

Sara was on the pill? It struck Kylie again how much things had changed between them. The old Sara would have certainly told Kylie something as big as getting on the pill.

But then, Kylie hadn’t exactly been in a sharing mood with Sara lately, either. Of course, trying to explain to a normal about being a still unidentified supernatural was a little—well, a lot—more difficult than discussing birth control pills.

“Did your mom agree to you taking them?” Kylie asked, knowing Sara’s mom was a bit of a religious fanatic and constantly preached against

premarital sex.

“Are you kidding? She’d die if she found out. I went to the clinic and I faked her signature.”

Kylie had heard about some other girls doing the same thing to get around the Texas law that required a parent’s signature before dispensing the pills.

Another long pause followed.

“So, who are you dating?” Kylie asked.

“A couple of different guys.” Sara sounded purposely vague. Kylie couldn’t help but wonder if Sara was having sex with the couple of different guys, too. Once upon a time, she might have asked.

“So,” Sara said. “You’re still coming home in a couple of weeks, aren’t you? Camp from hell is almost over? No more being a boner, huh?”

Annoyance chomped down on Kylie’s stomach. Obviously, Trey had told Sara about the whole boner reference, because Kylie couldn’t remember mentioning it.

“Actually, I’m only coming home for the weekend. And I really like it here.” Kylie didn’t tell her about the whole boarding school possibility just because she didn’t want to go into it. But she sent up a silent prayer that her mom agreed to it. The thought of going back to her old school and not having the old Sara at her side was just too much.

“Really, you like it? You hated it at first. Camp Freaky, isn’t that what you called it?” Sara sounded shocked.

That was before I actually realized I was a freak, too. Well, not a freak, but not all human, either. “I guess things change.” Kylie meant her relationship with her one-time best friend, as well as her feeling about the camp.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Another pause. “Well, text me when you get in town and hopefully we can meet up.”

She wasn’t even going to get a definite “Yes, I’ll see you” from Sara. That hurt like a paper cut to the lip. Pushing away the feeling, she answered, “Yeah, I’ll do that.” But she wasn’t so sure she would. Seeing Sara might just be too weird to deal with right now.

“Okay, my mom is calling me to help with the dishes,” Sara said.

Kylie couldn't hear anyone calling in the background. Not that she wasn't eager to end the call as well. This had been hard. Really hard.

"Okay, bye," Kylie said. *Have a good life. Nice knowing you.*

As soon as Kylie hung up, the phone rang again. This time, she looked at the caller's phone number.

Derek?

He didn't normally call her. "What's up?" she asked with a touch of worry.

A ghostly cold invaded the room as she waited for Derek to speak. A wave of dizziness had Kylie grabbing the computer desk. She had experienced this enough to know that it meant a vision was about to occur.

Or was occurring, she corrected when she saw the casket sitting where the kitchen table had been seconds earlier. The woman in the casket was the ghost. A few people moved around the casket with tears in their eyes.

"Kylie?" Derek's voice came on the line.

"Yeah." She stared at the casket and the people and wondered what she was supposed to learn from this vision. That was why they happened, right? The ghost was trying to tell Kylie something. But what?

"*I'm scared, Mama.*" From the back, Kylie saw the little girl reach up and take her mom's hand.

"*It's just Grandma.*" The couple walked up to the casket.

"Kylie, are you there?" Derek's voice sounded upset ... or something.

She recalled her concern about Derek calling her. It was so out of character for him.

"Yeah. I'm here. Is everything okay?" Kylie asked, and her concentration on Derek made the vision fade like an old photograph. It lost its color and went into black and white mode as if dating the scene as something that happened a long time ago. Then the vision grew weaker, almost transparent. "Don't go," she said.

"Go where?" Derek asked.

"Not you," she said, but it was too late, only a vague outline remained of the scene. The woman holding the little girl's hand turned around. Kylie got only glimpse of her face, but something about her looked familiar.

Shaking her head, and remembering Derek was still on the phone, she asked, “Is everything okay?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not okay.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You’re not here.”

She rolled her eyes. “I thought you were serious.”

“I am. I’ve been looking forward to this afternoon all day, thinking you’d be here.”

“But I wanted—”

“Please,” he said. “I...” His voice lowered. “I haven’t ever seen you in a bathing suit.”

“And you still wouldn’t. I’ve grown out of my bikini top, remember?”

“Don’t remind me,” he said with a tease in his voice.

“You’re terrible,” she reprimanded, but she wasn’t all serious. She liked the fact that he was attracted to her.

“Just put on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and come down.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. She looked at the computer screen, which displayed the list of the Dallas Brightens she hadn’t called yet. Della and Miranda had been helping, but so far nothing.

“Please,” Derek said.

His plea echoed in his voice and she felt herself giving in. On top of just wanting to make Derek happy, she remembered that she could read everyone’s brain patterns and realized seeing everyone all together would be fun. She could compare one brain pattern to another.

“You had a rough day,” Derek said. “You deserve some fun in the sun.”

I’ve had a rough few months. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Really?” he asked, almost shocked that she’d given in. Didn’t he know how much he meant to her?

“Really,” she said, and smiled. The smile warmed Kylie inside and out. The memory of how he’d stood up for her even to her dad played in her mind. And that’s when she knew that the next time Derek asked her to go out with him, she’d say yes.

* * *

It took her fifteen minutes to decide which pair of shorts and T-shirt to wear. She wanted to look good. Extra good. Maybe she and Derek could sneak off together and ... and hopefully he would ask her to go out with him. Heck, maybe she might even ask him.

When she realized how much time had passed, she tore out the door. The shortest route to the swimming hole was through the woods, so she took it. The speed with which she moved shocked even her. Her foot-eye coordination of where to step and how to miss the trees flabbergasted her.

While speed and agility had never been something she longed for, she found herself feeling a sense of pride at her new talents. If only she knew from what species these new talents stemmed.

She was over halfway to the swimming hole when she felt it. Felt that sensation of being followed. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. And wouldn't you know that's when she recalled Burnett's warning about staying on the paths and out of the woods.

Listening, hoping to hear something other than the sound of feet pounding against the earth, she felt better when the normal sounds of the woods filled her ears. Whatever presence loomed close by wasn't so ominous that birds and insects stopped their songs.

Not that she should stake her life on the wisdom of the birds and insects. The feeling hit stronger ... someone was here. What should she do?

Logic said for her to keep going; turning back would only put her farther away from the help of the others if trouble struck. Her mind went to the girls who'd been killed in town and amazingly, she found herself running even faster.

The clearing in the woods appeared in less than a minute. The bright sun hit her eyes and she could hear the other campers laughing and splashing in the water. When nothing attacked her, when no evil presence appeared wearing a bloody shirt and tried to yank her back into the woods, she wondered if this feeling of being watched wasn't all in her head. Could she be that paranoid?

She stopped in the clearing beside a tree and tried to catch her breath, feeling completely winded from her run. She almost had her breathing back to normal when she saw Derek coming toward her. He wore only a pair of swim trunks. His chest was bare and wet like the other night in the shower. The trunks were regular boy trunks, a little loose on him, even hung a little low on the waist, but they were wet so they molded against his form. Since she knew what he looked like without them, she found herself feeling breathless again.

“Hey,” he said, and when his gaze fell to her mouth, she could tell he wanted to kiss her. He looked around and saw that they had an audience. So instead of kissing, he reached out and took her hand. “Come on, the water feels great.”

It did feel great. And for the next hour, Kylie played water volleyball, splashed around, studied everyone’s brain pattern, and completely forgot about the problems pressing on her shoulders. The only downside was watching Perry watch Miranda. She looked really good in her bathing suit and Kylie wasn’t the only one who noticed, either. The guys were all stealing glances, even Derek, and then Perry would cut them glances, and not the friendly kind of glances either. His eyes would turn jet black, reminding Kylie of some kind of serpent.

Nevertheless, between the water and the laughter, Kylie hadn’t had so much fun in ... well, forever.

Then all the fun came to a jarring halt when she spotted Holiday running out of the woods in a panic and heading straight for the lake.

Her expression grew tighter with each hurried step. What was wrong? Holiday’s gaze found Kylie’s and suddenly she knew that whatever was wrong involved her.

Kylie started moving out of the water, but her toes sank into the mud at the lake’s bottom the closer she got to shore. All the stresses in her life lined up like dominos in her mind, and she wondered which one this new problem involved.

Selynn appeared behind Holiday and her gaze shot to Kylie, as well. This wasn’t going to be good.

Kylie met Holiday at the edge of the water and purposely ignored Selynn.
“What’s wrong?”

“We have a problem.” Holiday’s gaze shot back to the water and she waved someone else in. Kylie turned and saw Derek swimming in to join them.

“What is it?” Kylie asked again, still ignoring Selynn, who had moved in.

“You’re coming with us,” the werewolf spouted out. Her hand clamped down on Kylie’s wrist. “Now.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Kylie frowned and shook Selynn loose.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on.” Kylie’s gaze went back to Holiday who watched Derek step up onshore. “Will somebody please tell me what is wrong?”

Holiday glanced back. The line of stress furrowing the camp leader’s brow told Kylie this was serious. “It’s your mom.”

“My mom?” Kylie took a deep breath. Bits and pieces of her mom’s conversation filled Kylie’s mind. Then the ghost’s warning echoed like a bad song in her head. *“You have to stop it. You have to stop it or someone you love will die.”*

Oh, God, no.

“What’s wrong with my mom?” The words barely spilled from her lips. She remembered her mom was flying home sometime today. Kylie’s heart clutched as she envisioned a plane crash. Oh God, was her mom...?

“She must have come to see you.” Holiday said. “Late. For some reason, the new security alarm on the gate didn’t work. And she got in without anyone knowing.”

“She’s here?” More than Kylie wanted air, she wanted to know her mom was alive and well. That her plane hadn’t crashed. That some freak hadn’t kidnapped her and was torturing her the way the dreams seemed to imply.

“Yes. She’s here,” Selynn said in her haughty tone. “Against school policy. Visiting hours were over hours ago.”

Kylie’s gaze went to Selynn. What was the she-wolf saying? Was her mom okay or not? Kylie looked back at Holiday.

“What happened?” Kylie repeated her question. “Is she okay?”

“She’s ... upset.” Holiday’s frown deepened. “She was trying to find your cabin and got turned around. She ... she saw some things she shouldn’t have.”

“What?” Kylie remembered how stunned she’d been when she first saw Perry change into a unicorn. “What did she see?”

“She needs to be erased,” Selynn snapped. “And quickly.”

Erased? “What ... is that supposed to mean?”

The she-wolf grabbed Kylie by the arm and started pulling her toward the woods.

Kylie put on the brakes.

“What does erase mean?” she asked again, not anywhere close to understanding, but miles from liking how it all sounded. She yanked her arm away from Selynn and then took a step closer, so close Kylie could count the woman’s eyelashes.

“You better not lay a finger on my mother!” Kylie growled, and the sound of her voice seemed unnatural to her own ears. It was deeper. Coarser.

“Kylie, listen to me.” Holiday’s hand came down on Kylie’s back, sending a surge of calm into her tense shoulders. Kylie might have listened, might have even accepted the calm emotion from Holiday if Selynn hadn’t been there.

“We don’t have time for this,” Selynn snapped. She grabbed Kylie by both arms, her fingers digging into Kylie’s biceps hard enough to bruise. When Kylie tried to pull away again, Selynn tightened her hold.

“She’s human,” Selynn said. “She has to be dealt with. Now.”

“Dealt with?” Fury, anger, and fear for her mother’s safety threatened to overwhelm Kylie. “Damn you, where’s my mother?” Kylie’s voice sounded deeper than before.

“Stop it, Selynn!” Holiday said. “You’re upsetting her. She doesn’t understand what is going on.”

“Yeah, stop it!” Derek’s voice rang out.

Kylie felt Holiday’s touch come against her shoulder again. The fairy attempted to fill Kylie with a peace-inducing emotion, to curb her fury, but Kylie somehow rejected the flow from moving inside her.

“Your mom is going to be okay,” Holiday said, her voice seeming to echo from some other place. “She’s at Helen’s cabin right now. She—”

Once Kylie heard her mom’s location, she again tried to pull away from Selynn’s grip. But the she-wolf tightened her hold, her fingernails cutting into Kylie arms. Kylie recognized the pain, but it felt as if it was happening to someone else.

“Let go!” Kylie hissed in Selynn’s face.

When the woman didn’t release her. Kylie, acting on some instinct she didn’t even recognize, grabbed the woman by her shirt and slung her out of the way.

Several gasps echoed around her. One might have even been from Kylie when she saw Selynn flying like a rag doll through the air before she landed in the water with a loud splash. The werewolf came up covered in mud and spitting mad. She roared and started swimming back to shore, and once on dry land, she locked gazes with Kylie, slung her head back, growled, and charged.

Holiday jumped in front of Kylie and held out her hand. “One step closer and I will summon the wrath of the death angels. And if you think I’m joking about that, you don’t know me very well.”

But Selynn didn’t stop. She kept coming.

Then Derek and Della tackled her, sending the she-wolf tumbling to the ground with a grunt.

Kylie didn’t stick around to hear or see what happened next. She took off through the woods, her blood pumping through her veins as she ran with everything she had to reach her mother.

As she moved with inhuman speed, she felt a blast of air pass by her and she spotted a blur of movement. The sudden silence of the woods told her it was vampire. Not that she cared.

She only wanted to reach her mother before anyone touched her. If anyone hurt one hair on her head ...

Kylie heard her mother’s screams right before she exited the woods near the path that led to Helen’s cabin. Panic clawed at Kylie’s chest like a wild animal seeking escape. She cut through the last of the trees, flew over the

path, and arrived at Helen's porch.

Burnett, with a windblown Holiday at his side, stood there blocking the door. And Kylie knew Burnett had brought Holiday here.

"Let me out of here!" Her mom's scream reached Kylie's ears.

The rich berry scent that she now knew as blood filled her nose. She stared at Burnett. "Move!"

"Kylie." Holiday jumped in front of Burnett. "Listen to me, okay? Your mom is fine. She's very upset and we're going to have to calm her down."

"She's hurt." Kylie struggled to breathe and fought the desire to break through Burnett and the door to get to her mom.

"She's not hurt," Burnett insisted.

"I smell blood," Kylie seethed.

"That's not her blood," Burnett answered, his eyes turning a burnt orange color.

"I swear," Holiday said, and attempted to touch Kylie, but Kylie jumped back. Holiday lowered her hand. "Your mom isn't hurt, Kylie. I promise you. Please calm down. We're going to fix this. But we need your help."

"Trust them, Kylie," a voice said at the same time a familiar coldness invaded her breathing room.

Kylie turned to see Daniel standing next to her. "Trust them," he repeated.

Tears filled Kylie's eyes as Daniel wrapped her in his cold embrace. "It's okay." His icy breath came at her ear, as comforting warmth filled her chest.

An awesome sense of peacefulness flowed through her body. The same kind of peacefulness she'd felt at the falls. The kind that said things weren't as bad as she thought. The kind that said she should have faith.

She raised her head to look at Daniel, but he was gone. Feeling overwhelmed, her legs wobbled and she dropped to her knees on the porch.

Holiday crouched beside her. "She's going to be fine, Kylie. I promise."

Kylie looked at Holiday. "What ... what did my mom see? Perry...?"

"No." Holiday brushed Kylie's hair from her face. "I had given permission for Helen to donate a pint of blood to Jonathon. He was bleeding her, and against my rule he was..." Holiday paused and then firmly added, "He was drinking from the tube when your mom stepped in. I'm sure it

looked really bad to her. She panicked.”

Kylie dropped her face into her hands. “Oh, God.” How the hell was she going to explain this to her mom?

“Jonathon was startled,” Holiday continued. “He grabbed her and pushed her into Helen’s bathroom, shoved the dresser against the door, and sent Helen after me. I got Burnett here as quickly as I could.”

“I didn’t hurt her,” Jonathon said, stepping up on the porch. “I probably should have handled it differently, but I swear, I didn’t hurt her. I’m sorry this happened.”

Kylie looked at Jonathon. His shirt had stains of blood, Helen’s blood, she told herself, not her mom’s blood. Following him up the steps was Derek.

“Here’s what we have to do,” Burnett said. “It’s called erasing.”

“No,” Kylie said, instantly being reminded of her emotions and her fight with Selynn.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Holiday said. “Erasing means that the memory is removed from her mind. It won’t hurt her. But the calmer she is, the easier it is and the more successful it will be. And right now she’s not calm. I think if you talk to her, you can calm her down.”

“Talk to her? She saw someone drinking blood from an IV tube. What am I supposed to tell her that will calm her down?” Kylie asked. “Oh, don’t worry, Mom, they’re just vampires?”

Holiday looked Kylie right in the eyes. “She’s worried about you now more than she’s scared,” Holiday assured her. “Just let her know you’re fine and then Derek will come in—”

“Derek?” Kylie swung back to look at Derek. “Why Derek?” Something that looked like guilt clouded his eyes.

“We’ve recently discovered that Derek has the gift of erasing,” Holiday said.

Derek nodded and for a fraction of second, Kylie wondered why Derek hadn’t told her about his new gift. She thought they shared everything. Then her thoughts went back to her mom. “But if he’s new at this, then ... what if he messes up?”

“He won’t mess up,” Burnett said. “He’s practiced on me numerous

times.”

Kylie looked back at Derek. She didn’t know what all went into erasing someone’s memory, but the idea scared her. “Don’t you have someone with more experience?” Much to Derek’s credit, he didn’t appear offended by her request.

“He’s on another case right now,” Burnett said. “And the sooner we take care of this, the better it is. If we wait too long, he might have to remove more data from her mind. It could require he remove hours before what happened. Obviously, the less memory time that we have to remove the better.”

“Is it at all dangerous?” Kylie looked at Holiday for the answer.

Holiday shook her head. “When it’s done soon enough, the biggest side effect is a headache and confusion at the loss of time.”

Kylie looked back at Derek. “Promise me you won’t mess this up.”

“I won’t,” he said. But was that doubt in his voice?

“What do you have to do?” Kylie asked.

“Just touch her,” he answered.

Kylie nodded. She remembered Daniel’s assurance that she should trust them, and she stood up. “Okay. I guess.” Then she heard her mom start screaming again. She looked at Burnett. “Nothing better go wrong.”

* * *

“Mom,” Kylie called to her mom five minutes later from behind the large dresser that Jonathon had moved in front of the door.

“Kylie?” her mom screamed. “Oh, baby, are you okay? Tell me you’re not hurt. Tell me these crazy people—”

“I’m fine. I’m going to get you out, okay?”

“Hurry, baby,” her mom said. The rawness in her mother’s voice told Kylie her mom had been screaming and crying for way too long. “We’ve got to get out of here. There are some very bad people here.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Kylie said.

“Hurry, baby. Hurry before they come back.”

Burnett motioned that he planned to move the dresser and then leave.

Derek nodded. Then Burnett, with one hand, pushed the heavy piece of furniture out the way and, in a flash, was gone.

Her mom yanked open the door and flew out, wrapping her arms protectively around Kylie. “We gotta get out of here!” She spotted Derek and pushed Kylie behind her. “Stay away,” her mom yelled.

Derek looked at Kylie as if he was unsure how to proceed.

“It’s okay, Mom.” Kylie’s heart broke when she saw her mom’s tear-streaked face. “This is Derek. He’s a nice guy.”

“I don’t trust him,” her mom said. “We can’t trust anyone here. I just want us to leave. Now.” Clutching Kylie’s arm, she started moving toward the door, keeping herself between Derek and Kylie as if in protection.

Unsure what to do, Kylie stopped moving. She couldn’t let her mom walk outside. If her mom was freaking out with just Derek, she would surely lose it if she saw Jonathon and Burnett.

“Mom, Derek is a good guy. He’s going to help us leave,” she lied. “Aren’t you, Derek?” Kylie looked at him.

“Yes ... Mrs. Galen. I’m going to help you and Kylie get away.”

Her mom looked at Derek and back at Kylie. Panic shone in her eyes, but she didn’t jump back when Derek took a step closer.

“Let me get the door,” Derek said. He moved in and when he did, he reached out and touched her mom’s arm.

Kylie hadn’t known what to expect when a person’s memory was erased, but when her mom’s eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed in a dead heap on the floor, Kylie screamed.

Shaking, and still in mid-scream, she dropped down beside her mom to make sure she was still breathing.

“It’s okay.” Derek dropped beside Kylie and touched Kylie’s elbow. “She’s just unconscious. I promise, Kylie,” he said, as if reading her fear.

Burnett appeared and scooped her mom up in his arms. “I’m putting her in her car. You come with me,” he said to Kylie. “We’ll need you there when she wakes up.”

His gaze held Kylie’s for a second. “It’s all going to be okay,” he told her. “Follow me. It’s almost over now.”

Burnett disappeared. Kylie took off, too. She wasn't anywhere near as fast as he was, but with luck, and considering he had her mother in his arms, he could bet she wouldn't be far behind him.

* * *

"Mom, you okay?" Kylie tapped on her mom's car window only five minutes later.

When her mother didn't instantly wake up, it took everything Kylie had not to yank open the door to see if she needed CPR. But Burnett's list of don'ts still echoed in her head.

- Don't show panic, because she might pick up on it and it will make her even more nervous.
- Don't try to explain too much; let her come up with her own conclusions of what happened.
- Don't start crying for no reason.

And as he'd said that one, he'd pointed to Kylie's tears.

It was the "crying for no reason" part of number three that Kylie would have argued about if she hadn't been so damn worried about her mom.

Kylie tapped again on the window. "Mom?" She fought to keep her voice calm.

The way Kylie saw it, she deserved to go on a crying jag that lasted for a good two weeks. The emotional trauma she'd endured this last half hour would go down as one of the top worst half hours of her life. Even the fight at the wildlife preserve hadn't kicked her in the gut so hard.

She glanced down at her arms, expecting to see bruises and nail marks from where Selynn had grabbed her. Oddly enough, her skin was smooth and unmarked. Weird. Had she just acquired a new quick healing gift, too?

Her mom's eyes fluttered open and Kylie refocused on the situation before her. Her mom sat up and looked around, obviously startled. Kylie's first thought was that the erasure hadn't worked.

Then her mom turned her head and her confused eyes met Kylie's.

Kylie plastered a smile on her lips, hoping to appear as if everything in the world was just peachy. "When did you get here, Mom?"

Her mom's brow creased and she raised her wrist to see her watch and then opened the door. She turned and put her feet on the pavement, but didn't climb out of the car. "I..." She blinked. "I rushed over here from the airport." She ran a hand through her dark hair, which now had highlights of red running through it.

"You must have fallen asleep after you got here." Kylie bit her lip, realizing she'd broken one of Burnett's rules.

"Yeah." Her mom pressed a hand to her temple, a sure sign of the headache Holiday had said might come. "I was up all night at the airport hoping to get a flight on standby."

"You must be really tired," Kylie offered.

"Yeah. Gosh." She looked back at her watch and then stood from the car seat. "I hardly even remember arriving here. I must have parked and zonked out. Which is a good lesson for both of us. Don't drive while under the influence of exhaustion." Her mom reached over and gave Kylie a hug. "It feels so good to see you."

Damn it, if Kylie didn't feel herself breaking another rule. Tears filled her eyes and she hugged her mom really hard. Ahh, but her tears weren't just because of the last thirty minutes. No, they were because of Kylie's last sixteen years and the rarity of hugs from her mom. And because it brought to mind the hug she'd given her dad ... stepdad, before he'd left a few hours ago.

When her mom pulled back, she looked at Kylie. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Kylie batted at her tears. "It's just ... you don't hug me a whole lot."

"Something I guess we need to work on, huh?" her mom said, and touched her temple again.

"Yeah, we need to work on that," Kylie said. "But we're off to a good start." And they were. Kylie could feel it.

Her mom looked at her watch again. "I must have slept for an hour."

"You probably needed it," Kylie said, and started walking back through the gates.

"Yeah. I was going to call and let your camp leader know I was going to

be here a little late. I remember what a big deal they made over visiting hours, but wouldn't you know it that my battery died in my phone. It's completely dead."

"Yeah. Luckily I walked by and saw your car and told Holiday you were here. But they are very strict about visiting hours." *Please God, don't let me have to go through this again.*

"Which I think is silly," her mom said. "It's like they are trying to hide something."

"Nope." Kylie lied through her teeth and almost felt bad doing it. "Not trying to hide anything." Except things like: people drinking blood, changing into any kind of creature imaginable like super-size bears or unicorns or wolves. Or girls who accidentally turn kittens into skunks. In other words, the usual stuff that happened at Shadow Falls.

"But they're still strict," Kylie said. "They say it's for our safety. Besides, you know, like you used to tell me. Rules are rules."

"I know and I'll try to follow the rules from now on."

Thank you, Jeezus! "Would you like to go sit in the dining hall?" Kylie asked.

"Or your cabin," her mom said.

"Sure." And then Kylie remembered Socks—her little skunk. "Uhh, I forgot that ... Della and Miranda invited a few girls over. The dining hall might work better."

"That's fine," her mom said. "Maybe I could grab something to drink so I could swallow a couple of aspirins. My head is pounding like I'm going to have an aneurysm."

An icy coldness suddenly settled around Kylie again. For a moment, she thought the ghost was back.

She looked at her mom. "Don't say that."

"Don't say what?" she asked.

"The aneurysm crap." It had been one of the many unsaid possibilities Kylie had considered happening with someone messing with your mind, and erasing your memories, and it still freaked her out.

Her mom smiled. "I'm just being a drama queen. I'm fine."

“Good,” Kylie said. And when she looked at her mom, she recalled how frightened she’d been that she might never see her again. Another wash of emotion filled her chest. Kylie almost reached out to steal another hug. She didn’t. Not just because it might make her mom suspicious, but because where her mom was concerned, she’d probably handed out her quota of hugs for the month.

* * *

Amazingly, thirty minutes later, they hadn’t run out of things to talk about. Of course, they’d talked a good fifteen minutes about her mom’s new makeover. All of which Kylie admitted liking. Sure, Kylie was still a little hesitant about the thought of her mom dating, but Kylie decided to cross that bridge when she came to it.

Then her mom noticed Kylie’s “growth spurt.”

“Tell me that’s one of those Wonderbras making you look so big.”

“Fraid not,” Kylie said. “I’m a growing girl.”

That conversation led to her mom asking about Kylie’s shopping trip. But Kylie didn’t want to talk about shopping, or anything that occurred during her recent trip downtown. So she told her mom that her dad had come to visit. They talked a good five minutes about him. Kylie hadn’t given any details about the embarrassing scene she’d caused. She’d never even told her mom that she’d seen her dad in town.

She also opted out of telling her mom that her dad had broken up with his little girlfriend. For some reason, she didn’t want to remind her mom about that.

“I’m glad you two talked,” her mom said. “No matter what mistakes he’s made recently, he is a good father.”

“Yeah,” Kylie agreed.

Then Kylie spent another five minutes telling her how much she loved camp and her interest in the cake decorating class, all prep work for getting a commitment from her mom about signing her up for the boarding school in the fall. Not that she planned to ask about it today. Face it, whether her mom remembered it or not, she’d had a pretty lousy day.

“Seriously, you really enjoy decorating cakes?” her mom asked. “I do, too. Do you remember that I took that class when you were younger and made you the Cinderella cake?”

“Yeah,” Kylie said. “I loved it.” Another big freaking lie. She’d been fourteen and embarrassed out of her mind when her mom had served a fairy-tale cake at her soccer meet, but hey, what did one more little white lie count compared to the others she’d told today?

Lies aside, this whole new direction in their relationship was really going well. So well, Kylie decided to chance asking for more info about her real dad.

Picking up her soda, Kylie twirled the can in her hand. “Mom, can you tell me a bit more about Daniel?”

Her mom’s eyes widened. “Sure. I guess. But I think I pretty much covered everything the last time you asked.”

“You hardly told me anything. Like ... where were his parents from?”

She smiled. “I remember him telling me that they were originally from Ireland.”

“They’re Irish?” Kylie asked, not sure it would help, but not sure it wouldn’t. “When did they come to America?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was Daniel born in the States?”

“I’m guessing he was. He didn’t have an accent.”

“But you don’t know for sure, right?” Her hope started to wane. If he was adopted in Ireland, wouldn’t that make it almost impossible to trace him?

“I think he would have told me if he was born somewhere else.”

Kylie nodded. “You said his parents were in Dallas, right?”

“Close to Dallas. You know, somewhere up there.”

“Where?” Kylie couldn’t believe she’d spent this last two weeks calling Dallas numbers only to learn they didn’t even live there.

“I can’t remember.” Her mom studied Kylie. “You’re not thinking of trying to find them, are you?”

Okay, decision time. Kylie had told the PI that she would eventually tell her mom about her quest. Maybe this was showtime. “Would it upset you if I

was?” Kylie asked, not wanting to add any more stress to her mom’s day.

Her mom frowned. “I ... I just ... We don’t even know if they’re still alive.”

“They could be,” Kylie said, and couldn’t tell her mom that her real interest was in finding them so they might be able to lead her to Daniel’s real parents. Soon, her mom might find that out, but one thing at a time. Besides, she didn’t have a clue as to how she could explain that she knew Daniel was adopted. Well, not a clue without going through the whole ghost thing, and that was totally a conversation she didn’t want to have with her mom.

“Seriously, would you mind if I tried to find them?”

Her mom let go of a deep breath. “I don’t mind, Kylie. I guess I’m just worried they will be very angry at me if you did. There have been so many times that I felt guilty for not letting them know about you.” There was something in her mom’s voice that drew Kylie’s attention.

She suddenly realized if her mom felt guilty about not telling them, then she had to know where they were.

“Do you know where they are, Mom? Do you know how I could find them?”

Chapter Twenty-four

Her mom looked down. “I...”

“Please, Mom,” Kylie said. “Please. If you know anything, tell me.”

Her mom seemed preoccupied with her soda as if fascinated by the condensation running down the can. “I couldn’t bring myself to throw away his obituary,” she said finally. “I put it in the back of the frame of your baby picture hanging on the wall. It has their names and the town they lived in.”

Hope flared anew in Kylie’s chest. “When you get home, can you scan and e-mail it to me? Please.”

Her mom nodded. “If they are still alive, they are going to hate me.”

“I don’t think so, Mom. They’ll probably just be happy to meet me now.”

Her mom touched Kylie’s cheek. “I’m sorry, baby. I did what I thought was best at the time, but now ... it looks as if I didn’t make the best decisions.”

“You did fine,” Kylie said. And without thinking, she gave her non-hugging mom another hug.

* * *

An hour later, Kylie watched her mom’s car move down the road until it was a tiny blue dot that finally faded from view. Both Burnett and Holiday were waiting on her at the gated entrance when she returned.

“I think my mom is going to be fine,” she told them, assuming that’s why they were there.

Then she realized Burnett had probably been listening to their conversation the whole time. That’s when she got a feeling they weren’t here

just about her mom.

“Am I in trouble for fighting with Selynn?” she asked. The thought had crossed her mind during her conversation with her mom. Like it or not, Selynn was FRU.

Holiday shook her head. “No. Selynn deserved what she got. She handled the situation all wrong. Terribly wrong.”

Holiday glanced up at Burnett as if she was saying this to him as much as to Kylie. “If anyone says one thing about what went down out at the swimming hole, I’ll be the first to tell them how the cow ate the cabbage.”

When Kylie was about to ask Holiday what she meant about the cows and the cabbage, Burnett shrugged. “I don’t think anyone will be saying anything,” he said, humor dancing in his eyes. “I never have understood that saying. How does a cow eating cabbage translate into giving someone hell for something?”

“I have no idea.” Holiday looked back at Kylie. Burnett’s gaze followed Holiday’s, and they both returned to that weird kind of staring. And Kylie went back to wondering what the heck was going on.

“If it’s not Selynn, then what is it?” Kylie asked.

Burnett stuck his hands into his jeans pockets. “I think we just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

She started to answer him, but realized they both were staring at her again. “If that’s all, why are you two gawking at me as if I’m about to grow a tail?”

“Do you think you might grow a tail?” Concern filled his voice.

Oh, shit! He was serious.

Kylie swiped her hand over her butt to make sure nothing had suddenly appeared. When nothing was there, she frowned at them. “What is it that you’re not telling me?”

“You showcased some new talents today,” Burnett said.

“You mean running fast?” Kylie asked.

“And taking on Selynn,” Holiday said. “A were this close to a full moon is ... pretty hard to take on.”

“So you’re back to thinking I’m a werewolf now?”

Holiday glanced at Burnett and then they both looked back at Kylie.

“We’re still not sure.” He started studying Kylie anew.

“What is it?” she demanded.

“It’s your brain pattern,” Holiday said, her tone making it sound like a confession.

“What about it?” She touched her forehead. “Have I opened up? Can you tell what I am?”

“No,” Holiday said. “It’s just ... your pattern is shifting.”

“Shifting? You mean, it’s changing?”

Burnett and Holiday both nodded.

“What does that mean?” Kylie asked.

Holiday’s expression went from curiosity to sympathy in a flash. “It’s just...”

“Surmising, I know. Just tell me.” She motioned with her hands for the camp leader to hurry up.

“The only brain pattern that shifts and changes is a shape-shifter,” Holiday said.

“So, you now think I’m a shape-shifter?” Kylie tried to wrap her head around being a shape-shifter. Turning into giant lions and ...

“It’s not changing like a shape-shifter,” Burnett corrected. “A shape-shifter only changes when they change forms.”

Kylie looked down at her chest and lower, almost to make sure she hadn’t morphed into anything, and to make sure her boobs hadn’t taken on another cup size. Then she gave her butt another swipe, praying again that she hadn’t grown a tail. “I’m not changing.”

“We know,” Burnett said.

Then, as if sensing Kylie had about had her quota of crap for the day, Holiday came over and dropped an arm around her. “Come on, why don’t we take a walk to the falls?”

Kylie nodded. She’d been thinking about going back to the cabin and having a good long cry, but a trip to the falls sounded even better.

“I’ll come with you,” Burnett said.

“I think we’ll go alone,” Holiday replied.

“I don’t think you two should be that deep in the woods alone,” he countered. “We still don’t know why the security gate wasn’t working.”

“I don’t think we’re exactly vulnerable.” Holiday nodded her head to Kylie.

“I would feel better if I went with you.” He frowned. “You won’t even know I’m there. I’ll stay at a distance.”

Holiday rolled her eyes, as if to say “whatever,” then she guided Kylie to turn around and they started walking toward the trail that led near the falls. “I might be happy with a fifty-mile distance.”

“When are you going to remember I can hear you?” Burnett said from about fifteen feet back.

“When did you ever think I forgot?” she countered in a low voice.

* * *

Monday morning Kylie woke up to the chill of the ghost. She opened her eyes, but the spirit hadn’t materialized yet. “You do know just coming here and waking me up isn’t going to help me, don’t you? You need to give me something, find a way to show me who it is I need to help.”

No answer came back and Kylie pulled the covers over her chin and just stared at her breath making little clouds of mist rising above her nose. The visit to the falls with Holiday had been both amazing and amazingly disheartening. She and Holiday hadn’t even talked; they just sat beside each other, staring at the wall of water cascading down in front of them. The same ambience Kylie had found existed there last time seemed even stronger this visit. That was the amazing part.

And the amazingly disheartening part? The message she took away from the visit wasn’t so much everything was going to be fine. Nope. It was more like: stay focused and keep the faith.

And if Kylie had thought she could argue with the presence at the falls, she would have looked up at the rock ceiling and roared, “Really? That’s all you’re going to give me?”

Honestly, how was she supposed to stay focused when she didn’t know what to focus on? Sort of hard to focus on ghosts when they wouldn’t even

appear, wasn't it?

The temperature dropped another few degrees.

"Yeah, I'm talking about you," Kylie said aloud to the spirit.

Keeping the faith was almost equally impossible. Having faith meant believing nothing bad was going to happen. Didn't two girls being killed by a rogue vampire qualify as bad? Who could consider having your mom's memory erased to be a good thing? Add her changing brain pattern that had everyone staring at her as if she were a freak—and let's not forget her uncontrollable desire to barge into people's dreams—and, well, her faith could use a pack of steroids to build it back up again.

Kylie let go of a big gasp of frustration when the cold of the spirit started to fade. Great! Just another day of being shocked awake at dawn with nothing to show for it. Rolling over, she punched her pillow and felt her mood grow darker by the second.

Oh, it wasn't just a general Monday blues kind of mood, either. Nope, this was more. Tonight was the full moon. Who knew what was going to happen? But the fact she'd awoken in such a piss-poor mood was even more of a sign that she might be werewolf.

Not that morphing into a wolf was the only bad-mood trigger. After finally making up her mind to say yes to going out with Derek, she hadn't had a chance to get him alone and give him her answer. There was also the particular werewolf coming back to the camp today or tomorrow. Make that two weres coming back. She wasn't exactly looking forward to getting reacquainted with Fredericka. And facing Lucas after the whole dream fiasco? Oh yeah, that was going to be so much fun. Not!

Kylie let out a groan, punched her pillow, and pulled the covers over her head.

* * *

Five minutes after Kylie was up, and two minutes after checking and realizing her mom still hadn't sent her the scan of Daniel's obituary, Kylie managed to piss off both Della and Miranda. After they both managed to piss her off. So Kylie made up her mind—she was taking a day off. A complete

day off from people. And that included all the supernatural varieties, too.

Today, it was just her and her skunk.

Snatching a bottle of soda from the fridge, she scooped up Socks, told her roommates to tell Holiday she was taking a vacation day, and went back into her bedroom where she slammed the door just because she felt like it.

At nine o'clock, Holiday tapped at her bedroom door. "Just checking on you."

"I just want to be alone," Kylie said, hearing the door open, but not moving from the facedown position she'd landed on her bed an hour ago.

"Bad mood?" There was a bunch of meaning to Holiday's question that Kylie didn't want to think about.

"Yeah, a real piss-poor bad mood." Kylie rolled over.

"Okay." Holiday bit down on her lip. "Just remember, I'm here if you need me."

"I know," Kylie said.

At ten o'clock, there was another knock. This time, the knock sounded at her cabin front door.

"Go away," she yelled out.

A minute later, Derek walked into her bedroom without being invited. That pissed her off even more. Then, she remembered something else that had pissed her off that she hadn't spoken with him about yet.

"Why didn't you tell me about the whole erasing thing?" she blurted out.

He dropped down on her bed. "Burnett kind of said I shouldn't tell everyone."

"Am I everyone?" she asked, and sat up, pulling her knees to her chest.

Whether it was her tone, her question, or if her mood was contagious, she didn't know, but she recognized pissed off when she saw it. And Derek was pissed off. "Maybe if you'd been more accessible to me, instead of worrying that someone might figure out you liked me, we could have spent more time talking."

"I think I've apologized for that." She hugged her shins. "Not that it means you've forgiven me," she said with a touch of sarcasm.

He shook his head. "Okay fine, so maybe I don't have a right to be mad

about *that*.”

His inflection on the word *that* led to her next question. “But you’re mad about something, right?”

He frowned. “I shouldn’t be.” He ran a hand through his hair and looked at her. The deep emotional hurt that Kylie saw in his eyes chased away her own bad mood and she started to worry about him.

“What is it that you shouldn’t be mad about?”

He stood up from the bed and paced across the room. “You never lied to me. Not really. And I could see you still had feelings for him. You’d feel guilty and I knew you were probably thinking about him. I knew it, because I felt it. Yet like an idiot, I kept on pursuing you, even when you refused to go out with me.”

She shook her head. “You’re not making sense.”

He stopped walking and let go of a deep breath. Then his beautiful, warm, and still-hurting eyes met her gaze again. “I can only be mad at myself.”

“For what?” she asked again, her bad mood trying to move back in.

“But what I can’t get over is that you didn’t tell me.”

“What didn’t I tell you?” She felt confused and yet ... not really. She sensed he was talking about Lucas. Not that it really mattered, because she and Lucas were history. She’d made up her mind.

Yeah, there were the dreams. And she felt the guilt creep around her again.

He waved a hand in the air. “You see, this is how you feel half the time I’m with you. Guilty.” He shook his head. “Tell me it’s not true. Tell me that you haven’t been getting letters from him this whole time.”

His question bounced around her head. “I ... I never wrote him back.” She wanted to assure Derek that she hadn’t done anything wrong. But the truth hit and it hung on like a big mean dog to a bone he considered his own. If he’d been getting letters from some girl who’d kissed him, she would have been jealous. She wouldn’t have liked it. Certainly not if he’d been having sexy dreams about her, too.

“Derek,” she said softly, “I swear to God, I didn’t mean—”

“To hurt me,” he finished her sentence. “I believe you. I know you didn’t

do this to hurt me. You aren't cruel or mean. You don't have a devious bone in your body. You're just ... confused."

She stood and walked over to him and tried to take his hand in hers, but he pulled away. His withdrawal hurt. Meeting his eyes, she tried to find a way to explain it. "You're right. I'm confused about a lot of stuff. But I'm not confused about what I feel about you. I care about you. A lot. When I'm with you, I feel safe and when you kiss me I feel everything. Everything looks so beautiful and ... and I don't even care if you're doing it anymore. I just want that feeling, okay? I want to go out with you."

"If you'd really wanted that, you'd have said something earlier."

"I did want to, I was ... just confused. Like you said."

"Because of Lucas?"

"No." She offered him the answer she'd offered herself. "Because I'm still trying to figure out what I am."

"But I told you that what you are isn't important."

"It is to me," she said. But deep down, deeper than she wanted to look, she knew what he said was true. Not knowing what she was, was only part of the reason she hadn't agreed to go out with him earlier. The other part was Lucas.

But that didn't change how she felt about Derek, she insisted to herself. It was just like Holiday's aunt Stella. She might feel an attraction for Lucas, but she wouldn't act on it. She tried again to take his hand, but he wouldn't let her.

"You have to decide, Kylie, because I can't stand living in this limbo. I have too much limbo in my life with my father and I just can't deal with it anymore."

"I've already decided," she said. "It's you. I was going to tell you yesterday and then ... everything happened."

He stepped closer and her heart sighed with relief. She leaned in for a kiss. She wanted him to kiss her so badly; she wanted to make him see how much she cared about him.

He touched her cheek. "Until you're sure about what you feel about him, then you can't trust how you feel about me."

“That’s not true.” She tried to kiss him, but he put a finger over her lips, stopping her.

“No. No more. Until you’ve made up your mind, we’re just friends. Just friends.” Pain and hurt echoed in his voice and took a flying leap, landing right in her heart.

She didn’t want to just be his friend. She wanted more. “Please don’t do this, Derek. I never meant—”

He put his finger over her lips again. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me, Kylie. But it does hurt. I feel ... everything. That’s what makes this so hard.” He took a step back. “I’d better go.”

Pain welled up inside her. Tears filled her eyes. She was going to lose him. She knew it as well as she knew her own name.

He got to her bedroom door and turned back. “As your friend, I’m telling you this. Fredericka is back. She wants to hurt you. And I don’t think she’ll stop with just telling me about the letters. Be careful. Especially until after tonight. Weres are hyper-aggressive before they turn.”

Kylie felt her own aggression boil up inside her and she swiped at the tears sliding down her face. Until he mentioned it, she hadn’t stopped to guess how he knew about the letters Lucas had sent her. And now that she knew, she didn’t like it one iota. Fredericka had told Derek about the letters.

And in doing so, she hadn’t just hurt Kylie, she’d also hurt Derek.

Kylie closed her hand into a fist. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not as helpless as I used to be.”

“Helpless, no,” he said. “But she’s got meanness on you hands down. You don’t want to tangle with her.”

* * *

An hour later, heart still breaking, Kylie checked her e-mail and found her mother had finally sent her the scan of Daniel’s obituary. Maybe her emotions were already primed and ready to go because of her already sucky day, but when she read about her father’s death, Kylie dropped her head on the desk and wept. She wept for Derek and she wept for Daniel.

She recalled the dream/vision she’d had about his death. He’d been

leaving a war-torn village and had returned to save a woman from some insurgents. He had not only given his life for his country, he had given it to save a stranger.

“I love you, Daniel.” She wished he would drop in for a visit.

She noted his parents’ names and that they lived in some place called Gladlock, Texas. A search on the Internet showed it was a small city about seventy-five miles outside of Dallas. With her heart still hurting, she did a search for a phone number for Kent B. Brighten. The computer hadn’t completed the search when the door to the cabin swung open.

Kylie glanced up, expecting to see Miranda or Della. But nope. Fredericka had come a’calling. And she’d bypassed the proper etiquette of knocking before entering, too.

Chapter Twenty-five

“Well, if it isn’t the ghost girl.” Fredericka’s smartass tone hit Kylie the wrong way.

“She’s got meanness on you hands down. You don’t want to tangle with her.” Derek’s words rang in Kylie’s head.

Okay, so Derek was right. She didn’t want to tangle with Fredericka, but Kylie wasn’t sure she had an option now considering the werewolf stood less than six feet away. Kylie had no way out. Too late to run and hide under the bed.

Kylie stood, staring at the girl’s dark eyes and hoping the she-wolf wouldn’t see Kylie’s streak of insecurity.

Yesterday with Selynn, Kylie hadn’t felt fear. Nope. She’d been acting on instinct to protect her mother. Now the only one needing protection was Kylie herself; the kick-ass instinct had a taken mini-vacation.

“Gosh, I didn’t hear you knock.” Kylie tried to imitate Fredericka’s curt tone and defensive posture, hoping to bluff her way through this.

The glimmer of a smile danced over Fredericka’s lips as if Kylie’s bluff had fallen short.

“I thought it best if we got this little talk over with.” Fredericka glanced around the cabin as if taking in the furnishings. Not that it was much to look at or different from the other cabins. The overstuffed brown sofa was paired with an overstuffed gold chair that almost matched. Kylie’s mom had brought her a few throw pillows that added splashes of color to the room. The end tables had utilitarian lamps with plain white shades, and Miranda had added a few crystals around the room.

Behind Fredericka, Kylie saw Socks freeze in a panic at seeing a stranger

in the cabin, and the skunk unfroze long enough to bury himself under a red and gold sofa pillow.

Kylie didn't blame him, either.

"What talk is that?" she asked. "The one where I explain it's rude to walk into someone's home without knocking?" Her snarky comment might set Fredericka off, but Kylie sensed this was a test, and to show fear felt more dangerous than provoking the she-wolf.

Fredericka released a low growl, and her eyes brightened. When her uninvited guest's gaze shifted up and down Kylie's stance, it took everything Kylie had not to crawl under the pillow with Socks.

Fredericka's brows twitched. Kylie, never prouder of her new talent, twitched back. The she-wolf's pattern looked much like those of the other weres she'd noted at the river yesterday, but the darkened edges appeared ominous. Did that mean anything? Kylie really needed to sign up for Brain Pattern Reading 101.

"I hear you might be one of my own kind." Fredericka's eyes tightened.

The idea of sharing a bloodline with this bully made Kylie feel sick. Her gaze went back to the trembling pillow on the sofa. She recalled what Holiday had said about her not being were because felines had an abhorrence of werewolves. Kylie hoped Holiday was right about that. Even drinking blood for the rest of her life felt like a better option than bring a were.

Kylie held her defensive stance. "I wouldn't believe everything you hear."

"And if I were you, I wouldn't forget that if you do turn, we'll likely meet. And on full moons the emotions are always generally out of control, resulting in high casualty rates."

"Then I'm sure you will be watching your back," Kylie said, really bluffing now.

Fredericka's brows pinched. "Especially when a female feels another is making advances toward her mate."

"So, you still having a hard time holding on to your man?" Kylie fought back her fear.

The gold in Fredericka's eyes grew brighter. "What's that smell?" Fredericka held her nose up in the air.

Kylie didn't dare glance at the pillow hiding Socks. "Wouldn't know, but if it's offensive, the door is right behind you."

"It smells sort of like ... I don't know, lion, maybe?" Fredericka's left eyebrow arched.

Kylie didn't blink. "I knew you did it."

"Did what?" Fredericka's smile turned into more of a smirk. Then she shifted back a couple of steps and dropped down on the sofa with an exaggerated plop, as if she planned on hanging around a while.

The sound of the sofa giving up air was quickly followed by a half-hiss and half-meow. The pillow fell away and a black and white tail sprang up into the air. Fredericka turned just in time to take the full spray directly in the face.

Twenty feet away, the stench had Kylie covering her nose, but she couldn't stop smiling.

The she-wolf screamed and dove at the animal. While Socks had gotten in touch with his skunk side, he obviously hadn't forgotten his feline roots. He flew off the sofa in full frightened-cat mode. His ascent into midair sent the lamp on the end table crashing to the floor.

Wiping her eyes with her palms and howling, Fredericka shot off the sofa after Socks. Socks, now perched on top of the overstuffed chair, reacted accordingly and flew in midair, bouncing off the walls as he ran for his life.

The thought of what the she-wolf would do to her kitten had Kylie giving chase. Wooden chairs cracked against the floor, the microwave flew across the room, the computer desk nearly fell over, and a few dishes left on the counter shattered beside the chairs. Everything spun in circles with one kitten-turned-skunk, one she-wolf, and one unidentifiable supernatural chasing each other around the living room/kitchen, each with their own agenda.

Socks to live.

Fredericka to kill.

Kylie to protect.

Unfortunately, Socks was no match for the angry she-wolf, and in seconds Fredericka had Socks cornered by the refrigerator. A loud roar filled the

cabin. A wash of adrenaline shot through Kylie as Fredericka dove for the poor animal.

Just before Fredericka latched her paws on to Socks, Kylie latched on to the girl's forearms. Picking her up in the air, she hauled the struggling Fredericka over to the front door and tossed her out.

She landed about eight feet from the porch with a loud thud. Her eyes, now a bright gold, stared up in horror at Kylie. The she-wolf rose off the ground on all fours, her knees bent, shifting back and forth, as if revving up to pounce again.

Kylie didn't flinch.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

She welcomed another round.

"You bitch!" Fredericka growled, and tossed her head back.

"You hurt my cat and you'll see how big of a bitch I can be!" Kylie voice sounded as animal-like as the she-wolf's. Then, suddenly frightened, not of Fredericka, but at what Kylie would do if the girl came at her again, she stepped back and slammed the front door. The whole cabin shook from the impact. And right then a cold presence filled the room.

Company.

Great. The cabin smelled of skunk, she had a majorly pissed-off she-wolf outside, and *now* the spirit wanted to drop by.

* * *

Five minutes later, Kylie still stood with her back to the refrigerator, breathing through her mouth so she wouldn't gag at the pungent odor, and trying to calm herself and a very scared skunk-kitten. Socks, seconds after Kylie had come inside, had climbed up her leg, cuddled into her arms, and buried its little pointed nose in her armpit. Kylie wondered if the nose in the armpit wasn't so much his need to escape the smell as it was to hide.

The ghost paced the tiny living room as though she was trying to think. Kylie watched the spirit walk in circles before realizing the ghost's wardrobe.

"Why are you wearing a hospital gown?" Kylie asked, but the spirit didn't

answer. And when the ghost faded, relief flowed over Kylie. She closed her eyes and tried to recall the calm she'd gathered at the falls about the whole "Someone you love is dying" situation.

Then the door to the cabin swung open. Thinking it could be Fredericka again, Kylie tensed and then un-tensed when she saw Holiday and Miranda.

"Are you okay?" Holiday asked.

Kylie nodded and Socks, hearing more commotion, snuggled tighter into Kylie's armpit. Miranda and Holiday both covered their noses and their wide-eyed gazes moved around the ransacked cabin.

"What happened?" Holiday asked.

Fredericka happened, Kylie almost answered, but then bit back the words. She'd never been much of a tattler and didn't want to start now. "Socks got startled." It wasn't altogether a lie.

Holiday, her hand still plastered over her nose, squinted at Kylie. "I know Fredericka was here." Her voice came out muffled behind her palm.

"She told you?" Kylie asked.

"Didn't have to," Miranda piped in. "We smelled her when she walked past the office."

"What happened?" Holiday repeated her question from behind her fingers.

Miranda took a step closer. "She was spitting mad," Miranda broke in again, humor in her voice. "Seriously spitting. Did Socks get her in the face?" The witch laughed and wrinkled her nose at the smell again and waved her hands around the air as if to perform a bit of magic.

Kylie's next intake of air didn't include the skunk stench. "Thanks," she said to Miranda, surprised that her roommate had removed the smell without any goofs.

"Welcome," Miranda said with a sense of pride. "Odor removal is a piece of cake. Learned in the potty-training stage."

Holiday dropped her hand. "Miranda, can I have a minute alone with Kylie?"

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Why is it that everyone is always sending me away?" She stomped off into her bedroom, but flashed Kylie a smile before

shutting the door.

Holiday met Kylie's gaze. "Now, what happened?"

Fredericka just stopped by to remind me that she tried to kill me once by putting a lion in my room and once might not be enough for her.

When Kylie didn't answer, Holiday studied Kylie suspiciously. "My job here is to show everyone that we can all get along without incident." She sighed. "I agreed to her coming back because ... I know she doesn't have anywhere else to go. I'm afraid she'd be pulled into a gang, but if she's starting trouble, Kylie, I'll show her the gate."

Kylie knew Holiday meant what she said and she appreciated her loyalty to no end. While the temptation to tell the truth bubbled up inside Kylie, her own sense of loyalty bit down. She knew how important it was to Holiday to save every one of her campers from the dark side of the supernatural world. Even Fredericka.

Kylie wasn't sure the she-wolf was worth saving or even if she was salvageable. But Kylie didn't want to be the one to make that call. Besides, she didn't want Holiday having to solve Kylie's problems. She got a mental image of how she'd managed to toss Fredericka out the door. Maybe, just maybe she was capable of taking care of herself.

Giving the still-scared Socks a good scratch behind his ears, Kylie said, "It's not a big deal. Socks didn't like Fredericka and Fredericka didn't like Socks. No one was hurt." Yet, a little voice echoed inside Kylie, but she ignored it. "I'm sure we can work it out."

When Kylie looked up, she spotted Della standing behind the camp leader in the doorway mouthing the word "Liar."

Holiday looked at Della and then faced Kylie again. "You're sure?"

Kylie nodded. It felt less like a lie.

Holiday gave Kylie a hug and then took off. Miranda came out of her room, and Kylie dropped Socks to the floor and started picking up the mess. Miranda and Della did the same.

"You don't have to help," Kylie said.

"Please," Miranda said, and they continued to straighten chairs. Della lifted the microwave back on the counter. She plugged it back in and when

the light came on, she said, “Good as new.”

When the room was put back together, they all sat down at the kitchen table. “Okay,” Miranda said. “Give us the details and don’t leave out the good parts. And by good parts, I mean when little Miss She-wolf got sprayed in the face. Something tells me that that is going to be my favorite part. Heck, I’ll bet you’re even glad I turned Socks into a skunk now, right?”

Kylie leaned back in her chair and told them the whole story, including the part about Fredericka telling Derek about Lucas’s letters and even the part about Fredericka halfway admitting she’d been the one to put the lion in Kylie’s bedroom.

“Why the crap didn’t you tell Holiday?” Miranda asked.

When Kylie didn’t answer right away, Della piped up. “Because she’s too damn nice.”

“It’s not that,” Kylie said. She bit down on her lip. “Okay, maybe that’s part of it, but it’s Holiday I’m worried about—not Fredericka. Plus, I want to deal with this myself.”

“Now, that part of it I can respect.” Della crossed her arms over her chest. “Then there’s the saying about how you should keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.”

Miranda frowned. “Fredericka’s meaner than a rattlesnake. Are you sure you can handle her?”

“If she can’t, I’m always up for kicking a little werewolf ass,” Della said.

Emotion swelled in Kylie’s throat and she barely managed to swallow it. “Is Lucas here, too?” Kylie recalled the hurt in Derek’s eyes. The emotion in her throat doubled.

“Not yet,” Della said. “I heard Fredericka say he was showing up tomorrow.”

Kylie blinked, hoping to contain her tears. Then she recalled the dreams and how hard facing Lucas would be.

Miranda leaned in. “Do you think Derek’s serious about breaking up?”

“He didn’t break up with her,” Della corrected in a harsh tone. “They weren’t going out.”

But he might as well have, Kylie thought, and that’s when a couple of

tears slipped out. Standing up, she said. “Thanks guys, but I’m ... I just want to—”

“You still feeling pissy?” Della asked.

“Yeah,” Kylie answered. Her gaze shifted to the computer showing her grandparents’ phone number. She was even too distraught to deal with that right now. Tomorrow. Kylie got to her bedroom, shut the door, and dropped facedown on the blue-and-white bedspread. She had just closed her eyes when she heard Miranda sigh. A sigh Kylie shouldn’t have been able to hear through her closed bedroom door.

“Do you think she’s werewolf?” Miranda asked.

Kylie grabbed a pillow and covered her head, but it didn’t stop Della’s answer from filtering through the foam to reach Kylie’s supercharged hearing.

“Probably,” Della answered. *“But I’m not going to hold it against her. She’ll be the nicest werewolf that ever existed.”*

“Me, either,” Miranda said. *“Not all weres are bad. Not that I’ve ever been close to any of them.”*

Great, Kylie thought. Her friends seemed certain she was doomed to a life of nasty moods and howling at the moon. Kylie tried to imagine what it would be like to morph into a wolf. Then she remembered that Fredericka was going to be waiting with bated wolf breath for a chance to get even with her when—okay, if—she did turn.

And then she recalled Derek saying that he didn’t want her to be a werewolf because she’d have that in common with Lucas. Was that why he’d pulled away? Gawd, why did life have to be so damn hard?

* * *

Kylie stayed in her room the next few hours. Feeling an emotional storm rage inside her, she tried to think of anything that could take the edge off. She’d napped, actually fallen asleep, but had awoken when the temperature dropped in the room. She looked around for the ghost, but the spirit didn’t materialize. Remembering the ghost’s appearance after Fredericka left, Kylie asked, “Do you have something to say?”

Her question vibrated in the still coldness of the room. Kylie hadn't expected an answer, but asking was her job, right? Staring at the ceiling, she jumped when something crashed to the floor. Turning around, she saw her phone had fallen from the nightstand. When she picked it up, she heard someone on the line.

"Hello?" Kylie recognized Sara's voice.

"Hey," Kylie said.

"What's up?" Sara asked.

Kylie huddled under the covers to ward off the cold. "Nothing. Did you call me?"

"No. You called me," Sara answered.

"Oh." Kylie glanced at her cell. "My phone fell off the nightstand. It must have dialed you accidentally."

"Oh." The awkwardness rang louder than Sara's voice.

"Where are you?" Kylie asked, just to chase away the uncomfortable silence because just hanging up felt too rude. It wasn't as if Kylie could say what's on her mind like, *Hey guess what? I just tossed a werewolf out of my cabin for trying to kill my kitten that's now a skunk, and tonight, I might turn into a wolf myself*. Right then Kylie realized she'd been blaming Sara for the distance in their relationship, claiming Sara had changed. Well, hell, now look who had undergone the most change.

"At the mall with Tina," Sara answered, her voice sounding strangely tight.

"Tina?" Kylie asked, hoping to show interest in Sara's life.

"Tina Dalton. She just moved here."

"Is she nice?" Was Tina Sara's new best friend?

Sarah chuckled. "Not really, but her brother is hot."

"Hmm," Kylie teased. "Good thing I didn't have a brother or I'd think you were just interested in him all these years."

Sara laughed and Kylie joined in. A little of the awkwardness faded.

"It was strange that you called," Sara said. "I was just thinking about you. Do you remember when we were thirteen and you did that backward flip and knocked both of us off the trampoline? Our moms took us to the emergency

clinic by our neighborhood because they thought you had broken an arm and I had a goose egg on my head.”

“Yeah,” Kylie said. “What made you think about that?”

“Who knows,” Sara answered with the same tight voice.

Kylie leaned back on her pillow. “You thought the doctor was cute.”

“He was cute.” Sara sounded normal again. “Any hot guys at the camp?”

“Yeah.” Kylie took in a deep breath and when she released it, it came out as a fog. Strange. She’d thought the spirit had left but she was moving closer.

“You hooked up with any of them?” Sara asked.

Kylie’s heart tugged. “Kind of, but ... we sort of ... called it quits.” *Or he called it quits.* A shiver ran down Kylie’s back and she looked around again for the ghost. She still hadn’t materialized, but her chill filled the room.

“That sucks,” Sara said, and in the background Kylie heard someone call out Sara’s name. “Hold on a sec.”

The line went silent as if Sara had covered the receiver. But Kylie’s ears picked up Sara’s intake of air. Whether Sara had moved her hand, or if it was Kylie’s hearing abilities, she wasn’t sure. She still didn’t grasp how this whole gifted hearing thing worked. It came and went. Just like her strength.

“No, I’m not using my insurance.” Sara’s voice filled the line. “I’m paying cash. Of course my mom knows. Look, is the doctor going to see me or not?”

Kylie frowned when she realized that Sara had lied about being at the mall. The reasons for the lie filled Kylie’s head. Had she run out of birth control pills? Or did she think she was pregnant again? Tightening her grip on the phone, Kylie was reminded of how different they were. How sad was it that they couldn’t share things—neither werewolves or sex?

“Kylie,” Sara said. “I need to go.”

“Okay. Bye.” Kylie put her phone back on the nightstand. When she looked up, the ghost sat at the foot of her bed, appearing incredibly sad. Kylie started to speak but the spirit faded.

“Great,” Kylie muttered. “Communicating with spirits is almost as bad as communicating with old friends.”

* * *

At eleven thirty that night, Kylie walked with Della and Miranda to the campfire. Her heart swelled with the fear of what would or wouldn't happen to her tonight, but she refused to show it. Of course, Della pretty much knew what she was feeling because she kept studying Kylie with an enormous amount of sympathy.

The moment the three of them cut through the clearing, Kylie spotted Derek standing in a group of four other fairies. He glanced at her. The full moon offered enough light for her to see the soft concern in his eyes.

No doubt he could read her fear. Stopping, she muttered to Della and Miranda to go ahead and let her talk to Derek. Her two roommates walked off.

Kylie waited for Derek to come and offer her his comforting touch—just a touch to ebb the fear from her heart. She could really use a little of his calm right now, not to mention his touch. His gaze met hers, but instead of moving over, he glanced back at his circle of friends. That's when Kylie got the first hint of how things would be between them from now on.

Obviously, being *just* friends meant no more kisses and touches.

Kylie's first impulse was to beg him to stop this nonsense. Her second impulse didn't involve begging. Anger crowded out some of her fear. Even though she knew Derek was partially right—in the beginning, there was some truth to her confusion with Lucas stopping her from going out with him—didn't Derek trust her enough to know she wouldn't cheat on him? His lack of faith in her just plain ol' made her mad. Really, really mad.

Sure, it might be her uncontrollable werewolf-related aggression bringing on the fury, but she felt it all the same. And once again, being mad felt better than being hurt, even better than being frightened, so she clung to the anger and hoped Derek would read it. She even stepped closer, giving him ample opportunity.

She knew it worked when he turned back around and his green eyes met hers. She didn't blink, didn't attempt to look away, wanting to make sure he read every bit of her anger. A frown tightened his brows and he walked away,

probably wanting to get out of emotion-reading range. While tempted to follow him and cloak him in her emotional state, she didn't.

Just go. Her chest tightened as the hurt crowded out the anger. *Just remember, I wasn't the one who called it quits.*

Taking a deep breath, she looked around until she spotted another lone soul who looked almost as miserable as she felt. Perry stood by himself, leaning against a tree and watching Miranda chatting cheerfully with a group of guys—one of whom was Kevin. Knowing misery loved company, Kylie went to join Perry.

Perry snarled at her when she walked up. "What? Are you going to tell me how much she likes me again?"

"Nope," Kylie said. "I've come to the conclusion that anything to do with the opposite sex should be banned and considered illegal."

Perry studied her through his brown eyes. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Yup."

He sighed. "Maybe we should hook up and teach a few people some lessons."

"In your dreams," Kylie said.

"Not even there." He frowned. "The only girl appearing in my dreams lately is the girl who is too busy flirting with everyone to even say hello to me."

Kylie gaped at Perry. "I can't believe you." Where did he get off thinking Miranda should talk to him when he'd been the one to call it quits? Like Derek.

Before she voiced her opinion, Luis, the were in charge, called for everyone's attention. Kylie's anger with Perry and over Derek dissolved and she fell right into the lap of fear again.

Her heart thudded. She felt the moon's rays on her as if it were the sun. Her skin actually stung and it took everything she had not to stop and stare up at the huge orb in the sky and scream for it to stop.

"It's not as scary as you think," Perry said.

Kylie met his gaze. "Does everyone know what's going on with me?"

"Pretty much." His eyes, now a bright blue, studied her. "It's not bad."

They moved closer to where the ceremony was taking place and she looked up at Perry and gave him credit for his sincere concern for her “I didn’t think shape-shifters and werewolves were the same thing.”

“We’re not,” he said. “But we both shift and I’ve spent a lot of time talking about it with others. They all say the same thing, ‘It’s not a big deal. Like a muscle cramp.’”

She bit the inside of her cheek and recalled Lucas describing it the same way. Unfortunately, she’d never been fond of muscle cramps. A thousand questions started stirring in her head. Why hadn’t she found more answers? She felt her heart stop, start, then flutter like a trapped butterfly.

Swallowing fear, she searched the crowd for Fredericka. “Will I know who I am?” she asked Perry. Her lungs felt too tight to breathe even though she didn’t spot the she-wolf.

“Sure you will.” His gaze shot over Kylie’s shoulder. Kylie feared he saw Fredericka behind her.

“You okay?” Holiday’s comforting voice came to her ear.

Kylie turned just as Holiday motioned for Perry to move on.

Kylie leaned in and her voice caught as she confessed the truth. “I’m scared out of my gourd. I’m not ready for this.” Her eyes stung with the new urge to cry.

“You’re going to be fine. I don’t even think...” Holiday didn’t finish her sentence. Instead, she placed a hand on Kylie’s shoulder and the majority of her panic faded. “Come on, I’ll stand beside you.”

They walked to the crowd and formed another circle much like they had at the vampire ceremony. Luis stood in the middle and in his hands he carried a skull. Not a human skull, it looked to be a wolf. He held up the skull. It seemed to catch the moonlight and glow. He started recounting the story of the first werewolf, and then telling about his kind’s many gifts, but Kylie couldn’t listen. Nothing felt right. Her gaze shot to the moon, and she could swear she saw the man in the round silver circle wink at her.

Then Kylie noticed that many of the campers were walking off. The werewolves. Kylie glanced at Holiday with questions in her eyes.

“Most prefer not to transform in front of an audience,” the camp leader

explained.

Kylie didn't blame them. She didn't want to do it, either. Would her clothes fall off? Would they see the hair growing on her skin?

Her only thought was to run, but Luis stopped talking and the sound that came out of his mouth was one of sheer terror. In the background, Kylie could hear what sounded like the screams of the others as they, too, turned. Air caught in her throat again. Her feet felt nailed to the ground. She didn't want to hear this, didn't want to see it, but like an accident on the side of the road, she couldn't look away.

Luis dropped to the ground, his back arched, and the sounds—half growl, half moan—continued. It was like something out of a horror movie. Kylie watched his body contort in ways no human body should ever twist. He arched his neck back so far it looked as if it would surely break. His jawbone grew, his cheeks became elongated, and where the face of a young man had once been the snout of a wolf appeared. And then came the hair.

Kylie's heart jolted. Her skin started to crawl. Her stomach knotted.

Oh, God! Something was happening to her.

Chapter Twenty-six

Kylie felt as if seltzer ran through her veins. She watched Luis, now a complete wolf, run off into the woods. Then everyone there turned and stared at her.

Watching.

Waiting.

She looked at Holiday. “I need to ... be alone.” She walked away. She didn’t run—didn’t want to draw any more attention to herself than she already had—but she walked fast, afraid the sounds of terror would any minute begin to flow from her own throat.

She made it to the woods before the urge to run overtook her. She moved at amazing speeds, dodging trees, jumping over stumps, and ducking under branches. How long she ran, she didn’t know. But out of breath, out of energy, she finally collapsed in a heap of trembling muscles.

Stilling gasping, she stared at her hands. She touched her face to make sure she hadn’t started the change.

Nothing. No change. She closed her eyes and tried to stop the feeling of her crawling skin. That’s when she heard it.

A low, very ominous growl.

Opening her eyes, she saw the wolf lurching toward her. Mostly white with hints of gray and tan, its eyes glowed a bright golden. Its lips curled under and its sharp teeth were bared. This was no ordinary wolf. It was a werewolf.

Kylie tried to stand, but her muscles trembled and refused the command. The wolf seemed to notice her weakness. Its posture became more aggressive. The coarse hair on its back stood up and when Kylie looked it in

the eyes, she knew. Knew with certainty the wolf was Fredericka. The she-wolf's growl deepened and then she charged.

Kylie found the strength to bounce to her feet, ready to run, when another wolf, even larger, crashed between two trees. Fredericka stopped. At first, Kylie thought she was about to be attacked by two beasts instead of one. But the second wolf, a dark gray in color with eyes that glowed a lighter gold, whipped around and growled at the oncoming wolf.

Kylie heard the competing growls and saw the two converge upon each other. She heard the sound of teeth clicking, and then, recognizing this as a chance to escape, she tore off through the woods. She ran, not as fast as before, for her energy had been spent, but she forced herself forward and didn't stop until she reached her cabin.

Collapsing on the porch steps, she forced air into her lungs. When she looked out at the woods, a pair of light golden eyes stared back. Her next intake of air brought recognition. She wasn't sure how she knew, but it came with such clarity that she didn't question it.

Lucas was back.

* * *

The next morning, Kylie got her daily wake-up call with the dropping of the room's temperature. She groaned, rolled over, and glared at the clock, not wanting to believe it was dawn. But yep. It was 4:59 a.m. The spirit was right on time.

It didn't seem fair, and not just because she didn't want to face Lucas yet. Hadn't she just put her head on the pillow? She'd never had three hours pass so quickly. It had been two a.m. when she'd collapsed in her own bed.

When Kylie ran inside her cabin after seeing Lucas, Holiday had been waiting on her to make sure she was okay. Della and Miranda were waiting with the camp leader at the kitchen table, all of them looking somber. Her two cabin mates looked shocked when Kylie arrived. No doubt they seriously thought she'd made the change into werewolf. But Holiday hadn't seemed so surprised.

After thinking about it, Kylie couldn't help but be suspicious. Did

Holiday know something she wasn't telling Kylie? She loved Holiday, but her belief in the self-discovery crap, the idea that a person needed to find their own answers, was chewing on Kylie's last nerve.

The cold filling the room brought her back to the present.

"You have to save her."

Speaking of last nerves ...

Kylie groaned and sat up. The ghost stood at the foot of her bed. The sweet smell of blood assaulted Kylie before she saw the ghost had donned her bloody gown again. The spirit met Kylie's gaze and clutched her abdomen as if she was going to be sick.

"If you're going to throw up," Kylie said, "would you mind stepping away from the bed?"

The cold, uncaring sound of her own voice hit Kylie like a slap across the face. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm just ... I want to figure it out and it's frustrating not to be able to."

The ghost rested a hand on Kylie's foot. Even beneath the blanket, the icy chill took hold. *"You have the ability to stop it. Please make it stop."*

"Make what stop? Has it already started?" Kylie asked, her chest tightening. Was someone she loved already suffering? Kidnapped and being tortured by the Blood Brothers, or something even worse?

"Damn it, answer me!" Kylie yelled. "Or at least give me a vision I can understand. I don't even care how scary it is, just do it."

The one of the funeral still made no sense.

The ghost faded and so did the coldness of her touch. But then Kylie felt tingling warmth spread down the tendons to her toes and up the arches to her ankle. Kylie pressed a hand against her foot. She'd never felt that before with Daniel. Was that supposed to mean something?

Frustration welled inside Kylie, but the sound of cascading water filled her head. Was this the death angels way of saying it would be okay?

Kylie's phone beeped, announcing she had messages. There were three: one from the private investigator, one from Sara, and one from her mom.

Recalling the fear that whatever might happen could already be happening, and not caring about the hour, Kylie dialed her mom's number.

* * *

Later, at eight o'clock that morning, Kylie dropped her breakfast tray on the table and sat down beside Della and Miranda, purposely not looking around because she was afraid she might see him. Or both hims. She wasn't any more eager to see Derek right now than she was to see Lucas. Derek's avoidance of her last night still stung. Oh, she knew she'd avoided him only a couple of weeks ago, but it had been different. She hadn't avoided him because she didn't want to be with him; she'd done it because she'd wanted to be with him too much.

Staring down at her runny eggs, which were about as appetizing as roadkill, Kylie recalled her conversation she'd had with her mom. Frankly, Kylie didn't know if her mom believed the whole "I woke from a bad dream and didn't realize the time" spiel. But when her mom confessed she'd been having some really bad dreams lately, too, Kylie couldn't help but wonder if this was because of the erasing. Were her mom's nightmares about what she'd seen at Shadow Falls?

Suddenly, Kylie felt the hair on the back of her neck start to stand up. Without even looking back, Kylie knew someone had her locked in a serious stare. Unable to resist, she glanced over her shoulder. She should have known.

Fredericka.

Turning back around, her gaze shot across the room and she found herself staring right at Derek. His eyes expressed concern, caring, but not so much that he'd come over. Could he not sense how much she needed him? She looked away, but only found herself caught in the snare of a pair of blue eyes. Beautiful blue eyes that took her back to her childhood and trying to find elephants hidden in the clouds.

Lucas glanced over at the door and nodded as if asking her to meet him outside.

Kylie had to reach deep to find the courage to do what came next.

She picked up her fork and started heaping food into her mouth as if she were too hungry to leave. Yup, she'd rather eat cold roadkill, runny

scrambled eggs than talk with Lucas. Plain and simple, she wasn't ready to face him, or the dreams. Then came the fact that walking out of this dining hall to be with Lucas would no doubt hurt Derek. She didn't want to hurt Derek. It didn't even matter that he didn't seem to mind hurting her.

* * *

It was after art when Kylie arrived back to the cabin to make her two phone calls. Sitting at the computer desk, she reached for the mouse to pull up her grandparents' number again. She'd debated who to call first. The PI or her grandparents. She opted for the grandparents. Though for the life of her, she didn't have a clue what she was going to say. How did you go about telling someone you were their long-lost grandchild—but not really theirs because you happened to know their dead son had been adopted?

Oh, yeah, this was going to be easy.

When the computer woke up, the screen brought up a list of car accidents for the Springville area, Della's home. Kylie chest grew heavy when she realized Della was still suspicious of what she might have done during her changing stage.

Kylie glanced at Della's shut bedroom door. She often came back to the cabin and napped after lunch.

Opening another screen, Kylie searched for the telephone number for Kent B. Brighten in Gladlock, Texas. Unsure what she would say, she punched in the number before she lost her nerve.

The phone rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

An answering machine picked up. "Hello, you have reached Kent and Becky Brighten. We aren't home right now, but if you'll leave..." The voice continued.

They were still alive.

Her heart quivered. The line beeped.

Decision time. Leave a message? Not leave a message?

She hit the end button.

Ten breaths and thirty seconds later, she called the PI. Another message machine. But she left a voice message, letting him know she'd gotten a name and number of Daniel's adoptive parents.

Trying to let her mind wrap around the possibility of actually meeting the Brightens, Kylie realized she wanted to meet them for reasons other than just finding Daniel's birth parents. It would be nice to learn more about her dad. She closed the screen and another one popped up. It was a double screen of two newspaper articles about two different car accidents, each with casualties.

Kylie started to read. One was about a man in his late forties and the other was ... Kylie's heart tugged. A woman and her six-month-old little girl.

How could Della think she could have done something like that?

A knock filled the cabin and panic filled her chest. Was it Lucas? Or Fredericka again? She cut her eyes around the room, hoping Socks was hiding. The knock came louder.

"Kylie?" Burnett's deep voice boomed through the door.

Knowing he could hear her, Kylie called, "Come in."

He opened the door and walked to the kitchen table. She grew instantly worried about the reason he was here. Surely he hadn't come back to try to pull more information out of her about Holiday. If so, he'd leave disappointed.

He nodded to a chair. "Mind if I sit down?"

"No." Then, unable to stop herself, she blurted out, "If this is about Holiday, I—"

He held up his hand. "It's not about ... Holiday." He frowned. "Though I have to admit she still puzzles the hell out of me."

"Maybe if Selynn wasn't hanging around, then..." Kylie shut her mouth, realizing she was doing it again.

"Selynn's on orders of the FRU, so I couldn't send her away. But as of today, she'll be leaving."

While Kylie hadn't seen the were since the lake incident, she'd heard she was still at Shadow Falls. Someone had said she was here due to the incident with the rogue vampire. And if she was leaving, did that mean they'd

caught ...

“Has something happened? Did you catch him?” She envisioned the two girls who’d been killed, and the vision left painful footprints on her heart.

Burnett leaned back in his chair. “That’s what I came to tell you. I just got word that the Vampire Council has the guy. They are going to ... handle the situation.”

“What do you mean by ... handle?” she asked.

“Just that. They will handle it.”

“Will there be a trial ... or something like that?” Would Kylie have to testify?

Burnett looked right at her, as if remembering his promise that the guy wouldn’t go unpunished. “Not really a trial. The Vampire Council basically decide his fate, but ... they have assured me that they don’t take lightly the killing of normals.”

She didn’t want to think too hard about what his fate would be. That might remove some of the relief of knowing that she would never have to face that rogue vampire again. But how relieved could she be? Was this incident tied to the ghost’s warning? Was someone she loved still in danger?

She stared down at her hands to try and digest the information and sort out her questions. When she looked up, she saw Burnett’s eyes locked on the computer screen.

“What’s that?” he asked in a dark voice.

Not wanting him to suspect Della of such a horrific crime, she grabbed the mouse and hit the red X. “Nothing.” Too late she remembered he could tell when she was lying. And even if he hadn’t, her clumsy attempt to get the screen cleared would have told him the truth.

His gaze shot back to her eyes. “Kylie, don’t do this.”

“Do what?” she asked, unsure what he thought she was doing.

“Tell me you aren’t investigating car accidents looking for Code-Red incidents.”

Code Red. Kylie remembered that was what the FRU called a staged car accident to mask a death at the hands of a supernatural. Kylie looked back at the blank screen. “So ... one of those accidents was a Code-Red case?”

Maybe to cover up a vampire kill? Like Della had feared may have happened when she turned?

He turned his head and studied her, reading her. “If you’re not investigating it, who is?”

Oh crap, Kylie thought. *What to say? What to say? It couldn’t be a lie or he’d know.*

“Della?” he asked.

“No,” Kylie lied again without thinking.

He closed his eyes.

“Please,” Kylie said, not even sure for what she was pleading.

His dark eyes opened and he looked at her.

“She couldn’t have done that,” Kylie said. “She’s a good person.”

Burnett glanced toward Della’s bedroom door. He placed a hand on Kylie’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze, then he walked out without saying another word.

Two seconds after he left, Della walked out of the bedroom. Kylie had tears of guilt in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Della said, but she looked scared. “I was going tell him about it anyway.” She started to leave as if to find Burnett.

“You couldn’t have done that,” Kylie said.

Della looked back over her shoulder. Tears brightened her eyes. “I hope you’re right.”

* * *

Kylie sat there for about thirty minutes, numb with guilt. If she hadn’t been reading the screen when Burnett came in, this would not have happened. That’s when she realized she couldn’t just sit here. She had to do something. She tore out of the cabin, running with everything she had to the office where she expected Burnett would have Della.

Because everyone was either in a class or a meeting, the trail was empty. Kylie hadn’t gone too far when she felt it—that feeling of being watched—but her heart and mind weighed too heavy on Della to care.

Kylie made it to the opening of the trail when she saw Burnett’s car, with

Della in it, pull out of the front parking lot. “No.”

“It’s okay,” Holiday said from behind her.

Kylie looked back, and because the same worry she felt was etched on Holiday’s face, she knew that Holiday had been informed about what happened. “It’s my fault.” Guilt filled her lungs, making it hard to breathe.

Holiday guided her to the office where she gave Kylie a hug. “It’s okay,” she repeated, sending a surge of calm into Kylie.

“Where’s he taking her?” Kylie swallowed a lump of emotion.

“To the FRU office to do some tests. DNA and bite-mark imprints.”

“So one of the accidents was a Code Red?” Kylie asked.

“Both,” Holiday confessed.

Kylie’s heart felt like it folded over onto itself.

“Is everything okay?” a male voice spoke from the doorway.

Lucas leaned on the door frame. Worry filled his eyes.

“It’s fine.” Holiday waved him out.

He didn’t move. “You okay?” he asked Kylie as if he needed to hear it from her.

She had yet to speak to Lucas since he’d been back and for some reason, her voice box refused to work now. All she could manage was a nod. He walked away, leaving a wake of genuine concern.

Holiday pulled Kylie over to the sofa and they sat down. “It’s really going to be okay.” She pressed a hand on Kylie’s back and sent comforting warmth washing through her.

But the image of Della with fear in her eyes filled Kylie’s mind. Della and fear didn’t mix. Della was strong, and bold, and way too kind to hurt someone. “She didn’t do this,” Kylie told Holiday. “It’s stupid to put her through the tests.”

“Della wanted to do this. She needs to know.”

“But she didn’t do it,” Kylie said again, realizing Holiday hadn’t agreed with her.

“That’s what we’re hoping, Kylie. But if she did, there are extenuating circumstances. She was undergoing the change. The FRU will overlook it, I’m sure.”

Kylie inwardly flinched at Holiday's words. She didn't know what bothered her more—that Holiday could believe Della could do this, or that new vampires could kill innocent humans and not be held accountable.

* * *

Holiday called three hours later and told Kylie that Della would be returning. She gave permission for Kylie and Miranda to take the rest of the afternoon off and wait for her. And that's just what Kylie and Miranda did. They sat at the kitchen table waiting. Kylie turned a Diet Coke around in her hands. Miranda didn't even move.

"She didn't do this," Kylie kept saying. "How can they think it's possible?"

Miranda groaned as if tired of Kylie's litany. "This isn't the same world you used to live in. Shit happens here. Bad shit. Teenage girls die. Cats get turned into skunks. Werewolves come into your cabin and try to kill you. And when a vampire turns for the first time, they can ... do things that they wouldn't do in their right minds."

"You think she did it!" Kylie accused.

"I don't know," Miranda said. "But if she did, it wasn't her fault and I won't stop loving her. And damn it, Kylie, you shouldn't, either. She thinks you walk on water. If you turn your back on her, it'll kill her."

Tears filled Kylie eyes at even the suggestion that Della could've done something so terrible. But deep down she knew, even if it was true, she wouldn't turn her back on her friend.

Ten minutes later Della, eyes red, walked into the cabin and dropped into a chair. "The bite marks weren't mine. None of the fingerprints, either."

A smile spread across Kylie's face and her heart. "I told you."

Tears slipped from Della's dark eyes and rolled down her pale cheeks. "They think Chan did it."

Miranda looked from Della to Kylie. "Who's Chan?"

"My cousin," Della told her, no longer caring about keeping the secret. "He helped me through my change. He didn't have to do it. But he did."

"Oh," Miranda said.

“Now they want to me to find out if he did it,” Della went on. “To go undercover and get the proof of his guilt.” She hiccupped. “But he was there for me when no one else was, and now I have to—”

“Just tell them no,” Kylie said.

“You don’t tell the FRU no.” Della took in a deep breath. “Besides ... they showed me the pictures.” Sorrow filled Della’s dark’s eyes. “There was a baby. It was awful. If he did do this, he has to be stopped before he does it to someone else. I don’t think I could live with myself if I let that happen.”

* * *

That night Kylie attended a mandatory camp meeting because somebody had tampered with the security alarm again. According to Burnett, the alarm was being shut off—what he didn’t know was if it was by someone on the inside or outside, but he was determined to find out.

Kylie wondered if her feeling of being watched coincided with the security alarm being turned off. Because now that the alarm was guarded, she didn’t feel a thing, except safer.

After the meeting, she had headed back to the cabin alone and had taken the first step up onto her porch when a noise startled her.

So much for feeling safe. Her heart pounded and she turned. Her thoughts shot to Fredericka.

“How long do you think you can avoid talking to me?” Lucas leapt up on her porch.

Kylie shifted a bit closer to the light fixture above the front door, where insects buzzed, and looked at her watch.

“Obviously only about twelve hours,” she said, noting it was nine o’clock on the dot. Today when she’d seen him in the office, she’d been too concerned about Della to worry about her Lucas issues with the dreams. But not tonight. She stepped out of the light, hoping he wouldn’t see embarrassment color her cheeks.

“So you admit you’ve been avoiding me?” Humor laced his deep voice.

Humor she didn’t appreciate. She met his eyes before looking away. “I’d deny it, but you wouldn’t believe me.” *Besides, avoiding things that make me*

uncomfortable is my specialty.

Instantly, she recalled confessing to Holiday about how confronting her dad had made her feel better. Was it too much to hope that confronting Lucas would have the same effect?

One more peek at her cabin door and she knew she had to do this. Face him and get it over with.

“So, if you’re not going to deny it, dare I hope you’ll explain the reason you’re doing it?”

She raised her gaze again and while she wanted more than anything to believe he didn’t know about the dreams, she couldn’t believe it. Obviously, she was much better at avoidance than denial.

“Reasons,” she said.

“What?” He stepped closer and his scent, woodsy and rich, invaded her air.

“I have more than one reason.”

“Okay.” He caught the end of a strand of her blond hair and rubbed it between his fingertips. “Tell me the reasons.”

She pulled her hair from his hand and took a step back. “Tell you? And take all the fun out of your trying to figure it out yourself?” She had meant for the words to sound curt, but she must have missed her mark because he chuckled.

She frowned.

His humor faded. “Okay, my first guess is that you’re beginning to realize at least some of your gifts. Dreamscaping, for example?”

She flushed but didn’t look away this time. “Now that I understand it, it won’t be a problem.” She prayed she was right. Holiday had said Kylie would get more control over it, hadn’t she? Surely that meant she could shut it down. God, she hoped it was true.

He studied her. “That’s a shame.” His tone came out flirty again.

She glanced back at the door. She’d said what she needed to, hadn’t she?

When she reached for the doorknob, he caught her arm. His touch wasn’t rough, not even a little bit. It was tender and that gave her more pause. She’d had a hell of a day and could still recall how he’d seemed genuinely

concerned for her in the office.

“Give me a few more minutes. Please.”

She continued to stare at the door, so aware that he didn’t drop his hand from her arm. So aware that his touch sent feel-good tingles down her arm.

“So what are the other reasons?” he asked. When she didn’t answer, he continued. “Why are you so angry with me, Kylie? And don’t deny it. I might not be able to feel your emotions like ... some people ... but I see it in your eyes.”

Kylie didn’t question who he meant by “some people.” He must have heard about her and Derek. Good, she thought. But then, whatever he’d heard was history. Derek had ended it.

His hold on her arm tightened slightly. “Tell me what you’re upset about so we can get past it.”

One word sat on the tip of her tongue. *Fredericka*. But admitting she was upset about his being with Fredericka meant she cared about him in a boy-girl kind of way. She didn’t want to admit that to Lucas. She hadn’t liked admitting it to herself. And it wasn’t even really true. She was just confused.

“I’m tired.” She risked looking at him.

His blue eyes looked brighter in the golden hue of the porch light. He still had his hand around her arm and his thumb started brushing against her skin. “You got my letters, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it the dreams that have got you upset, because I didn’t—”

“I know—it was me, not you.” She pulled her arm away.

He raised his eyebrows as if contemplating. “It wasn’t all you,” he said as if it cost him a lot to confess it. “Not the first dream. I mean...”

When he hesitated, her mind took over. “So you were doing it? You came into my dream?”

“No, I don’t have that ability. But when you came into my dream the first time, I was already dreaming about you.” He shrugged as if to knock some of the guilt off his shoulders. “At first, I didn’t realize you were really there. Not until it became so vivid and real. And I didn’t say anything later because I could tell you didn’t understand what had happened. If that’s what you’re

upset about. I probably should have stopped it but ... It was a dream. And oh, hell, I didn't want it to stop."

Even if she had to give him credit for being honest, she was still upset. He should have stopped it. Or at least told her so she wouldn't have gone back the second time. Then again, she didn't know how she'd have reacted if he'd told her this then. A lot had happened in these past weeks. She'd accepted things now that she probably wouldn't have been able to accept then.

"The second dream, however, that was all you." His eyebrows rose as if the thought made him happy.

Caught off guard by the blue twinkle in his eyes, she said the first thing that came to her mind. "I bet Aunt Stella dreamed about Tom Selleck, too."

Chapter Twenty-seven

Confusion filled his expression. “What? Tom Selleck?”

Embarrassment filled her chest. Had she really said that? “What I’m trying to say is I don’t think it will happen again. So let’s forget it, okay?”

“Why won’t it happen again?” His gaze became heavy, and he lowered his face an inch closer from hers. “It’s obvious that you feel the same about me as—”

“As you do for Fredericka?” She wished she could snatch the question from the air before it reached his ears.

His brow creased and he leaned back on his heels. “So that’s what you’re angry about.”

She didn’t deny it. Not because she didn’t want to, but because she didn’t think she could pull it off.

“Look, Fredericka and I—”

“It’s not important.”

“It is to me. I never touched her while we were away. Not once.”

“It doesn’t matter because ... what you two are, or what you do, is your business. Because you and I ... we’re just friends.”

“We could be more,” he countered. “It feels like more already.”

“No.” She looked him directly in the eyes, hoping he’d understand she meant it.

He pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, and his thumb brushed over her cheek. “The last time we stood on the porch, you invited me inside and I think that invitation included more than just ... being friends.”

She remembered standing here, almost begging him to come inside, wanting ... so much more than his company. But that was then—before her

feelings deepened for Derek.

She caught Lucas's hand and moved it from her face. "But you said no. And you were right."

"You really believe that?" He tenderly folded his fingers around her hand.

Yeah, she did, because he'd run off with Fredericka.

"She followed me, Kylie. I didn't ask her to come. I would have sent her home, but it turned out I needed her."

Kylie tried to pull her hand from his, but his hold tightened.

"I didn't mean need her like ... like that. I left to help someone." He paused. "I didn't tell you in the letters because if Holiday found out she'd have had a fit. I have a half sister. She'd been pulled into one of the gangs. I had to get her out, Kylie. She didn't deserve to ... I should have been there for her earlier. She called and asked for help a few months before, but I didn't do it because I would have had to face my father. It was my fault it happened and I had to help. Then Fredericka helped me."

Kylie tilted her head back. "She helped you. She tried to kill me."

He shook his head. "She wouldn't have killed you last night."

It *had* been him. She'd known, but hearing him say it made it more real.

"She just wanted to scare you," he continued. "She doesn't like you because she knows how I feel about you."

"You had to fight her to stop her from charging me."

"That doesn't mean anything. That's the way we deal with things when we're changed. We don't stand around and use psychology when we're in our natural state."

"But last night wasn't the first time she tried to put me six feet under. She put a lion in my room before you left."

His expression darkened. "She did what?"

"She put a lion in my room. One from the wildlife preserve. If it hadn't been for Derek I could have died."

Disbelief filled his expression. "She wouldn't have done that."

Kylie yanked her hand from his. She couldn't believe he was defending Fredericka. But why was that unbelievable? He'd admitted to having sex with her. Then he ran off with her.

He raked a hand through his hair. "She's not like that, Kylie. I know she's harsh but ... you don't know her like I do."

"You're right," Kylie said. "I don't know her like you do. And since you two have so much in common, why don't you go find her right now and ... and be with her? That's where you belong."

"She's not the one I want." His words came out terse. "It's you. It's been you since ... since the minute I first saw you."

Kylie closed her eyes and shook her head. This was all happening so fast. She'd finally gotten used to him being gone, and now here he was shaking up her life all over again.

"Tell me you didn't feel it," he whispered. "Tell me that you didn't feel the bond we had when we first met."

She had felt it, but she'd been five years old. She met his gaze again. "I don't know what to think, Lucas. You're telling me that there's nothing between you and Fredericka, but she obviously has other ideas. Maybe you should sort things out with her before you start something up with me." Her heart clutched when she realized this was basically the same thing Derek had told her.

"You make it sound as if I haven't already tried to do that."

She shrugged. "My life's really complicated right now. If you'd been around these past weeks, you'd know that. So for now, we can be friends. That's all."

Kylie heard voices on the trail. When she looked up, Derek and a few of his friends walked past. Derek didn't even look her way. She suspected it was because he'd already seen them. Seen them and assumed the worst.

Guilt filled her, but she pushed the emotion back, hoping Derek hadn't been close enough to sense it. She hadn't been doing anything wrong. Breath held, she watched the group of guys walk out of eyeshot.

When she looked back, Lucas studied her. "Is he why? Are you two serious?"

"That's not even important. You and I are just friends, Lucas. Just friends."

She turned and opened her door. Right after she shut it in his face, she

heard him say, “Not if I can change your mind, Kylie Galen.”

* * *

The next morning, Della had an early morning ritual and would be a no-show for breakfast. Miranda announced she'd be skipping as well. Kylie got a feeling the witch was up to something. Probably trying to reverse the spell on Socks. Kylie had almost asked but she'd fought sleep most of the night for fear she'd lapse into a dream with Lucas, and she didn't have the stamina for a long conversation about possible curse reversals.

Walking into the dining hall alone, Kylie felt everyone's stares and knew they were all twitching like crazy checking out her brain pattern. After she grabbed her tray of a Danish and fruit, she hesitated in the back of the room, searching for a seat. Today everyone had chosen to sit with their own kind. Since Kylie didn't have a kind, or at least know what kind she belonged to, she marched over to an empty table.

For the life of her, she didn't know why it was so hard to sit alone. She should have more self-esteem than to let something so silly make her feel uncomfortable. But calling it silly didn't change how she felt. She stared at her Danish and tried not to look as pathetic as she felt.

Hearing familiar laughter, Kylie glanced up and saw the fairy table all in chuckles. Everyone there looked content in their cozy circle of friends. Everyone but Derek. Hurt filled his eyes, but what was she supposed to do? She hadn't done this. He had. And she had a distinct feeling if she went to him, he'd walk away from her. That would hurt too much.

Picking up her pastry, she took a bite. It was her favorite kind with raspberry and cream cheese, but she barely tasted it. She swallowed another flavorless bite and felt as if everyone in the room stared at her. Her new shifting brain pattern hadn't stopped being the topic of conversation from what she'd heard.

Suddenly, a tray dropped down on the table beside her. Thinking it was Della back early from her morning event, Kylie sighed the words, “Thank you,” and turned with a smile.

Not Della.

Lucas smiled. "Thanks for what?"

"Nothing," she said, and almost asked him to leave. But damn it, hadn't she told him they were friends? And as friends, there was no good reason why he couldn't sit at a table with her. Well, aside from a certain she-wolf who would want to kill her because of it.

His blue eyes twinkled with humor. "You've got jelly." He brushed his finger across her lip. Then he popped the digit into his mouth.

"That's what napkins are for," she said, reaching for one and giving her tingling lips a good swipe.

He chuckled.

Realizing Derek might be watching, Kylie cut her eyes to his table. He was gone. Which meant he'd seen them and taken off. Great. She let herself feel guilty for a second and then she got mad. She wouldn't be in this situation if he would have come over and sat with her. Nope.

Taking a deep breath, she reached for her milk and took a long sip. Then she looked at Lucas who was watching her.

"You are so damn beautiful," he said.

She rolled her eyes and put down her milk. "Just friends," she insisted.

"Okay. But you're still beautiful." His grin widened. "Even with a milk mustache." He handed her a napkin and chuckled. Then he grew serious. "Burnett told me about what happened with Della. Is she going to be okay?"

"I think so." She didn't go into any detail, or mention Chan. She didn't know how much Burnett had said, or how much even Della was supposed to be telling anyone about the Code-Red incidents.

"I heard about what happened in town and then with your mom," he added. "It sounds like you've had a crappy time since I've been away."

"Yeah, pretty crappy."

He picked up his pastry and took a bite without getting anything on himself, of course. "I also heard..." His eyes brightened in humor. "About what your skunk did to Fredericka. I'm sure she deserved it."

"She did." Was this his way of showing loyalty to Kylie over Fredericka? Not that he had to choose between them. Kylie and Lucas were just friends. And if she could just stop remembering how good it had felt to kiss him, she

really thought they could be friends, too. “Your last few weeks didn’t sound too great, either. Is your sister going to be okay?”

He nodded. “I think so. I’ve got her staying with some friends. I’m going to talk to Holiday about her enrolling here for school. You are signing up, right?”

Kylie pinched off a piece of pastry. “I’m hoping so. My mom said she’s thinking about it.”

The thought of what Kylie would do if her mom really said no caused her stomach to knot. She belonged here, with the others. Her gaze shifted around the different tables hosting what looked like families of supernaturals. Hopefully, soon she’d even discover what table she belonged to.

This isn’t the same world you used to live in. Kylie heard Miranda’s words from last night echo in her head. No, it wasn’t the same world. It was dark and sometimes very dangerous, but it was her world now.

Chapter Twenty-eight

“How do I make it stop?” Kylie, exhausted from lack of sleep, asked the question as she dropped into a chair across from Holiday’s desk at the start of their two o’clock appointment. “I don’t want to do this whole dream crap anymore.”

Holiday sat back and pursed her lips. “This gift is too special to call crap. And you can’t stop it, but you can control it with practice.”

“Okay, how do I control this shit then?”

Holiday chuckled. “Haven’t you sensed yourself moving in the dream world?”

“You mean, like flying?”

“Yeah, like flying.”

“Sure, but sometimes I don’t wake up until I’m already in the dream.”

“Okay, here’s what you do. Before you go to bed...” Holiday rattled off a series of techniques to train herself to wake up from a dream. It wasn’t a guarantee Kylie could control it but Holiday thought it was a first step.

They had moved on to the subject of the ghost when Holiday’s cell rang. She picked it up from the desk and glanced at the caller’s number. Her eyes lit up. “I ... need to take this call. Can you give me a few minutes?”

Kylie started to get up, but Holiday sprang from her chair first and started toward the door. “Hello, Mr. Eastman.”

Holiday shut the door behind her with a firm *click* and Kylie settled back and closed her eyes.

“Yes, *I’m so excited that you’re considering my offer.*” Holiday’s words filled Kylie’s ear.

Kylie snapped her eyes open. Not again with the sensitive hearing!

“I can’t tell you how much Shadow Falls needs someone like yourself on our board.”

Kylie put her hands over her ears, not wanting to eavesdrop.

“Yes, a hundred thousand should cover it.”

Kylie frowned when the voice continued to sneak through her palms. Then she realized what this meant. Holiday had found another investor for Shadow Falls, which meant Burnett would be leaving.

Kylie’s chest filled with a strange kind of achiness, a sense that this was all wrong. Not that there was a damn thing she could do about it.

After a few minutes, she heard Holiday tell Mr. Eastman that she’d be in touch soon and send him the papers to sign. She heard Holiday hang up and Kylie quickly started debating whether she should tell Holiday that she’d heard her phone conversation.

Several long minutes passed and Kylie came to the conclusion that she didn’t need to tell. When Holiday didn’t come back into the office, Kylie went to find her.

Holiday stood in the back room staring out the window at the basketball court. When Kylie joined her, she noticed that Burnett was shooting hoops with a group of boys. Kylie’s gaze shot to Derek, but she suspected it wasn’t Derek who intrigued Holiday. No doubt the camp leader was having second thoughts. Hopefully even some third ones about turning down Burnett’s offer.

Right then, Derek turned. His gaze found the window and she knew he’d sensed her. He didn’t smile or wave. He turned back to the game and ignored her. Just like that, Kylie made up her mind. Enough was enough. She and Derek needed to talk.

* * *

The next morning, Kylie woke up refreshed. When the cold at dawn hit, Kylie had slept for about five straight hours. Holiday’s tips on how to wake up before the dreams started had worked. She’d woken up twice to the sensation of flying. Once, she’d even seen Lucas, but she’d been able to pull back before he’d noticed her. She felt certain he hadn’t even known she’d

been there. Or at least she hoped that was the case.

Pulling the covers up to her chin, she looked around. No ghost appeared, but the cold hung on so Kylie knew the ghost hung with it. When Kylie's phone fell off the nightstand—again—she remembered how it had done the same thing the other day.

“Are you doing that?” she asked the spirit. “Wanna tell me something?”

No answer came back. Reaching for her phone, wondering if she'd find someone on the line again, she was relieved when there wasn't. Then seeing her blinking message light, she remembered she hadn't deleted her old messages.

She'd spoken to the PI and given him the new information she'd discovered about her grandparents. He said he would try to contact the Brightens. Not that it stopped Kylie from also calling them. She'd made a dozen calls to the number yesterday afternoon, but each time she'd only gotten the message machine.

Kylie went to delete the messages and realized she had one from Sara that she hadn't played. Remembering the mixed emotions she'd felt the last time they'd spoken, she put the phone down and gave herself permission to avoid it until later. Besides, she needed to get her speech straight to get Derek to come to his senses. She hoped her plan worked.

* * *

Kylie waited out in the dining hall before breakfast, looking for Chris. Don't let him walk up with Derek, she prayed.

When she spotted Chris walking up with Jonathon, she relaxed. When he got closer, she motioned him over. He said something to Jonathon and then started walking her way. Kylie could see curiosity spark in his eyes about why she wanted to speak to him.

It wasn't a secret that Chris, one of the head vampires, thought he was a total stud muffin. And Kylie would admit, with his blond hair and light eyes, he had sort of a California-beach-cute-guy look going for him. His body wasn't all that bad, either. But if he was thinking Kylie had a thing for him, he was about to be disappointed.

“What’s up?” He smiled.

Kylie hadn’t given much thought about how to approach this, so she just blurted it out. “I need a favor.” Chris was in charge of Campmates Hour, where names were put in a pot and drawn and you would spend an hour getting to know this person better.

“What kind of favor?” His gaze shot to her breasts.

She almost called him on it, but considering she needed him, she let it pass. “I heard that if someone wanted to make sure they drew a certain name, you could arrange it.”

“Oh.” He looked disappointed, which told her he’d thought she’d called him over for different reasons. He recovered quickly, though. “Did you also hear there’s a price for doing it?”

“A pint, right?”

“Yep.”

“Fine. I’ll tell Holiday I’m donating.” She started to walk away, but he caught her arm.

“You forgot to tell me who it is.” He wrinkled his brow. “Let me guess. Lucas?”

Kylie frowned. “Derek.”

* * *

Derek wasn’t around when the names were called, so she went in search of him. He stood in the dining hall talking with Steve and Luis. Derek frowned when he saw her step beside him. That hurt. Forcing a smile, she leaned over and whispered, “Guess what?” She waved the slip of paper with his name in the air.

He said good-bye to the guys and motioned for her to follow. They walked outside past the crowd. She wondered if he just planned to go to their spot at the rock, but he stopped.

His green eyes studied her. “Did you rig this?”

“Rig what?” She feigned innocence.

He caught her arm and turned it over. She knew he looked for a bandage, or a needle mark, but his touch sent tiny pain-like currents running through

her. “Did you buy my name with blood?” He dropped her arm.

She squared her shoulders. “So? You did it for me. Twice.”

So much emotion filled his eyes that her breath caught.

“We have to talk, Derek. This...” She moved a hand between them. “It isn’t right.”

He raked a hand through his brown hair. “What isn’t right is that I care about you while you care about someone else.”

“Fine!” Kylie felt herself growing angry and losing hope. “Do I care about Lucas? Yes. But I don’t care about him the way I care about you.”

He shook his head. “You can’t lie to me, Kylie. I can read your emotions and when you’re around him you’re ... attracted to him.”

“Okay, I’ll even admit I’m attracted to him. But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“The hell it doesn’t!” He started to walk away.

Kylie grabbed his arm. “You’re no different.”

“What?” His eyes brightened with anger and hurt.

“I saw you looking at Miranda when we were swimming.”

“I didn’t—”

“Yes, you did!”

“This is stupid.” He started walking away again.

Kylie almost let him go, but she remembered that she was going to have to pay a pint for this. Damn it. She wanted her blood’s worth.

She caught up with him. “Perry even noticed because he started giving you the evil eye.”

He continued walking and so did she.

“Did I get bent out of shape about it? No, I didn’t because I know that while you might have thought she was pretty in her bathing suit, it didn’t mean you didn’t like me.”

He stopped and turned to face her. “That is different.”

“How is it different? If I could read your emotions, like you can read mine, I would have read lust loud and clear.”

“Yeah, but ... but I’m a guy.”

Her mouth dropped open. “So only guys can be attracted to someone?”

Please! What century are you living in?”

His eyes tightened. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I meant...” He clenched his jaw. “Christ. I don’t know, but it’s still different.”

“It’s not, Derek! Don’t you see? You’re getting all bent out of shape because you’re jealous and you have no reason to be.”

“It’s more than that,” he said. “You just said you care about him. This isn’t just—”

“Yeah, I care about him. We met a long time ago. And maybe that bonds us somehow. And yes, he’s nice looking. But ... I want to be with you.”

She thought she was getting through to him, but he looked away. “I can’t do it, Kylie. Until you can prove to me that he doesn’t mean anything to you, I can’t do this.” He walked away again.

“Derek?” she called.

He turned around. “What?”

Her chest grew heavy. “You lied to me.”

“About what?” Frustration colored his voice.

“You said we’d be friends. This isn’t how you treat a friend.”

He looked up at the sky before he met her eyes. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I guess I can’t be your friend.” He walked off.

This time she let him go.

* * *

It was hard to get through the day. Kylie wanted to ask Holiday to let her skip the scheduled events, but she’d begged off too much. So she went to art, took a hike, and lost herself in cake decorating.

Every time she started to think about Derek, she’d mentally snap a rubber band around her heart. She was so focused on decorating her cupcakes that half the class was over before she realized Miranda wasn’t there.

As soon as it was over, she ditched music class and found Della walking to the lake for kayak lessons. Della had been pretty low-key lately, still recovering from the whole FRU visit and testing. And she dreaded having to

go undercover to try to help catch her cousin for murder. Of course, worrying about that meant she wasn't worrying about parents weekend. Hey, you had to find the silver linings where you could.

"Have you seen Miranda?" Kylie asked.

"No. Is something wrong?"

"She just wasn't in cake decorating. I was going to see if she was at the cabin."

"You want me to come with you?"

"No," Kylie said, remembering that Della had been looking forward to kayaking. "If I can't find her, I'll find you. I'm sure it's nothing."

Unfortunately, right before Kylie reached her cabin, she was certain she'd been wrong in her assessment. Her first clue? The high-pitched scream coming from inside.

Taking off at a dead run, Kylie reached the front door before she realized that the screams weren't Miranda's. Not that this realization slowed her down. Someone was in her cabin and screaming bloody murder. And Miranda was missing.

Jerking the door open, Kylie ran inside. "Miranda?"

"In here," Miranda called from her bedroom, her words barely heard over the shrieking.

Pushing open the bedroom door, Kylie thought she was prepared to face anything. She couldn't have been more wrong.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Kylie gaped at the screaming redheaded girl locked in the big purple cage in the middle of Miranda's room. Then her gaze shot to Miranda, reclining in the middle of her bed, painting her toenails as if it were a lazy Sunday morning.

"Let me out of here, you bitch!" The girl shook the cage.

Miranda finished spreading fuchsia pink on her pinky toenail before she glanced up. "What's up?" She smiled extra wide at Kylie.

"Bitch!" the girl screamed at Miranda then glared at Kylie. "Make her let me go!"

"I think I should be asking you what's up," Kylie said to Miranda, and then she looked back at the girl. A quick sniff of the air said there hadn't been any blood lost.

Yet, anyway.

"Release me!" the prisoner snarled.

Kylie glanced back at Miranda and raised an eyebrow.

"See what I caught." Miranda giggled. "Remember I've been telling you that someone was lurking around our cabin? I set a trap. And damn if I didn't catch Tabitha Evans."

"Do you know her?" Kylie asked.

"Yup, she's one of the witches I'm competing against in two weeks."

Tabitha shook the bars so hard that the cage rocked. "I'm the witch that is going to put a hex on you if you don't let me out!"

"Don't worry," Miranda said. "Her powers don't work as long as she's kept in my special cage. And I put a silencer about a hundred feet away, so no one can hear her yell."

“What’s she doing here?” Kylie asked, concerned for the prisoner.

“Trying to undermine my confidence so I’d drop out of the competition.”

“And if I’d known you were such a screw-up I wouldn’t have wasted my time,” the girl screamed.

Okay, so Tabitha deserved to be caged. “Do you think she’s the one who’s been cutting off the security alarm?” Kylie asked.

“No, this was done with magic. Pathetic, barely excusable magic, of course.” Miranda glanced at the caged girl.

Tabitha hissed. “You’re the one who’s pathetic.”

Miranda raised an eyebrow at her prisoner. “And you’re the one in the cage.”

The girl returned to shrieking. Miranda beamed with pride.

No doubt, catching Tabitha was good for Miranda’s ego. Kylie hated to pop Miranda’s bubble, but ... “As cute as she looks in the cage, you do know you can’t keep her.”

“I don’t plan on it,” Miranda said. “I told her that as soon as she turns Socks back into a kitten, she can leave.”

“And I’ve told you that I didn’t do that! That was your screw-up! All you!”

“Please,” Miranda said. “For weeks almost everything I tried to do came out wrong.”

Miranda swung her feet off the bed and leaned close to the cage. “Change the skunk back into a kitten and you can go.”

“And for the millionth time, I didn’t do that!”

Miranda glanced back to Kylie. “Do you want me to paint your toenails?” Doubt filled Miranda’s eyes.

“Look,” Tabitha snapped. “If it wasn’t you who did it, then maybe it was that old guy.”

“I’ve got some nice reds,” Miranda told Kylie, ignoring Tabitha.

Kylie wasn’t so good at ignoring. “What old guy?”

“Don’t believe anything she says,” Miranda said.

“I don’t know who he is, but he’s vampire. But he has some other powers, too, because he was here using a similar spell as I was. Scary old guy.”

“Please,” Miranda said. “Tell me something I can believe.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Tabitha snapped.

Miranda rolled her eyes. Then she wiggled her pinky.

“Wait,” Kylie said, but too late, the cage and Tabitha disappeared.

“Wait for what?” Miranda asked.

“Where did she go?”

“You said I couldn’t keep her.”

Kylie frowned. “What if she was telling the truth about the weird old guy?”

“Please, she’s making up crap. Della would have smelled a vampire. Tabitha’s crazy.”

Kylie had to admit Miranda had a point. Della could sniff out vampires a mile away.

Miranda dropped back on the bed. “Can you believe I caught Tabitha Evans. I’m good.”

Socks came slinking into the room cautiously. His puffy black and white tail pointed in the air as if ready to blow and go if needed. Kylie looked back at Miranda. She might be good at setting traps, but she hadn’t quite gotten the spell down to turn Socks back into a kitten.

Then Kylie remembered her conversation with Derek. She mentally reached for the rubber band to snap herself out of thinking about him, but the dang rubber band wasn’t there. All she could feel was a big empty hole in her chest where her heart used to be.

“I’m gonna lay down.” Before she went into her bedroom, she stopped at the fridge. Yanking open the freezer, she grabbed one of the many quarts of ice cream Miranda had bought to nurse her broken heart.

Snatching a spoon out of the drawer, Kylie wondered if there was enough ice cream in the universe to make her feel better.

She really didn’t believe so.

* * *

The next week passed in a haze of heartbreak. Kylie gave her pint of blood and ate at least ten pints of ice cream. Derek continued to avoid her; Lucas

continued to show up. Not that she could even get mad at him. He never made any passes. He was just being a friend. With her heart on the mend, she could use another friend.

Of course, they never discussed Fredericka or the dreams—and thankfully she'd managed to keep the dreams at bay. He had asked about Derek, though, and Kylie told him it was a sore subject. The only thing Lucas said was that Derek was an idiot. For some reason, Kylie appreciated Lucas saying it.

She also appreciated the fact that Fredericka had stayed out of her way. Kylie wasn't sure, but she suspected Lucas had something to do with that, too.

The ghost showed up every morning. Sometimes she'd speak, but she never offered anything that helped Kylie figure out who was in danger. Whenever Kylie would start to worry about the ghost's warning, Holiday would take her to the falls. They'd gone three times. Kylie kept leaving with the same message: stay focused and keep the faith.

Holiday hadn't mentioned anything about Burnett in all this time. Kylie wondered if she'd told him she'd found another investor, or if she was reconsidering his offer. Kylie caught Holiday spying out the window and watching Burnett and the others play ball at least six times. Two or three of those times Kylie had even stood with her, just so she could watch Derek. Not that he didn't know she looked on. He would always glance at the window.

Their eyes would meet. Kylie would remember how much she missed him while he appeared annoyed.

"You want to talk about it?" Holiday had asked the last time it happened.

Kylie had agreed to spill her guts, but only over ice cream. She'd eaten all of Miranda's stash and needed more. So Kylie and Holiday took the afternoon off and went back to the ice cream parlor where they ate their weight in cold creamy scoops of bliss.

"Why does ice cream go with a broken heart?" Kylie asked.

"Because if you eat enough of it, it freezes the heart and numbs the pain for a bit," Holiday answered, and they both laughed.

Daniel hadn't visited since the day her mom had broken into the camp and

had to be erased, but her stepdad had called twice. Kylie had taken his second call. They talked about his job, about the weather, and then he mentioned the possibility of Kylie attending the Shadow Falls boarding school. He hadn't been positive or negative and said it was up to her mom.

When she hung up, she realized that her mom and dad must be talking for him to know about the boarding school. Kylie wasn't sure how she felt about that. Was her mom ready to forgive him? Kylie almost called her mom and asked, but with parents weekend less than one week away, Kylie figured she should wait and do it in person.

Miranda seldom mentioned Perry anymore. Not that it stopped Perry from watching Miranda. Anytime he was within a hundred feet of her, he had his gaze locked on her. Kylie knew that Miranda noticed it. She chose to ignore it. Not too hard considering her stress about the upcoming competition that her mother had entered her in during parents weekend. If she wasn't practicing for the event, she was attempting to solve the puzzle of what happened to Socks.

After two weeks, Socks didn't seem to mind being a skunk. He seemed to understand the power of his tail, and he'd raise it up in a threat at the least provocation. He even had Della walking a line. Thankfully, he hadn't sprayed again.

Della dreaded going home. And now she dreaded coming back to the FRU job waiting on her. Going undercover to find out if her cousin was responsible for the murders wasn't going to be easy for Della. A grumpy Della and a stressed-out Miranda meant the two were at each other's throats. Kylie often wondered if she didn't intervene if the two would really kill each other. But she loved the two of them too much to chance it.

The PI had finally discovered that Kent and Betty Brighten had taken a long vacation in Ireland. So Kylie's quest to discover what she was had been temporarily put on hold. Wasn't that just lovely?

The one good thing that happened lately was Kylie no longer felt that strange sense of being watched. She wondered if Tabitha had been the cause of it. But when she'd recall Tabitha, Kylie would remember what the girl said about an old vampire hanging around. For some reason, that bothered Kylie.

Not enough to mention it to Holiday, because in doing so she might get Miranda in trouble. And after the Burnett incident with Della, getting friends in trouble was the last thing Kylie wanted to do.

On Tuesday morning, Kylie woke up with what felt like an extra chill in the air. Either the ghost was trying to send a message or Kylie had more than one spirit hanging around. Great. That's all she needed, another ghost.

"What do you want?" Kylie trembled beneath the covers.

Her phone started croaking. Either her phone's ringtone had gotten changed or Miranda had managed to turn it into a frog. Kylie grabbed her phone. It stopped making the hideous sound and went directly to her voicemail messages.

First it played the one her dad had left, then one the PI left a few days ago. Next it played one that Kylie hadn't heard. From Trey, her boyfriend from the past. How had she missed this call? He asked her to return his call, saying it was important.

"Yeah, right," she muttered. "What, did you find out my breasts got bigger and you want to see them?" She shut the phone off, but not before deleting his message.

She had no sooner laid it back on the nightstand when the cell commenced croaking.

Grabbing it, she looked at the dang thing to make sure it was off. It was. So how did it make noise? She hit the off button again. The croaking continued.

"Are you doing this?" she asked the spirit. "If so, stop. Because it's not funny. And it's not telling me crap about what I need to know."

The phone went silent. The ghost appeared at the foot of her bed. "*You have to do something soon. She's dying.*"

Just like before, the spirit didn't offer a freaking clue as to who the mysterious "she" was.

Kylie got dressed and decided to visit Holiday. She doubted if hearing Holiday say she thought everything was going to be okay would take the edge off the fear, but she had to try.

She hadn't even gotten to the office porch when she heard the voices

ringing in her ears.

"Tell me it isn't dangerous?" Holiday insisted, sounding furious.

"I can't tell you that," Burnett said. *"This work is always dangerous."*

"Then no. He can't go."

"I didn't come to ask you," Burnett said, sounding equally annoyed. *"He's gotten permission from his mother. He'll be leaving today around noon."*

Kylie turned and started walking in the opposite direction. She would have covered her ears, but that had never worked before, so she just kept walking, hoping the voices would fade.

"It's wrong," Holiday said. *"First, you involve Lucas, and now Derek. I have to put my foot down."*

Kylie stopped. *First Lucas and now Derek ... what?*

"They are both exceptional boys," Burnett said.

"And that's my point. They are boys, Burnett."

"I was sixteen when I went to work for the FRU. Lucas is eighteen. Derek is only a few months shy of that. And he's an eraser, Holiday. Do you know how few there are of those?"

"I don't care about that. I care about him."

"He'll only be gone a month or less. Back in time for the school year to begin."

"Assuming he's not killed trying to do the government's work," Holiday snapped.

"I'm sorry," Burnett said, and there was regret in his voice.

Kylie heard a door slam. Burnett had left but she didn't move. She stood there on the trail, digesting what she'd just heard. Derek was leaving. He was going to work for the FRU. He wouldn't be back for a month.

Assuming he's not killed trying to do the government's work. Holiday's words played in Kylie's mind. Her heart froze. She took off down the trail toward Derek's cabin.

Chapter Thirty

Kylie got to Derek's cabin a minute later. She spotted Chris walking out of the cabin, dressed for his morning jog, and stopped. She would have jumped into the woods and hidden, but Chris was vampire, which meant he'd probably already heard her. So she started jogging and hoped he wouldn't stop and ask any questions.

When they ran past each other, she waved. He smiled and kept going. She continued down the trail past the cabin until she felt he wouldn't be in hearing range. Then she spun around, ran into the cabin, and went straight into Derek's room.

He was in bed, still asleep. His wide chest was bare. The sheet came low around his waist and Kylie wasn't sure if he had anything on beneath the sheet. She'd heard rumors that most boys slept in the buff. But she'd seen him naked and that didn't scare her away.

"Derek?"

He dropped his hand over his face.

She moved over to the bed and touched his shoulder. "Derek?"

His eyes popped open and he shot up. He stared at her but didn't look awake. "You've got your clothes on, so this isn't a dream." He flinched as if he realized he'd said that aloud and then he dropped back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

"It's not a dream." She sat beside him. "I heard what you're planning to do and I don't want you to go. Please, don't go."

He looked over at her with heavy-lidded eyes, but she could tell he was awake. "How did you find out?"

He hadn't answered her question, so she didn't answer his. "Were you not

even going to say good-bye?” Tears filled her eyes.

He sat up and pulled the sheet around his waist. “I was going to say good-bye.”

She blinked away the emotion. “You’re doing this because of me, aren’t you?”

“No. Not completely.” He touched her arm and the floodgates of emotion really started pouring.

“Please, don’t go,” she said in tears.

“I have to. I need to get my head on straight.” He blinked. “You were right. Well, partially right. I still think you have issues you need to resolve about Lucas. But ... you were right about me being jealous. My ability to read emotions is getting stronger. And I don’t know why, but with you, it’s as if I feel everything you feel but ... more. I don’t know if it’s because I care about you so much or what. But when you feel something I don’t like, an attraction for another guy, anger, or even disappointment at someone, I ... I go crazy inside. It’s like someone is shooting me up with emotional adrenaline.” He raked a hand over his face. “I’ve either got to learn to deal with this or...”

“Or what?” she asked. He didn’t answer, but Kylie knew what he meant. He either had to learn to deal with the emotions she unleashed inside him, or walk away from her. But wasn’t that what he was doing? Walking away?

“And you’ve got to deal with Lucas and...” He paused. “I’m also going to confront my dad. And when I come back in a month, we’ll see how things stand. You may have fallen in love with Lucas by then. And if that happens, I’ll have to accept it.”

“Would it be that easy to accept?”

“No. But I don’t see what other choice I have.”

“But you do have a choice. Stay. Give us a chance. We’ll work through this.”

He shook his head. “I can’t, Kylie. I just can’t.”

She looked at him and as hard as it was to accept, she finally did. Derek was leaving. He had made his choice, and it wasn’t her.

Chin high, vowing that she’d done everything she could, she turned and

walked out. He might have broken her heart, but he wasn't going to break her spirit. She would get over him. She would.

* * *

A week later, Kylie sat on a blanket out by the river where she and her mother had sat and talked about Daniel. Kylie just wanted to be alone to think, to try and wrap her head around how she was going to get her mom to sign her up for Shadow Falls' boarding school. And maybe, just maybe, Daniel would drop by while she was here.

She lay back on the blanket and stared up at the blue sky, and then she heard someone approach.

"See any elephants?" a familiar male voice asked.

She smiled at Lucas. "No, but I just saw a giraffe."

He looked up in the sky. "Where?"

"Over there." She pointed to the left. "Its neck is no longer connected to its body, but you can still see it if you squint."

He dropped down beside her. She thought he looked up at the clouds, but when she glanced back, she found him looking at her. He smiled. "You just get prettier every day, Kylie Galen."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't start."

"Okay, can I say I'll miss you?"

She sat up. "Are you going to your grandmother's house?"

"Yeah. We're in Houston."

She studied the tip of her tennis shoe, and decided to just ask. "Lucas, are you working with FRU?"

His eyes widened. "Who told you?"

"I overheard Burnett and Holiday talking about it."

"After I got inside the gang that had my sister, I got with Burnett to help me bring down a few really bad guys. So yeah, I sort of worked with them. And I told them if they needed me for anything else, I would be available."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

He studied her. "Are you asking out of concern for me or for Derek?"

"Both." She had accepted that Derek had left. She hadn't completely

gotten over the heartbreak, but she would.

“It’s not that dangerous. If you follow the game plan, things generally go okay.”

He brushed a long strand of hair from her cheek. “You know I want to be more than your friend, right?”

She went to studying her tennis shoe again.

“I don’t expect you to answer. I just wanted you to know before some other guy tries to move in.” He leaned closer. “I’m patient, Kylie. I’ve waited eleven years for you. I can wait until you’re ready.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek. It wasn’t anything like the kisses they’d shared, especially those in her dreams. But his nearness—his woodsy scent, the feel of his lips against her skin—sent a hundred butterflies into full flutter mode.

When she looked over at him, he was gone.

And obviously so were Kylie’s wits. Because for the life of her, she didn’t know what she’d planned to do, reprimand him for kissing her ... or kiss him back.

And maybe it was better if she didn’t answer her own question, too.

* * *

Friday morning, Kylie, Miranda, and Della, each carting suitcases, walked the trail to meet up with their parents. They walked slowly, like condemned prisoners moving to their executions.

“I’m going to be peeing on a drug test stick every hour,” Della muttered.

Miranda sighed. “I’m going to screw up at my competition and my mom is going to give me up for adoption.”

“I’m going to a ghost hunt,” Kylie added. Both girls looked at her. “Don’t ask.”

Holiday met them at the end of the trail, channeling her normal, peppy self. “Smile, guys. It’s only for a few days.”

They all turned and looked at each other again. Kylie dropped her suitcase and hugged them both. “I expect a phone call from each of you twice a day.”

“Twice a day,” Della said. “I hope you don’t mind if I call when I’m peeing on a drug test stick, because that’s what I’m gonna be doing the whole

time.”

“Just don’t flush,” Miranda said. “I hate it when people flush when they’re talking to me.”

Five minutes later, over in the dining hall, Kylie gave Holiday a big hug. “Take care of Socks,” she told her.

“I’m planning on bringing him over to my place,” Holiday said.

When Kylie and her mom started out of the dining hall, Perry came over and gave her a nudge with his elbow. For Perry, that was equivalent to a hug. Kylie gave him a warm smile.

“It seems like you’ve made good friends here,” her mom said.

“Yeah, I have, Mom. They’re special.”

Kylie almost ran out the door when Lucas stepped in front of her. “Hello, Mrs. Galen,” he said. “My name is Lucas. I just wanted to say good-bye to your daughter.”

Kylie’s heart raced as she worried her mom might recognize him.

“Nice to meet you, Lucas,” her mom said, and stepped away to give them some privacy.

He smiled. “Take care.”

“I will.”

He leaned in. “Dream of me,” he whispered.

She rolled her eyes, but he just grinned and walked off. Kylie headed over to her mom.

“He’s kind of cute,” her mom said, but she had that tone—the tone she got before she started handing out the sex pamphlets. They walked out of the dining hall and headed for the car.

“Yeah,” Kylie agreed, and for the umpteenth time, she hoped that the weekend went okay. No unexpected surprises, no long, uncomfortable silences with her and her mom.

When her mom started the car, the cold that filled the interior was more powerful than any car air-conditioning.

“Wow. I’ve never had this car get cool so fast.” When her mom pulled out, Kylie glanced in the backseat to stare at the ghost in her bloody nightgown. Suddenly the ghost lurched forward and threw up all over Kylie’s

shoulder. The stench was awful.

Kylie fought to keep her gag reflex from bouncing up and down her throat.

“So,” her mom said, oblivious to it all. “Where would you like to go for an early lunch? I’m starving.”

Chapter Thirty-one

Kylie wasn't sure who it was who said you couldn't go home again. But he had it partly right. Oh, you could go home. It was just going to be awkward as hell. Amazingly, it didn't stem from her mom. They'd actually had a good three-hour drive home, phantom puke aside. The problem was the house. It felt cold, not just because the ghost had decided to tag along, but because of her dad. Or lack of dad. There was nothing, not one thing here that reminded Kylie that he'd ever lived here. Even the pictures of their father-daughter trips were gone, replaced now with pictures of just Kylie.

She couldn't blame her mom, but damn. For the first time since it all happened, Kylie worried about how her mom might really feel with her going away to boarding school. And maybe she even understood her mom wanting to sell the house.

"Doesn't it feel so good to be back?" Her mom hugged her.

Being back? Not so good. The hug felt nice, though. So nice it even made the house feel less awkward.

When Kylie went into her room, she couldn't help but laugh. On her nightstand was a whole set of pamphlets on all the sex-related topics Kylie had missed while away. The one on top, obviously the one Kylie's mom thought most important, covered info on safe oral sex. Oh yeah, crucial need-to-know information. Kylie was planning on running out tonight and having oral sex.

Her mom had the entire weekend scheduled with items from her We Gotta List. We gotta bake your favorite cookies. We gotta go eat at a new pizza place. We gotta be at the haunted house at six.

When, Kylie wondered, was she going to have time to run out and have

“safe” oral sex?

Kylie added a big Gotta to the list. *Gotta convince Mom to sign me up for boarding school.* Even with her reservations about leaving her mom, Kylie was a supernatural and felt like a fish out of water back at home.

At six that evening, after baking cookies and enjoying some together time with her mom, Kylie crawled her fish-out-of-water butt into the car to go to the ghost hunt. And she seriously hoped that the B&B owner didn't mind if she brought a visitor along because sitting in the backseat—still bloody, still puking—was Kylie's ghost, who wasn't any more communicative here than she'd been back at Shadow Falls.

And to prove the point, the ghost disappeared before they arrived at the B&B.

Once they'd all gathered in the lobby of the B&B, the owner, a tall, heavysset woman in her late fifties, with dyed red hair, waved them into a semicircle. “Welcome. Welcome to Anderson's B&B. My name is Celeste Bell. Some of you may remember me from my many television appearances.”

Kylie didn't but several of the other guests nodded their heads. Celeste was a professed ghost whisperer who had appeared on some cable show as an expert on haunting. She wore a long white gown, as if dressing spooky would help intensify the experience.

“The house was built in the late eighteen hundreds by Joshua Anderson, but tragedy struck before he ever moved in when his young bride was killed on their wedding day in a carriage accident. Joshua took his own life in the master bedroom. The place was subsequently sold and reopened as a saloon. More tragedy soon followed. Now, before we get started, let's talk about the rules.”

The rules were simple. Stay together. No unnecessary chitchat. Celeste also insisted they turn off their cell phones because that kind of energy could chase away ghosts.

Funny, Kylie thought, her experience said ghosts really liked tinkering with her cell.

Kylie actually checked Celeste's brain pattern to see if maybe she was supernatural, but nope. The ten attendees, with the exception of Kylie and her

mom, were all card-carrying senior citizens who no longer had to show their IDs to get their free coffees at their neighborhood Chick-fil-A. Moving slowly as a group, half of them using walkers, they followed the woman through the first floor of the house. In each room, Celeste stopped to tell another haunting tale, most from the house's days as a saloon.

Thus far, the place looked ghost-free.

While Celeste may have sucked as a ghost whisper, she was a good storyteller and she had everyone on pins and needles listening to the spooky tales.

"Now, we're going to have dinner. And I'll tell you about what happened in the early nineteen hundreds. Go ahead and sit down." Celeste motioned to the dining room table, with plates already filled with spaghetti. "For some reason," she whispered, "this room is always a bit colder than the rest of the house."

As if on cue, the temperature in the old parlor dropped a good forty degrees. Kylie's ghost materialized next to her. The patrons all huddled together, hugging themselves, as steam rose from their lips. The look on Celeste's face would have made attending the ghost hunt worth it if Kylie hadn't seen the look of sheer terror on her mom's face.

"It's okay, Mom," Kylie whispered.

"It's so friggin' damn spooky." Her mom never said *friggin'* or *damn*.

"Probably just a trick," Kylie lied.

"*It's time. Time for you to do something!*" the ghost screamed.

Show me what I have to do, Kylie said in her mind.

Right then, every cell phone in the room started ringing. Well, all of them except Kylie's. Her phone croaked like some demented frog. And since they had all been turned off, that brought some serious gasps.

But not as serious as when the chandelier crashed down on top of the table, sending plates of spaghetti shooting across the room.

Celeste, the professed ghost whisperer and cable TV "celebrity," fainted. Kylie didn't know people using walkers could move so fast. But not fast enough for her mom. Kylie thought for a second that her mom was going to knock a couple of them out of the way to take the lead spot heading out of the

dining room.

Kylie knelt beside Celeste. As the last of the guests fought their way out the door, Kylie heard one of them say, “Who is Trey Cannon?”

Kylie looked up at the elderly man.

“Don’t know,” said another lady. “But that’s who called me, too.”

Kylie grabbed her phone, and sure as hell, she had a voice message from Trey.

Why would the ghost send Trey’s message to everyone in the room?

Kylie looked up at the ghost who stood in the middle of the room wearing spaghetti all over her blood-soaked nightgown, which definitely would be putting Kylie off pasta for a long time. “It’s Trey? I’m supposed to help Trey? But you said ... ‘she’ needed help.”

The ghost started to fade.

“Don’t you dare leave!” Kylie screeched.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I thought you were right behind me,” her mom called from the other room. Seconds later, she ran back in and dropped beside Kylie. “Oh, God, is she dead?”

The woman’s eyes shot open and she screamed.

Twenty minutes later, while Kylie’s mom spoke to the ambulance driver who was about to cart off Celeste and one of the guests who was now complaining of chest pains, Kylie got her mom’s phone and deleted Trey’s message. The last thing Kylie wanted was her mom getting suspicious. She hoped her mom hadn’t heard Trey’s name mentioned in the mix of things.

Kylie listened to his message. All he’d said was to call him. She did. It went to his voicemail. Just freaking great!

* * *

When Kylie woke up the next morning at nine o’clock, she had two startling realizations.

First: She hadn’t been woken up at dawn by the ghost. Did this mean anything? Was it a good thing? A bad thing?

Second: And this was the shocker. She wasn’t alone. Nope. Completely covered under the blanket next to Kylie was a body. Dead or alive, she

wasn't sure.

Biting back a scream, she touched it. More like poked it. It wasn't cold. It even made a *oomph* sound. Her mom's head popped out from under the covers. When she saw Kylie's expression, she bolted upright. "What is it?"

Kylie blinked. "What are you doing in my bed?"

"Oh." She ran a hand through her newly styled hair that really looked good on her. "I came to check in on you. I guess I ... dropped off."

Kylie giggled. "You were scared."

Her mom did an eye roll that would put Sara to shame. "Nooo." She broke down and laughed. "Okay, yes. It was freaky. I was shocked you could sleep."

"It was just a ghost." Kylie grinned.

"You say that as if you see them all the time." Her mom touched Kylie's cheek. "I'm so happy you're home. See how much fun we can have? You don't need to go to boarding school."

Kylie's breath caught. "But I really want to go, Mom."

The spark in her mom's eyes dimmed. "Let's not talk about this now. We have a wonderful day planned."

In spite of the anti-boarding school talk, and the fact that Kylie still was unable to get in touch with Trey, her mood remained positive. The ghost had apparently decided to give Kylie a reprieve. That or she decided she'd just caused enough trouble after last night's scene. A call to the B&B informed them that both Celeste and the old man who'd complained of chest pains had been released from the hospital.

They decided to do pizza for lunch and were primed to leave when Kylie's phone rang. When she saw it was Miranda, she asked for a few minutes. Her mom took off to check her e-mail.

"Hey," Miranda said. "I got us on three-way. Say hello, Della."

"A verbal ménage à trois," Della said.

"Gross," Miranda said.

"You wanna hear gross?" Della asked. "I just peed on my hand trying to piss on this damned drug stick while talking on the phone to you."

Kylie laughed. "I miss you guys." The sound of a toilet flushing filled the

line.

“Oh, double gross,” Miranda snapped. “I told you not to flush while I was on the phone.”

Kylie dropped on the sofa. “Miranda, have you gone to your competition yet?”

“I’m not on until four.” She sounded desperate.

“You’ll do fine,” Kylie said.

“You will,” Della added. “How was the ghost hunt, Kylie?”

Kylie checked to make sure her mom wasn’t near. “You aren’t freaking going to believe this.” She gave them the lowdown. They all had a good laugh and then the conversation switched to how much they all wished they were back at Shadow Falls. When Kylie realized she’d been talking for almost ten minutes, she told them good-bye. They agreed to talk this afternoon.

“I’m ready, Mom.” The doorbell rang. Kylie ran to the door while her mom called that she was shutting off her computer. When Kylie swung open the door all the awkwardness from the night before came hurling at her. Funny how last night’s unease had stemmed from her dad not being present and now it stemmed because he was here.

“Hi, Pumpkin.”

The question popping around Kylie’s head was if her mom knew Dad was coming.

“Are you ready to—” Mom’s tennis shoes stopped so fast at the opening to the entryway. The skid marks on the marble floor and the shock on her mom’s face answered Kylie’s question.

Mom didn’t know. Even more apparent, Mom wasn’t happy.

Her dad’s gaze went to her mom. “Hi, hon.” His smile wavered.

The nervousness of his grin sent a desperate flutter to Kylie’s gut. Okay, her dad deserved to be nervous. But it still felt downright wrong to open the door to her dad when this had been his home. His castle. Now he was unsure if he was welcome. And if her mom’s expression was any indication, he wasn’t.

“I thought maybe I could take you girls to lunch,” he said.

Her mom took a step back. “I ... I should have known you’d want to see her.” She waved a hand toward the door. “You two go.”

“Why don’t you come, too?” her dad insisted.

“I think not,” her mom countered.

“Kylie wants you to come.” His father’s gaze shot to her. “Don’t you, Pumpkin? Like ol’ times, the three of us.”

Her mother frowned. Kylie frowned. Her dad grew more nervous. The tension in the room grew terse.

Her mom notched up her chin. “Why not make it four? Your whore can come, too.”

“Oh! This is a bad time, isn’t it?” Trey’s voice came right behind her dad.

Kylie’s mom shot up the stairs. Her dad looked stunned. Trey looked embarrassed.

Then her dad frowned at Kylie. “Didn’t you tell her it was over?”

Had she heard him right? “Huh?”

“You didn’t tell her that it was over with Amy?”

“Should I leave?” Trey asked.

“Yes,” her dad answered.

Kylie’s head reeled. She watched Trey go. She heard her mom crying. Kylie stared at her dad—stepdad. The idea that he’d actually attempted to use her to get her mom gnawed on some very raw nerves. The fact that he’d expected her to update her mom about his relationship status pretty much nuked those nerves.

She pointed at her dad. “Don’t you ever try to use me to get to my mom!”

“I thought—”

“Then stop thinking!” She slammed the door. The house shook. The small glass window in the doorframe shattered. She saw her dad’s startled expression through the broken window before he took off.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

Then she took the stairs two at a time to check on her mom.

* * *

It took Kylie an hour to convince her mom to go out for pizza again. She'd tried calling Trey hoping to see what was so important that the ghost had sent his message to everyone in the room, but she got no answer. They were in the middle of lunch at the pizza parlor, still not back to their prior jovial mood, when her phone started croaking.

"Oh, honey," her mom said. "Change that ringtone." She hugged herself and called out to the waiter, "Can you turn down the air?"

Kylie grabbed her cell. There was no call, but an old voice message played.

"Hi, Kylie. It's Sara. I'm sorry I had to hang up like that. I ... had something I had to take care of. Listen, I really want to see you when you're home. Please make sure to call me?"

"Who was it?" her mom asked, then lowered her voice. "Your dad?"

"No. A message from Sara."

Kylie stared at her pizza and got the strangest feeling. "Mom, would you mind if I went to see Sara after lunch?"

* * *

"Hi, Kylie," Mrs. Jetton said an hour later. "Sara will be thrilled to see you."

Kylie studied Sara's mom's expression. Her eyes looked red and her face pale. The somber mood filling the air ratcheted up Kylie's concern for her former best friend.

"She's in her room," Mrs. Jetton said.

Kylie almost asked what was wrong, but the chill running down her spine prevented her from talking. That short walk from the living room to Sara's door filled Kylie's head with dozens of memories. And for some odd reason, those memories brought tears to her eyes.

"You have to save her. You have to save her." The ghost's words vibrated in Kylie's head. She swallowed and told herself she was overreacting, that everything was fine.

Sara's door stood ajar and when Kylie saw Sara, Kylie gasped.

Sara looked ... awful. So pale that Kylie watched her chest to make sure she was breathing.

Sara opened her eyes. “She told you, didn’t she?”

Kylie used both hands to wipe the tears from her cheeks. “Told me what?”

“What the doctor ... If she didn’t ... why are you crying?”

“Happy to see you.” She tried to smile.

“You always were a lousy liar.” Sara pulled the covers up. “Mom, can you please turn down the air? I’m freezing in here.”

“Honey, I already did,” her mom called from the living room. “I phoned the electrician. Something’s wrong with the AC again.”

A photo album on Sara’s bedside table plopped to the floor.

Kylie picked it up. She wasn’t surprised when she saw the face staring up from the album. Then she looked at the foot of Sara’s bed at the same spirit of the woman. She’d lost the spaghetti and the bloodstained gown, but her expression was just as dire as before.

“Who is this?” Kylie passed her finger over the face. Sara leaned over to see. It appeared to hurt her to move. “My grandma. She died when I was four. Of the same kind of cancer. Isn’t that freaky?”

Cancer. The word brought another gasp to Kylie’s lungs and she had to work to keep her lips from trembling. She looked at the spirit. “I can’t fix this.”

“Yes, you can!”

“Can’t fix what?” Sara looked at the album as if Kylie had broken something.

“Nothing.” Kylie sat down beside Sara. The memories of them on this bed, sharing secrets, laughing at the stupidest things, filled Kylie’s head.

She swallowed emotions that threatened to overpower her. “Do you remember when we laid here and practiced kissing mirrors before the sixth-grade dance?”

Sara smiled. “Yeah.” She leaned on the pillow and closed her eyes. Her long brown hair looked thinner and it lacked its normal luster. The silence grew longer. Sadder.

Kylie stroked Sara’s arm. “What did the doctor say?”

Chapter Thirty-two

Sara opened her eyes. “The oncologist said he’d try to get me into experimental trials, but ... he thinks it’s too late.” A sheen of tears filled Sara’s eyes. “Mom says I’m doing it, but...” Sara swallowed. “I don’t want to die.” Her lips trembled. “But I can still hear my mom saying dozens of times that if *she* ever got cancer, she’d rather die than go through what they put her mama through. She said they butchered her mom. I don’t want to deal with that. The one surgery was bad enough.”

Kylie recalled the dreams of knives coming at her. She looked at Sara’s abdomen. “When did you have surgery?”

“Last week,” Sara answered. “I’d missed so many periods. The clinic doctor felt a mass when she was checking me. Two days later, I was in the hospital.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Sara bit down on her lip. “I did. I didn’t tell you that I thought I had cancer, but...”

Guilt filled Kylie’s chest. The ghost, Sara’s grandmother, had been trying to get her to listen to the message. The same message she had played earlier.

“Couldn’t they take it out?”

Sara shook her head. “There’s too much. It’s everywhere.”

The ache in Kylie’s heart doubled. She recalled Trey’s message that had been sent to everyone at the B&B. Why had the ghost sent Trey’s message? “Trey?”

Sara looked down at her hands. “I’m sorry. I swear I didn’t mean it to happen. I’d drunk too much. He’d drunk too much.”

“What?” Kylie asked.

Sara looked up. "Shit. He hasn't told you, has he?"

It took only a second to digest what Sara said—it took less time for Kylie to know it wasn't important.

"I asked him to tell you because I couldn't stand it. He promised he would."

"He tried. I didn't take his calls. But I don't care, Sara." She took Sara's hand in hers and squeezed. "Trey and I are ... so over. You're what's important."

Another tear crawled down Sara's pale cheek. "You're not just saying that because I'm dying, are you?" Sara tried to make it a joke.

Kylie didn't laugh. "No."

Sara pulled her hand out of Kylie's. "You're hot."

"*You can do it.*" The ghost's voice came right behind Kylie's ear. "*It's your touch.*"

Kylie looked back at the spirit. "Do you mean ... like Helen?"

"What?" Sara asked.

Kylie continued to stare at the ghost.

"*Do it,*" the ghost said. "*Please. Heal her. Before it's too late.*"

"I don't know how," Kylie muttered.

"Am I hallucinating or are you talking to yourself?" Sara asked. "I mean, I am on some pretty good drugs right now."

Kylie looked back at Sara. "No." She felt the cold of the ghost inch closer.

"No, I'm not hallucinating or no, you're not talking to yourself?"

"No to both." Kylie tried to think. Could she really do this?

She looked down at Sara's grandmother's picture. "What's her name?"

"Fanny Mildred Bogart." Sara laughed. "I'm glad Mama didn't name me after her." It obviously hurt Sara to laugh because she moaned and dropped back on the pillow. When she opened her eyes, she stared at the photograph. "Do you want to hear something crazy?"

"What?" Kylie asked, but she thought she already knew what Sara was going to say.

"Sometimes I think she's here."

"She *is* here." Kylie took Sara's hand again and struggled to know how

much to tell Sara.

Sara chuckled. "Now you believe in ghosts, huh?"

"Yup." Kylie inhaled. "You'd be surprised what I believe in now."

"Like what?" Sara asked.

"Like miracles." Kylie looked at Fanny.

"I could use a miracle." Sara smiled and tried to pull her hand away.

"Why is your hand so hot?"

"How do I do this?" Kylie asked the spirit, holding on to Sara's hand.

"Do what?" Sara asked, her voice sounding as tired as her eyes looked.

"I don't know how, I just know that you have the power."

"That's not helpful," Kylie responded.

"You're talking to yourself again," Sara said, but she'd stopped trying to pull her hand away.

"I know," Kylie told Sara. Then Kylie remembered how Helen, the fairy who had the ability to heal, had touched Kylie's head when she'd checked her for tumors. And Helen had said that's what she'd done when she had healed her sister's cancer.

Dropping Sara's hand, Kylie scooted up to the head of Sara's bed. She brushed Sara's bangs from her brow. Then she reached over with her other hand and touched both of Sara's temples.

"What are you doing?" Sara asked, looking at Kylie and making a funny face.

"Trying to help you relax," Kylie said, knowing it sounded lame.

"Okay, this camp has turned you weird," Sara said, and started to reach up to move Kylie's hands.

"Tell her that your mom did this for you when you weren't feeling good," Fanny said.

Good idea. "My mom used to do this to me, and it really made me feel good."

Sara dropped her hands down. "Okay, but if you try to kiss me, I'm screaming for my mom." Sara giggled.

"What? I'm not your type?" Kylie asked, and giggled, and then she tried to concentrate on positive healing thoughts.

* * *

It was after nine that night when Kylie left Sara's house. When she'd been there for about an hour, Kylie had slipped into the bathroom and called her mom. She cried when she told her mom about Sara's cancer. Her mom said she'd call Mrs. Jetton tomorrow and that Kylie should stay with Sara as long as she wanted but to call before she started home.

Kylie didn't leave until Sara went to sleep. She had forgotten to call her mom, but since she lived close, she didn't worry.

Her neighborhood was dark, no streetlights—no lights on in the houses, either. A power outage, Kylie told herself as she fought an urgent sense of unease.

And that's when it happened.

Something large hit the windshield of her car.

Chapter Thirty-three

Kylie's heart stopped when she saw the body against her windshield. She slammed her foot on the brakes. Oh, my God. She must have hit someone.

Then she saw the face staring through the windshield at her. The rogue, the vampire who'd killed those girls in Fallen. But how? Hadn't he been "dealt" with?

She accelerated and swerved, hoping to throw him off the car. It didn't work. Clinging to the car like a spider, he inched over, smiled, and punched his fist through her car window. Glass shards went everywhere. She screamed and pushed the accelerator harder. He reached for her. His fist wrapped around her neck and squeezed. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Fireworks exploded before her eyes. Her last thought was of Sara. She hoped she'd healed her. One of them should live.

* * *

When Kylie woke up, she sat up on a cold, heavy wooden chair. Her head and throat throbbed. She went to rub her temple, but her hands wouldn't move. She heard a clinking noise, metal against metal. Chains?

She pried open her eyes but saw nothing. Pitch-blackness surrounded her.

Shuffling her feet, she heard chains rattling again. Aware of cold metal bracelets against her ankles and wrists, her mind started rationalizing. Her arms and legs were bound with some kind of metal chain. She attempted to shift her limbs to test her theory.

Yup. Chains.

She hated being right, too. The memory of the rogue filled her head. A

scream lodged in her throat.

She blinked and hoped to see something but only blackness invaded her senses. She inhaled. The scent of dirt and concrete filled her nose.

The lightest intake of air reached her ears. "Is someone here?"

No answer came. "I know someone's here," she said. Trying to test her strength, she pulled at the chains.

She was barely able to move.

"So the rumors of your strength were just rumors." A raspy male voice echoed in the darkness.

"Release me!" Panicked even more, she fought against the chains that bound her, but she couldn't free herself.

"You shouldn't struggle, Kylie. You'll spend your energy uselessly. Save your strength to think. To make wise choices."

Forcing herself to calm down, she listened. The voice echoed in the room. She didn't recognize it. She remembered the rogue vampire who had crashed through her windshield. Panic clawed at her raw, dry throat. She tried to remember what his voice had sounded like. She could hear him in her head, but it hadn't been the same. Had it?

"What kind of choices?" she asked.

"We have much to talk about." Definitely not the rogue and not a voice she'd heard before. It sounded ... rusty, almost ... old. From the way the voice bounced around the room, Kylie sensed she was in a tunnel.

"Where am I? Who are you?" She would have asked what he wanted, but she was too scared to know. Face it, when you find yourself in chains in a pitch-black room, tea and scones weren't usually going to be offered.

The only noise she heard was the sound of her own breathing and the lighter short breaths from the man with the rusty voice. Her mind shot to the visions with the ghosts and she wondered if she had misread them. Was Kylie the person who would be tortured?

Taking a deep breath, she pulled against the chains. She couldn't free herself. Where was her strength? "What do we have to talk about?" she asked.

The light flickered on with blinding brightness. She blinked and on the

second rise of her eyelids she saw him. He wore a strange robe, like a monk. His skin was wrinkled, leathered. She tightened her eyebrows and saw his brain pattern. As she suspected, vampire.

An old, weird vampire like Miranda's enemy Tabitha had described. Kylie's gut had tried to tell her not to ignore it. She hoped this didn't turn out to be her fatal and final flaw.

"You were watching me."

"You have keen instincts." He stepped closer, frighteningly closer. His eyes were cold and gray. Dead gray. "Do you purposely keep your mind closed?" he asked.

She wondered how much she should tell him, or if she should tell him anything at all. Then again, if he thought she was blocking him on purpose, he might get angry. And she had to remember not to lie.

"I don't know how to open up."

The sound of metal scraping concrete rang out. Kylie looked behind the old man to a door being pushed open. Her heart stopped and her throat ached as she remembered the newcomer's hand cutting off her airway.

"I told you to wait," the old man scolded.

"But, Gramps, I'm just eager to see my new bride." The rogue moved closer.

Bride? Kylie yanked at the chains, repulsed by the idea of being his bride.

"Leave now!" the old man roared. His voice might be rusty and worn, but his tone demanded obedience. Frightening obedience.

The rogue stopped two feet from her. His auburn hair wasn't soaked in blood this time, but she could still see it in her mind. She knew the minute she looked into his cold, gray eyes, he was the same vampire who'd slipped into her dressing room—and the one who'd crashed through her windshield. "She's so pretty. Don't keep her from me too long."

He shot off. The sound of the iron door slamming shut echoed throughout the room.

Kylie glared at the old man. "He murdered two young girls."

"Yes." He hung his head as if ashamed. "My grandson made many mistakes. But he will grow wiser."

“The Vampire Council was supposed to...” Kylie remembered something Della had said about the Council, namely that they were all old, and just like that, she knew. “You are part of the Council. You lied to them.”

He looked up. “I did not lie. I said I would deal with this. You are part of my plan.”

“He kidnapped me.” Could she shame the old man into letting her go?

“On my orders.”

So much for that hope.

He moved closer. A sense of power moved with him. “In my day, when our young men acted out, only one thing could tame them. A woman strong enough, pretty enough, to give them a reason to settle down.”

“He can’t be saved.” Her pulse raced as the old man inched closer.

“He’s wild now, but you fascinate him. Do you have any idea how many hours he spent in those woods by your camp, risking being caught, and for nothing more than a chance to see you?”

She shivered with disgust, knowing it had been him all those times.

“I was curious about who had stolen my grandson’s heart and I followed him. Once I saw you, I could understand what drove him. You are very fascinating.” He leaned down, his face inches from hers. His breath came against her cheek and she felt sick that they shared the same airspace. “What are you, Kylie Galen? Do you even know? Is there vampire in your blood?”

“He’s a murderer. I would rather die than let him lay a finger on me.”

His right eyebrow arched. “Death is always an option. Not one I recommend, though.”

The panic started to claw anew in her chest.

“I saw you drink the blood.” His cold touch on her arm made her skin crawl. “But you are still warm. I saw the strange wolf befriend you, but you did not turn on the day of the moon. Normally, I would seek a vampire as his mate, but you ... my grandson is right. You are special.”

She pulled again at her chains. “Let me go.”

“You seek a family, Kylie Galen. We shall be that to you. You will bear me great-grandchildren, and with my genes and yours, they will be even more powerful. And you will teach my grandson to be a man.”

“Not happening,” Kylie sneered.

“We will convince you.”

“I’m not easily convinced. And if your grandson isn’t a man, maybe it’s because he’s lacked a role model.”

The old man’s eyes tightened. “I will tolerate much, but I demand your respect.”

“You have to earn respect.” It was her mom’s favorite saying, and it never rang so true as it did now.

He shook his head. “In our world, respect is won by the person who has more power. Right now, my dear child, I hold all the power.”

He disappeared. Vanished. Kylie didn’t even see him turn into a blur. What was he? She remembered Tabitha, the witch who Miranda caught snooping around the cabin, saying he was more than vampire, and Kylie feared the girl was right.

He might have power, Kylie thought, but she still didn’t respect him. And by God, she wouldn’t bear his great-grandchildren either.

She yanked at her chains again, sought the strength within herself to get free. The strength didn’t come. She considered screaming but something inside her said it would be a waste of energy. She needed to think. She needed to use her brain to get out of this.

She called out for Daniel. He was a no-show. Would the death angels or whatever it was at the falls come to her aid?

She closed her eyes and asked for help. Begged, actually. The thought of being touched by the rogue meant she wasn’t above begging.

In the deep corners of her mind, a voice whispered, “You have the power within you.”

“Please, that sounds like an old *Star Wars* movie!” When only silence answered, she continued, “This isn’t any time for self-discovery.” She yanked again at the chains, thinking the power she had was to break loose. She struggled until she felt her wrists and ankles bruise. “He wants me to bear his great-grandchildren. I could use some help here!”

Trying to remember to breathe, she considered what power the death angels meant. She was a ghost whisperer, she could run fast, and occasionally

found unknown strength to toss werewolves long distances. And she had special hearing that came and went. There was also a possibility that she could heal—she hoped so for Sara’s sake—and she could dreamscape.

I can dreamscape! Wasn’t that as good as a cell phone? If she could get Lucas, Lucas could get Burnett. Burnett would get her out of this. He would. He’d bring the whole FRU down on this old dude’s ass.

* * *

She counted sheep. One hundred, then two. Every noise and sometimes the lack of noise kept her awake. Her eyes grew tired. She eventually grew tired. Finally, the floating sensation pulled at her subconscious. Then she flew, whooshed through the clouds. She saw him.

“You came.” Lucas sat up on a king-size bed. He wore a sexy smile and no shirt. Not that now was the time to notice such things.

“The rogue has me. Get Burnett.” She spoke quickly, afraid she’d wake up.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Where are you?”

“Don’t know. A tunnel. There’s a lot of concrete. Iron doors, too.”

He looked at her in panic. “I have to know where you are.”

“I was unconscious when they brought me here.”

“They?”

“The rogue’s grandfather. He’s one of the Vampire Council.”

Lucas pushed both hands through his dark hair. “Listen, Kylie. The way dreamscaping works, you can fly. You’re going to have to fly back to your body, but slowly. Look down and see landmarks. Then come back and tell me where you are. I have to know where you are or I can’t help you.”

“What if I can’t come back? What if I wake up and can’t tell you?” The panic made her feel heavy and it sounded in her voice. She didn’t want to leave Lucas. Although she knew it was a dream, she felt safer here.

“You can do this, Kylie. Go!” He waved her away. “Hurry.”

Kylie did what Lucas told her to do. She started flying back. Too fast. She

concentrated until she found how to reduce her speed. Then she looked down. She saw a skyline. Houston skyline. She dropped lower until she saw a large building, the Toyota Center, she recognized it. Then she remembered her father had taken her downtown into the Houston tunnels.

Flying through the tunnel, unstopped by the walls, Kylie didn't slow down until she saw herself. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Seeing oneself slumped over in a chair, chained like a scene in a horror movie, freaked her out. She heard a noise. The iron door began to open. She felt herself falling into her body.

"No!" She had to get back to Lucas. She had to give him directions on how to find her.

Chapter Thirty-four

Fighting the pull to move back into her body, Kylie swung around and flew back the way she'd come. The speed prevented her from breathing.

Someone called her name. Not Lucas. It was the old vampire.

The clouds were thick. Wasn't Lucas just through the layer of fog? She felt herself being yanked back. She was about to wake up. "Lucas, I'm in the Houston Tunnel System. Under the Toyota building. Can you hear me?"

"What are you doing?" the dark, rusty voice growled.

Kylie jerked her eyes open. The old vampire stared at her. She remembered she couldn't lie. "Dreaming."

"What kind of dream? I felt the energy."

"A disturbing one. I ... used to have night terrors when I was younger." No lie there.

He appeared resigned to believe her, but remained suspicious. Was there something for him to be suspicious about? Had Lucas heard her?

"I have some old friends interested in meeting you. For your own well-being, I hope you will be on your best behavior."

"Who are they? And why do they want to meet me?"

"I think, Kylie Galen, that you are even more special than you know."

"How am I special?"

He didn't answer. "If you can tell me that you will not try to escape, I will release the chains."

The thought of having the heavy metal bracelets removed sounded like heaven. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but they would have been a lie.

"We both know that if there is a way to escape I will take it. Your job is to

make sure there isn't a way."

He laughed. "I appreciate your honesty."

"Enough to unchain me?"

"Not that much," he said.

She met his aged gray eyes. "I see no way to escape the room. Unless you believe I have the power to overtake you when the door is open. And since I can't break these chains, are you saying that your powers are weaker than this metal?"

He studied her. "You are very intelligent, my child. Dare I worry that you are as cunning as you are smart?"

"If I was that smart and cunning, would I be here?"

"Let's compromise." He closed his eyes and the metal bracelets around her arms and one from one ankle disappeared. Her right ankle was now attached to a long heavy chain.

Shocked at his ability, she stared at him. "What are you?"

He smiled. "See, I am already winning your respect."

"You misread curiosity for respect," she countered.

His eyes tightened, but a slight smile crept from behind his anger.

"What are you?" she asked again.

He folded his aged arms over his chest. "What's wrong, dear? Are the similarities frightening?" With that, he disappeared into the thin, cold air.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she yelled, and stood to see how far she could get with the chain attached to her ankle.

No nearly far enough.

* * *

Kylie tried to fall back asleep, to get back to Lucas, but she couldn't. She could only hope her message had gotten through and that he'd already phoned Burnett and they were on the way here now. How long would it take?

What if they didn't come? What if her message never got through? She attempted to pull the chain free, but her strength wasn't there. What was it with her strength? Why did it come and go?

Kylie started pacing, dragging the chain as she went. She couldn't reach

the thick door, though it wouldn't have mattered if she had. When the vampire had disappeared, so had the doorknob. Opening it would have been impossible. Still she paced and tried to come up with a way out, with or without any help from Burnett. She glanced back at the door with its missing knob. What the hell was he? And what had he meant by that whole similarity crap?

The chain clattered against the concrete floor. She remembered she hadn't phoned her mom before she left Sara's house and she hoped like heck that she wasn't worried. Turning again, pacing toward the right wall this time, Kylie was surprised to hear voices. Was the old man back with his friends? She stopped moving and listened.

It wasn't the old dude's voice, but that of the rogue. Oh, great, was he planning on visiting again? Her body tensed and she looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon. Before her gaze swept the room, she heard the rogue's voice clearer.

"Who are you and what are doing snooping around here?"

Where were the voices coming from? She hesitated and moved closer to the wall. Suddenly, a loud thump sounded as if something heavy had been tossed across the room.

Or someone?

Her heart stopped. She moved even closer to the wall trying to see if the voices were coming from behind the wall. Another clatter echoed and she felt almost certain that it was.

"You will tell me!" the rogue hissed.

Fear filled her gut. Who was the rogue talking to? Was it ... was it someone who'd come looking for her? Her thoughts and heart shot to Lucas.

"Unchain me and fight like a man!" Lucas's voice roared.

Her chest swelled with regret. She'd gone to him for help and ...

"Why? You would only fight like the dog you are." A loud thud followed, and Kylie knew Lucas had taken a blow.

Her muscles tightened. A surge of energy shot through her. She grabbed the chain with one hand and yanked it out of the concrete. Then, turning to the wall, she charged at it with her shoulder. Only a flicker of a second before

she hit did she consider how it might hurt.

Oddly, she felt nothing. Chunks of concrete fell around her. She knocked the big pieces from her face and then, realizing she stood on the other side of the room, she stared through the cloud of dust. Lucas lay on his side, still chained to a chair, much like the one she'd been in moments earlier. She saw his face, a bloody mess, and his eyes were closed as if he was unconscious.

Or dead.

She breathed in raw fury and looked around for the rogue. When she saw him, the shock on his face didn't surprise her. She charged him, but right before she had her hands on him, he disappeared.

"So you are not so powerless." The old vampire's voice boomed around her although she could not see him. The concrete wall behind her reformed and she sensed it grew thicker this time.

"What are you?" she hissed, knowing no ordinary vampire could build a wall back up.

"Did I not ask you the same thing?" he answered.

She ran to Lucas. A hand to his chest told her he was still alive. She yanked his chains off and dropped beside him on her knees. The gravel on the concrete floor bit into her skin.

Remembering she possibly had the power to heal, she moved her hands over him, then remembering what she'd done for Sara, Kylie pressed her palms around his head.

"Talk to me, Lucas. Please." The memory of him saving her from the bullies and of him looking up at the sky for elephants filled her mind and tears filled her eyes. "Please be okay."

She tried to think positively, tried to think about her hands sending warmth into his body. She didn't know if this was how it worked, but for Lucas's and Sara's sake, she prayed it was. Her heart filled with hope when the swelling on his face disappeared.

"Now talk to me," she whispered, and she began to lean down.

His eyes shot open, panic marred his expression, and he swung his fist.

She tried to catch it but whatever power she'd had was gone.

She did manage to avoid the punch to the face. Instead, his fist slammed

against her shoulder. Pain exploded. The blow knocked her clear across the room.

“Christ!” He lunged to his feet. “I’m sorry.” He picked her up and cradled her tenderly against his chest. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. Thankful he wasn’t vampire and wouldn’t know she lied. Her shoulder throbbed like a bad toothache. “Down,” she managed to say.

He complied but her knees buckled and he had to catch her. “I’m sorry.”

She looked into his blue eyes. “It’s okay.” He hadn’t meant to hit her. “I don’t think it’s broken.”

“Did you get...” She stopped talking, remembering the old vampire was probably listening.

“Burnett?” she mouthed the name, and looked up at him with a question in her eyes.

He nodded and she prayed he’d read her lips correctly and this meant Burnett and the FRU were coming.

Her shoulder pounded. Her legs shook. She leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the cold concrete floor. Lucas sat down beside her. She shivered and he must have felt it because he put his arm around her. His body oozed heat. She leaned into him to soak up his warmth.

“You are so hot,” she said.

“It’s about time you noticed,” he teased.

She would have smiled if her energy hadn’t felt spent. In spite of the pain, she felt safe.

“It’s a werewolf thing,” he said. “Our body temperatures run hotter.”

“What time is it?”

“After midnight,” he answered.

She remembered her mom who must be panicking by now. Then feeling too exhausted to think, Kylie closed her eyes and leaned closer into his chest, careful not to move her shoulder.

He shifted her into his lap. His warmth surrounded her. She felt him moving a hand through her hair. “You’ve got something in your hair,” he said.

“Probably concrete, from when I ... came through the wall,” she said.

“What wall?” he asked.

She recalled he’d been unconscious then. Did he even know she’d healed him?

“That one.” She nodded. “He put it back together, though.”

“I think I hit you harder than I thought.”

She didn’t have the strength to argue. “So tired.”

“Rest.” He pulled her closer. “Soon,” he whispered.

Was he saying that it would be over soon? God, she hoped so.

* * *

“Kylie. It’s time.”

Lucas’s words stirred her awake some time later.

She felt Lucas jump up with her in his arms and she became instantly alert. Loud noises came from behind the wall and, in one easy leap, he had them against the back of the room, away from the noise. Before she could insist Lucas put her down, the front wall collapsed and Burnett and several other FRU personnel hurtled through the cascading concrete.

Burnett rushed forward. “Is she okay?”

“Fine,” she said, embarrassed that Lucas held her like a child. “Put me down.”

“Her shoulder,” Lucas said. “I think it’s broken. My fault. I did it ... accidentally.”

“I’m fine.” She went to move her shoulder to prove her point, and winced.

“They’re here!” someone screamed from down the hall. Lucas, Burnett, and the other men ran through the rubble that had once been a wall. She stood alone in the cloud of dust their hasty departure had created. The sound of men fighting in the distance reached her ears. Feeling useless, she started to follow, hoping her strength would return, but she hadn’t taken one step when she felt the rush of air move past her.

The young, evil-eyed rogue stopped beside her and before Kylie could do more than scream, he had her in his arms. Forgetting about her shoulder, she struggled. Pain exploded in her arm, but she continued to fight. But his hold was strong, and her own strength spent.

“No!” the deep rumble of Lucas’s voice filled her ears.

“Put her down,” Lucas demanded.

“She’s mine,” the rogue hissed.

“Over my dead body,” Lucas roared, and his eyes deepened to a burnt orange.

“That will be my pleasure,” the vampire roared back, his gray eyes now glowing red.

Realizing her opportunity, Kylie jabbed the palm of her hand into the rogue’s throat. He dropped her, and she had no more than hit the ground when she saw Lucas attack. The sound of fist pounding into bone filled the room. In horror, she watched as Lucas was thrown across the room. She felt her own strength returning, but before she got to her feet, Lucas was back, holding the vampire by the throat. The sound coming from the vampire’s throat left Kylie with no doubt that Lucas’s hold was crushing his airway.

“Drop him!” The voice of the old vampire filled the room and made the air heavy. “Drop him or she dies.”

While Kylie could see no one, she felt a hand close around her throat. She clawed at the invisible force that choked her and tried to pull air into her lungs. None came.

She saw Lucas’s gaze shoot to her. Dark sparkles started filling her vision, and right before everything went black, she saw Lucas drop the rogue, who then disappeared. No wind, no air. Obviously the old man’s magic had taken him away.

Still attempting to gasp air into her lungs, she collapsed to her knees. Lucas pulled her up.

Burnett suddenly appeared at their side.

“He came back for her,” Lucas said.

“We need to get her away,” Burnett said, and reached out and took her in his arms. “The FRU are following them.”

“I’m going with them,” Lucas said.

“No,” Kylie said, forcing the words out of her bruised throat. But she wasn’t in the room anymore. The wind hit her face so fast she couldn’t breathe. Burnett readjusted her, and buried her face against his chest, a chest

that wasn't near as warm or comforting as the one she'd just been sleeping against.

When he came to a stop outside a single-story building, Kylie raised her head. "Where are we?" She touched her neck.

"A clinic," he said, and moved her hand to check her neck.

"I'm fine. Put me down."

"Not yet. You might be fine, but Holiday would have my ass if I didn't have a doctor check you out."

She remembered Lucas. "You should have stopped Lucas from going after the rogues..."

"Couldn't have stopped him," he said. "Werewolves are too damn stubborn. But Lucas can take care of himself."

"He got captured," she said.

"Only to get inside to you," he said.

The realization made her gut clench. "He could have been killed."

"He wasn't." The lights came on in the building and Burnett moved in.

Kylie read the sign on the door as he carried her inside: PROTECT YOUR PETS AGAINST HEARTWORMS. "Wait. You're taking me to a vet?" Kylie looked around the small office with pet pictures posted on the walls and noticed the smell of animals.

"A vet and supernatural doctor," he said.

A man walked out of the door from the back. "In here," he said.

Burnett introduced her to Dr. Whitman as he carried her through the door. A big orange cat followed them into the back. When Burnett placed her on an examining table, the cat jumped up beside her. "I'm fine," she told Burnett and Dr. Whitman.

"Her shoulder," Burnett said. "And her neck."

When the doctor reached for Kylie's shoulder, she flinched. "I'm just bruised." She looked back at Burnett. "I've got to get back to my mom's. She's probably already at the police station."

Burnett picked up the phone and walked to the other side of the room.

Dr. Whitman moved Kylie's shoulder and studied her. Kylie flinched a bit, but she knew it wasn't broken. His eyebrows twitched as he looked at her

forehead. "What are you?"

"Beats me," she said, and looked at his brain pattern. He was part fairy. The cat walked across Kylie to rub against the doc's side. She suspected he could communicate with animals the way Derek did, too. The thought of Derek had her heart remembering how much she missed him, but she pushed it away.

"Well, the girl's right. Her shoulder isn't broken," Dr. Whitman said as Burnett moved back over.

"Told you so," Kylie couldn't resist saying. "Now, would you please drop me off at my mom's house?"

"Thank you," Burnett said to Dr. Whitman, and motioned for him to leave the room. Once they were alone, Burnett turned back to Kylie. "I'm going to get you home. But first I need to know what happened tonight."

Kylie told him everything she remembered from the time the rogue had landed on her car, to right before Burnett burst through the concrete walls. She informed him that the rogue who'd killed the girls in Fallen was the grandson of one of the Vampire Council members. As well as the fact that it had been the vamps who'd been watching the campgrounds off and on all summer. Most of what Kylie had to say turned the vampire's eyes bright with fury.

"So, what's the deal with him wanting me to marry his grandson?" she asked when she was done.

Burnett shrugged. "In the past, our grandparents chose our mates."

"Even if the mate wasn't willing?"

"Afraid so." Burnett's expression filled with remorse. "You were right, Kylie. This was about you. I should have listened. I won't make that mistake again."

She nodded, sensing how hard it was for him to admit he'd made a mistake. "The old man, he's weird. His brain pattern says he's a vampire, but he's more than that."

"I know the man you are talking about. I've met him during my visits with the Council. He's vampire, but you're right, he's strange."

"He's more than vampire," Kylie said. "He put the wall back together

after I broke it down.”

“Maybe he had help from someone with other powers.”

“I think it’s more,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said, but Kylie could tell he didn’t agree. “Okay, I’ll get you home. And I’ll have someone watching your house so you’ll be safe.”

He picked Kylie back up. “Hold on.” She knew this time to bury her head against his chest.

In seconds, Burnett set her down in front of her house. “What do I tell her?” she asked.

“Don’t know. I’ve never been good dealing with parents,” he said. “But be creative.”

“You’re not a lot of help.” She bit down on her lip. “Oh, crap, my car.”

“We found it when we were looking for you. Someone will get the window replaced and have it back here before daybreak.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded. “I’m glad you’re okay, Kylie. We’ll go over everything again tomorrow evening when you come back to the camp. And call Holiday the first chance you get. She won’t sleep until she talks to you.”

Kylie reached up and hugged him. He looked unprepared for the show of affection. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he answered, obviously uncomfortable with the conversation as much as the hug.

She looked around at the darkness. The silence didn’t even scare her because she knew Burnett was the one who caused it.

“I’ve got two men watching the house,” he said as if he’d misread her expression.

“I believe you.” She watched him leave. Then she went to the door. When she realized she didn’t have her keys, she found the spare her mom kept inside the fake dog poop behind the azalea bushes.

She barely got the door open when her mom flew at her and wrapped her arms around her.

“Oh, God. I was just about to call the police. Where have you been, young lady?”

Her mom's hug squeezed her shoulder and made it hard to breathe. Pulling back and trying to mask the pain in her voice, Kylie said, "I forgot to call. And then ... I was so upset over Sara that I just needed to think."

Tears filled her mom's eyes. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. The power went out. I fell asleep on the sofa waiting on you to get home. I woke up fifteen minutes ago and when I realized you weren't here, I called Sara's house. Her mom said you'd left, but she didn't know when."

Luckily Sara's mom had already gone to bed when Kylie left so she couldn't have known what time Kylie really left. "Well, I'm fine."

"I didn't hear the car pull in," her mom said.

Think quick. "I parked it on the street." She hoped Burnett was right and the car would be returned by daybreak.

Kylie faked a yawn. "You know, Mom, sleep sounds really good right now," she said, wanting to get to her room and call Holiday. But she'd have to use the home phone because her cell was back in the car.

"Okay, but we'll talk about Sara tomorrow."

Yeah, Kylie thought. They also needed to talk about her going to Shadow Falls for the next school year. But she decided to worry about that later, too. She hurried to her room and dialed Holiday's number.

"Have you heard from Lucas?" she asked when the camp leader answered the phone.

"Yes," Holiday said. "He's fine. But ... last I heard, the people responsible for taking you weren't captured. Burnett is watching you, though. Don't worry."

"I know," Kylie said.

"Are you okay? I wish I could touch you and calm you down."

"I'm fine," she lied.

"If you close your eyes and imagine the falls, it will help push away the panic."

"I will," Kylie said, and this time she wasn't lying.

* * *

Sunday morning, the ringing telephone woke Kylie at almost ten. She sat up,

reached for the phone, and actually looked around, hoping she'd see the ghost. Hey ... after over a month of seeing her first thing in the morning, she sort of missed her.

Pushing the talk button, she recalled her conversation with Holiday from last night. It had worked; imagining the falls had taken the edge off her panic.

"Hello," Kylie answered.

"Are you okay?" Della and Miranda's voices exploded at the same time over the line.

"I'm fine." Kylie leaned back on the pillow. "How did you find out?"

"When you didn't answer the damn phone all night, I called Holiday," Della said.

"Spill it," Miranda said.

Kylie gave them the short version and promised she'd tell them all the gory details later. Then she asked about their weekend. Miranda moaned and groaned about the event, but ended by telling them that she'd taken second in the competition.

"And the bitch Tabitha took fourth," Miranda said with pride.

"How are you, Della?" Kylie asked.

"What does this tell you?" The sound of a toilet flushing filled the line.

"Gross," Miranda said.

"I think my parents are shocked that I haven't shown positive yet."

After a few more minutes of chatting, they said good-bye. Remembering the car, Kylie scrambled out of bed and looked out the window. Burnett had been true to his word. The car sat on the street outside the house, looking as good as new.

If only everything else in her life could be fixed as easily.

* * *

"You're up," her mom said as Kylie walked out of her bedroom a few minutes later. Her mom had a towel wrapped around her head and wore her bathrobe as though she'd just gotten out of the shower. "Give me a minute and I'll fix us breakfast."

Thirty minutes later, Kylie was having pancakes and eggs with her mom.

They talked about a lot of things but mostly about Sara. Kylie's mom told her that Sara's mom had called to make sure Kylie had gotten home okay.

Her mom picked up her plate and carried it to the sink. "Sara's mom said that Sara's was feeling good today, too. She's supposed to go to the doctor tomorrow to talk about her options. I sure hope it works out."

Kylie stood and helped clear the table.

"She doesn't need options," a voice whispered behind Kylie. *"You did it."* The temperature in the room dropped a good twenty degrees.

"I swear that air-conditioner has been acting up for a month now." Her mom shivered and went to check the thermostat. Kylie wondered if her mom's AC was really out, or if it had been Daniel causing the cold.

Kylie turned and saw the ghost. She looked healthy and young. Beautiful. Kylie suspected that Sara would look just like her when she hit her thirties.

"Thank you. I knew you could do it."

"You don't have to thank me. She's my friend."

"Did you say something?" Her mom stood in the kitchen doorway.

The ghost smiled and faded.

"Yeah," Kylie said. "I said we need to talk about school." Kylie went and gave her mom a big hug. Her shoulder hardly hurt now. When she pulled back she just spouted out the words before she lost her nerve. "I know it's hard for you. I know you love me. But I need this right now. I really need this."

Her mom touched Kylie's face. Then tears filled her mom's eyes.

She breathed in.

Then out.

"Baby, I'm sorry. But I just can't let you go."

Chapter Thirty-five

Kylie's heart squeezed. The room went cold again. Daniel appeared. He smiled. "Remind her..." he said, but before he could finish, he disappeared. Somehow Kylie knew what he'd meant.

"Mom," she said. "Remember how you told me that when you met Daniel, you just knew he was right for you?"

Her mom looked shocked that Kylie had brought up Daniel. "Yes, but—"

"This school is my Daniel, Mom. I know it's right for me. I know it in my heart. Please, don't take that away from me. Don't take this away from me, like Daniel was taken away from you."

* * *

"Don't I even get to walk you inside?" her mom asked, after she pulled to a stop in the parking lot outside the gates at Shadow Falls later that afternoon.

"It's not visitation day," Kylie said, and barely glanced back at the new spirit who'd hitched a ride with them as they passed the cemetery in Fallen. The dark-haired woman, wearing a pink fuzzy housecoat, appeared to be in her late twenties. She also looked completely confused and kept staring at Kylie and asking where she was. Kylie had tried talking to her in her mind, but the woman didn't hear. Plus, Kylie's mom had bitched the entire way about how the car's air-conditioner must be broken, too.

Scooting over, Kylie gave her mom a big hug. "Thank you," she said. Her mom had reluctantly agreed to sign the papers for Kylie to go to school that fall at Shadow Falls.

Sighing, her mom pulled back and rested her hand against Kylie's cheek.

“I still don’t like it.”

“I know.”

“Remember the condition,” her mom said.

Kylie hadn’t meant to argue, but the words slipped out. “I don’t get it. You won’t forgive him. You don’t even want to see him, but you expect me to call him twice a week.”

“He’s your father,” her mom said.

“Daniel’s my father.”

Her mom winced. “Yes, but Tom loved you like his own.”

“I know. And I plan on forgiving him, but ... it still hurts. And when he tried to use me to get to you, well...”

“I know,” her mom said. “He was wrong. He’s not perfect. Neither am I. I’m sorry I caused a scene when he showed up.”

Kylie looked into her eyes. “Do you still love him?”

“I don’t know. When it stops hurting so bad, I might figure it out.”

They hugged again and a few minutes later Kylie watched her mom pull away. The ghost had decided to stick with Kylie and now stood beside her. She opened her housecoat and looked down at a big gaping hole in her abdomen. Why the heck couldn’t Kylie get haunted by a ghost who died peacefully in her sleep?

“*What happened to me?*” the ghost asked.

“I don’t know.” Kylie watched the spirit fade. But Kylie had a feeling she’d be back. And she’d expect Kylie to help her figure everything out, too. That in itself frustrated Kylie to no end. How could she figure out the ghost’s problems when she couldn’t figure out her own? She checked her phone to see if the PI had returned her call she’d made to him right after she’d collected her phone from her car this morning. He’d left a text and said he had news, but didn’t even hint at what the news might be.

When Kylie got to the gate, the feeling of being home made her heart race. This really was where she belonged. Holiday and Burnett were waiting for her as soon as she walked inside.

Holiday gave her a big, soulful hug. Burnett took her bag and motioned for her to follow him.

As they passed the dining hall, Kylie saw that several campers had also arrived early. Holiday had called Kylie and asked her to come back an hour early to talk. They walked into the office cabin and Kylie was stunned when Lucas stood right on the other side of the door.

His blue eyes met hers. "The shoulder okay?"

Kylie got a feeling he wanted to touch her, but he waited for her to make the first move. As tempting as it was to wrap her arms around him, it didn't feel a hundred percent right. Last night it had felt as natural as breathing, but now she wasn't so sure. "Only a little sore. Thanks."

"If you ever hit her again, accident or not, I'm going to come after you with a pitchfork," Holiday said. From the tightness in her eyes, Kylie knew the camp leader meant it, too.

"It wasn't his fault." Kylie stepped closer to Lucas and obviously he took that as the sign he'd wanted earlier. He moved his hand ever so slightly and touched her wrist. A simple touch, but it sent sweet warmth through her.

"Yes, it was." Lucas met her eyes. Guilt rang in his voice. "I have to learn to think before I swing." He looked at Burnett and Kylie got a feeling Holiday wasn't the only one who'd given Lucas a talking-to.

Slowly, Lucas's hand slipped into hers and gave her palm a light squeeze. Ambivalence bounced around Kylie's stomach. She wasn't sure she was ready to give herself to the possibilities of where that touch could lead them, but neither was she willing to pull away. He'd risked his own life to save her. Remembering she should focus on something other than Lucas, she looked at Burnett. "Any luck on finding them?"

"No." His eyes brightened with anger.

"But we will," Burnett and Lucas said at the same time.

"The others in the Vampire Council have been told about what happened. I imagine there will be consequences."

In a few minutes, Lucas was asked to leave and then Burnett and Holiday took Kylie into Holiday's office. Burnett made Kylie go over everything three or four times. While it felt about as easy as eating rocks, she didn't complain about his drilling. Holiday's eyes filled with pride when Kylie told them about healing Lucas and possibly also Sara.

Finally, the question that had been brewing in her mind came out. “The thing I don’t understand is why I couldn’t use the strength to save myself.”

Holiday gasped as if she’d come to a sudden realization. “You’re a protector. I should have guessed after the incident with Selynn. When we were at the lake, you only gained strength when you thought your mother was in danger. It also explains why your real father, Daniel, wasn’t able to save himself the day he died.”

“Does that ... tell you what I am? What he was?”

“I’m afraid not, but...” Holiday’s gaze went to Burnett who looked equally surprised and amazed. “Being a protector is very rare and only is bestowed on the extremely gifted.”

“Really gifted,” Burnett said, and he sounded a little awed. “I’ve only met one other protector in my life.”

A protector? Kylie didn’t know what all it meant. “So, I have other gifts beside the ones I have now?”

“Probably.” Holiday smiled. “I knew you were special, Kylie. I knew it from the moment I saw you.”

“Could one of these gifts perhaps be the gift of figuring out what the hell I am!” Frustration colored her voice.

After a minute of being told the same thing: *It would eventually happen. She needed to be patient, make it her quest ... bla ... bla ... bla ...* Burnett went back to asking questions. “Did Mario say who these friends were that he wanted you to meet?”

“Mario?” Kylie asked.

“Mario Esparza is the old vampire’s name.”

She closed her eyes, not sure if she liked knowing his name. “No.” Kylie shivered, imagining the kind of friends he probably kept. “What do you think he meant about the similarities he said we had? Do you think he believes I’m somehow like him? Could he be a protector or...”

“I don’t know what he meant,” Burnett said. “But I don’t think he’s a protector.”

“You’re not like him, Kylie,” Holiday insisted. “He wasn’t born at midnight.”

“So he’s evil?” Kylie asked.

Burnett looked at Holiday as if he wasn’t sure what he should say. Holiday nodded as if giving the okay.

“Yes, he’s evil. He’s been a thorn in the FRU’s side for years. We tried to get him thrown out of the Council, but we never had enough proof.”

Kylie took a deep breath. “Do you think he’ll come for me again?”

Again, Burnett glanced at Holiday before continuing. “I wish I could tell you that I thought it was over. He doesn’t like to lose, but you have my personal guarantee he won’t win this one. I will stop him, no matter what it takes.”

Holiday reached for Kylie’s hand and squeezed. “We need to wrap this up,” she told Burnett. “I think most of the campers are in the dining room.”

He didn’t look happy. “Okay, but I may want to ask you some questions later.”

Kylie nodded. They all stood. Burnett started out.

“Burnett?” Holiday said, her tone filled with uncertainty.

He turned around and for a second his expression was one of a puppy who sought affection and acceptance.

Kylie watched Holiday pull a piece of paper from her desk drawer. “You might want to take this. Read it over carefully before you sign.”

“What is it?” he asked.

Holiday hesitated. “It’s the paperwork. I thought you wanted to be an investor in Shadow Falls.”

He glanced down at the paper and then back at Holiday. “So, you couldn’t find any other investors?”

Her right eyebrow arched. “I suppose the school isn’t considered the best of investments.”

Kylie had to bite back a smile when she recognized Holiday’s method of avoiding a lie for the purpose of hiding a different truth. She didn’t want Burnett to know she’d had other offers, and Kylie knew why, too. To admit that she chose him over the others was admitting she didn’t want to lose him.

“I will insist on having more of a say in how things are run around here,” Burnett warned.

“And I’m sure I’ll fight you on most of it,” Holiday countered.

A slight smile whispered across his lips. “Fair enough.”

Holiday nodded. “Most of my conditions are listed.”

Burnett went to Holiday’s desk and signed the paper.

“Don’t you think you should have read it first?” Holiday asked.

“Let’s just say that I look forward to fighting with you.” He handed her the paper and walked out, leaving a sweet kind of tension in his place.

Kylie waited until she was sure Burnett was out of super-hearing earshot. “I know you had another investor lined up.”

Holiday rolled her eyes. “And you know not to say anything about it, too, right?”

Kylie grinned. “You didn’t want to lose him, Holiday.”

“He’s growing on me,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“Right.” Kylie laughed.

Holiday frowned. “I’ll bet Della and Miranda are waiting for you.”

Kylie hugged Holiday before leaving. When she walked out of the office, Kylie looked toward the dining room and suddenly she wasn’t so sure she was ready to face everyone. So much had happened and she hadn’t even had time to adjust. Right then, she felt a hand slip inside hers.

She jumped and started to pull away, but stopped when she recognized the warmth of the palm in hers.

“Hey,” Lucas said, and gave her a tug. “Let’s take a walk.”

She let him lead her behind the cabin that housed the office. The moment they stepped in the secluded spot beneath the trees, he stopped and turned and faced her.

“I’m really sorry I hit you.” His hold on her hand tightened.

She shook her head. “You didn’t mean to do it.”

“But I still did it.” He gave her hand another light tug and drew her closer. “Burnett said you ... you healed me.”

“Yeah,” she said, feeling the warmth of his chest even though she wasn’t pressed against him. She inhaled and realized that Lucas smelled like the woods. The scent of the trees and the moist earth clung to him.

“You might have even saved my life,” he said.

“Yeah, but I was the reason you got hurt in the first place.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He shot her a sly smile. “You know there’s an old vampire legend that says if someone saves your life, you must stay with them forever.”

She cut her gaze up at him. “You’re not vampire.”

He leaned down. His lips were so close to hers that she could taste them. “And for the first time in my life, I wish I were.” He inhaled. “But since I’m not vampire, I think the least I can do is give you a thank-you kiss.”

“The least you can do,” she said, and then his lips touched hers. It wasn’t overtly sexy like the kiss they’d shared at the falls, or the ones they shared in the dreams, but it didn’t make it any less special. Or any less harder for her to pull away from. But she did pull away. It was just ... too soon. But later, maybe ... yes, maybe.

“We ... we should probably go join the others.”

“Yeah.” And they walked in silence and he didn’t let her hand go until they walked into the dining hall.

Kylie was nearly overwhelmed by everyone wanting to make sure she was okay. She wasn’t sure who had spilled the beans about what had happened but it was clear they all knew.

Della, Miranda, Perry, Helen, and Jonathon all gathered around her. Lucas stood back as if giving her space. But he’d meet her eyes every few minutes. Once she even waved him over, but he shook his head, as if somehow he knew she’d been unsure about offering him the invitation. Or maybe it was because he was werewolf and his kind just always seemed to stay together. Nevertheless, she got an odd kind of feeling as if he was guarding her. She remembered how he’d protected her from the bullies when she’d been six and again she felt the bond that connected them. Now what Kylie needed to figure out was just exactly what that bond meant.

An hour later, Kylie’s closest friends were all still eating pizza and chatting about how their home visits went. “Oh,” Miranda said in her usual peppy voice. “I think I figured out what I did wrong with Socks. I’ll have the little stinker back to his old self in no time.”

“So, Miranda, your competition went okay?” Perry blurted the question

out, sounding nervous. It was the first time he'd spoken to Miranda. Kylie knew this was his way of saying he wanted to start over with her, and Kylie would have hugged him if she hadn't been afraid Miranda might zap her with her award-winning pinky.

"It went fine," she said, but Kylie couldn't read Miranda's expression.

"Why don't you two just kiss and make up already?" Della said. "And then you can go somewhere alone and really suck face."

Miranda shot Della a huge frown that for sure meant an argument would follow later. Perry's eyes went black as he stared at Della, and then he walked off, looking a little rejected. Kylie just leaned back in her chair and wondered if things would ever change.

But then ... some things had already changed, hadn't they? She found herself looking around for another face. While she tried really hard not to admit it, she missed Derek. More than that, she worried if he was okay. She decided to go find Burnett and ask, but her phone beeped with an incoming text.

She glanced at the caller ID. It was from the PI. Then Kylie saw she had a text from Sara. It read, "What did you do? Don't lie. I know you did it."

Kylie's heart lurched. Great. What was she going to tell Sara?

Her phone beeped again. When Kylie read the message from the PI, she gasped. "Grandparents back. Spoke yesterday. They want to see you ASAP."

Hope stirred inside her heart. Would this lead to the answer about who she was?

"Kylie?" Mandy called her name from the door.

Kylie turned around. "Yeah?"

"Holiday said for you to come to the office. Someone is here to see you."

"Who is it?" Kylie asked, feeling panicked at the thought of it actually being them. Was she really ready to do this? Was she ready to meet Daniel's adoptive parents? Her grandparents?

"I don't know, but there was an old couple knocking on the gate a few minutes ago."

And just like that Kylie heard the sound of cascading water. Something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye, and she looked toward the

log wall where a mixture of light and shadows swirled in soft, almost hypnotic patterns. Dancing death angels.

She glanced at Della and Miranda. Neither reacted. Apparently, Kylie was the only one to see the show playing on the other side of the room. And then,

“Go and uncover your past so you may discover your destiny.”

“Is everything okay?” Della asked, looking concerned.

Kylie took a deep breath. “Yeah. Fine.”

And she hoped she was right about that, too.

Taken at Dusk

c. c. hunter

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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There's always a person in your life who you know helped make you who you are. A person who, without them, you wouldn't have taken the same journey. A person who didn't just make a difference, they were the springboard for all you've achieved. Thank you hubby, Steve Craig, for all you have done to help me become who I am. Thank you for the love, for the years, and for the endless laughter you share with me. We make a hell of a team, don't you think?

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Chapter One

They were here. Really here.

Kylie Galen stepped out of the crowded dining hall into the bright sunlight. She looked over at the Shadow Falls office. Gone was the chatter of the other campers. Birds chirped in the distance and a rush of wind rustled the trees. Mostly she heard the sound of her own heart thudding in her chest.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

They were here.

Her pulse raced at the thought of meeting the Brightens, the couple who had adopted and raised her real father. A father she'd never known in life but had grown to love in his short visits from the afterlife.

She took one step and then another, unsure of the emotional storm brewing inside her.

Excitement.

Curiosity.

Fear. Yes, a lot of fear.

But of what?

A drip of sweat, more from nerves than Texas's mid-August heat index, rolled down her brow.

Go and uncover your past so you may discover your destiny. The death angels' mystical words replayed in her head. She took another step forward, then stopped. Even as her heart ached to solve the mystery of who her father was—of who she was and, hopefully, what she was—her instincts screamed for her to run and hide.

Was this what she feared? Learning the truth?

Before coming to Shadow Falls a few months ago, she'd been certain she was just a confused teen, that her feelings of being different were normal. Now she knew better.

She wasn't normal.

She wasn't even human. At least not all human.

And figuring out her nonhuman side was a puzzle.

A puzzle the Brightens could help her solve.

She took another step. The wind, as if it were as eager to escape as she was, whisked past. It picked up a few wayward strands of her blond hair and scattered them across her face.

She blinked, and when she opened her eyes, the brightness of the sun had evaporated. Glancing up, she saw a huge, angry-looking cloud hanging directly overhead. It cast a shadow around her and the woodsy terrain. Unsure if this was an omen or just a summer storm, she froze, her heart dancing faster. Taking a deep breath that smelled of rain, she was poised to move when a hand clasped her elbow. Memories of another hand grabbing her sent panic shooting through her veins.

She swung around.

"Whoa. You okay?" Lucas lightened his clasp around her arm.

Kylie caught her breath and stared up at the werewolf's blue eyes. "Yeah. You just ... surprised me. You always surprise me. You need to whistle when you come up on me." She shoved down the memories of Mario and his rogue vampire grandson, Red.

"Sorry." He grinned and his thumb moved in soft little circles over the crease in her elbow. Somehow that light brush of his thumb felt ... intimate. How did he make a simple touch feel like a sweet sin? A gust of wind, now smelling like a storm, stirred his black hair and tossed it over his brow.

He continued to stare at her, his blue eyes warming her and chasing away her darkest fears. "You don't look okay. What's wrong?" He reached up and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her right ear.

She looked away from him to the cabin that housed the office. "My grandparents ... the adopted parents of my real dad are here."

He must have picked up on her reluctance to be here. “I thought you wanted to meet them. That’s why you asked them to come, right?”

“I do. I’m just...”

“Scared?” he finished for her.

She didn’t like admitting it, but since werewolves could smell fear, lying was pointless. “Yeah.” She looked back at Lucas and saw humor in his eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“You,” he said. “I’m still trying to figure you out. When you were kidnapped by a rogue vampire, you weren’t this scared. In fact, you were ... amazing.”

Kylie smiled. No, Lucas had been the amazing one. He’d risked his life to save her from Mario and Red, and she’d never forget that.

“Seriously, Kylie, if this is the same couple I saw walking in here a few minutes ago, then they’re old and just humans. I think you can take them with both hands tied behind your back.”

“I’m not scared like that. I just...” She closed her eyes, unsure how to explain something she wasn’t clear on herself. Then the words just came. “What am I going to say to them? ‘I know you never told my father he was adopted, but he figured it out after he died. And he came to see me. Oh, yeah, he wasn’t human. So could you please tell me who his real parents are? So I can figure out what I am?’”

He must have heard the angst in her voice because his smile vanished. “You’ll find a way.”

“Yeah.” But she wasn’t that confident. She started walking, feeling his presence, his warmth, as he accompanied her up the steps to the cabin. The walk was easier with him beside her.

He stopped at the door and brushed a hand down her arm. “You want me to come inside with you?”

She almost told him yes, but this was one thing she needed to do on her own.

She thought she heard voices and glanced back at the door. Well, she wouldn’t exactly be alone. No doubt Holiday, the camp leader, waited for her inside, prepared to offer moral support and a calming touch. Normally, Kylie

objected to her emotions being manipulated, but right now might be an exception.

“Thanks, but I’m sure Holiday is in there.”

He nodded. His gaze moved to her mouth, and his lips came dangerously close to hers. But before his mouth claimed hers, that bone-cold chill that came with the dead descended on her. She pressed two fingers to his lips. Kissing was something she preferred to do without an audience—even one from the other side.

Or maybe it wasn’t just the audience. Was she totally ready to give herself over to his kisses? It was a good question, and one she needed to answer, but one problem at a time. Right now she had the Brightens to worry about.

“I should go.” She motioned to the door. The cold washed over her again. Okay, she had the Brightens and a ghost to worry about.

Disappointment flashed in Lucas’s eyes. Then he shifted uncomfortably and looked around as if he sensed they weren’t alone.

“Good luck.” He hesitated and then walked away.

She watched him leave and then looked around for the spirit. Goose bumps danced up her spine. Her ability to see ghosts had been the first clue that she wasn’t normal.

“Can this wait until later?” she whispered.

A cloud of condensation appeared beside the white rocking chairs on the edge of the porch. The spirit obviously lacked the power or the knowledge to complete the manifestation. But it was enough to send the chairs rocking back and forth. The creaking of wood on wood sounded haunted ... which it was.

She waited, thinking it was the female spirit who had appeared earlier today in her mother’s car as they drove past the Fallen Cemetery on their way to camp. Who was she? What did she need Kylie to do? There were never any easy answers when dealing with ghosts.

“Now’s not a good time.” Not that saying so would do any good. Spirits believed in the open door policy.

The smear of fog took on more form, and Kylie’s chest swelled with emotion.

It wasn't the woman she'd seen earlier.

"Daniel?" Kylie reached out. The tips of her fingers entered the icy mist as it took on a more familiar form. Hot emotion—a mixture of love and regret—coursing up her arm. She yanked her hand back, but tears filled her eyes.

"Daniel?" She almost called him Daddy. But it still felt awkward. She watched as he struggled to manifest.

He'd once explained that his time to linger on earth was limited. More tears filled her eyes as she realized how limited. Her sense of loss tripled when she considered how hard this must be for him. He wanted to be here when she met his parents. And she needed him here, too—wished he'd told her more about the Brightens—and wished more than anything that he'd never died.

"No." His one word, briskly spoken, sounded urgent.

"No, what?" He didn't—or couldn't—answer. "No, I shouldn't ask them about your real parents? But I have to, Daniel, that's the only way I'll ever find the truth."

"*It's not—*" His voice broke.

"Not what? Not important?" She waited for his answer, but his weak apparition grew paler and his spiritual cold began to ebb. The white chairs slowed their rocking and silence rained down on her.

"It's important to me," Kylie said. "I need..." The Texas heat chased away the lingering chill.

He was gone. The thought hit that he might never come back. "Not fair." She swatted at the few tears she'd let fall onto her cheeks.

The need to run and hide hit again. But she'd procrastinated long enough. She grasped the doorknob, still cold from Daniel's spirit, and went to face the Brightens.

* * *

Inside, Kylie heard light murmurs coming from one of the back conference rooms. She tried to tune her ear to hear the words. Nothing.

In the last few weeks, she'd unexpectedly been gifted with sensitive hearing. But it came and went. What good was a power if one didn't know

how to use it? It only added to the feeling of everything in her life being out of her control.

Biting her lip, she eased down the hall and tried to focus on her main goal: getting answers. Who were Daniel's real parents? What was she?

She heard Holiday say, "I'm sure you're going to love her."

Kylie's footsteps slowed. *Love?*

Wasn't that a little strong? They could just like her. That would be fine. Loving someone was ... complicated. Even liking someone a whole lot came with a downside, such as a certain good-looking half-fae deciding that being close to her was too hard ... so he left.

Yup, Derek was definitely an example of the downside of liking someone too much. And he probably was the reason she hesitated to accept Lucas's kisses.

One problem at a time. She pushed that thought away as she stepped into the open door of the conference room.

The elderly man sitting at the table rested his clasped hands on the large oak table. "What kind of trouble did she get into?"

"What do you mean?" Holiday cut her green gaze to the door, and she pushed her long red hair over her shoulder.

The old man continued, "We researched Shadow Falls on the Internet and it has a reputation for being a place for troubled teens."

Freaking great! Daniel's parents thought she was a juvenile delinquent.

"You shouldn't believe everything you read online." Only the slightest hint of annoyance sounded in Holiday's tone. "Actually, we're a school for very gifted teens who are trying to find themselves."

"Please tell me it's not drugs," said the silver-haired woman sitting beside the man. "I'm not sure I could deal with that."

"I'm not a druggie," Kylie said, sympathizing with Della, her vampire roommate, who had to deal with this suspicion from her parents. All heads turned toward Kylie, and feeling put on the spot, she held her breath.

"Oh, my," the woman said. "I didn't mean to offend."

Kylie eased into the room. "I'm not offended. I just wanted that cleared up." She met the woman's faded gray eyes and shifted her focus to the old

man, searching ... but for what? A resemblance, perhaps. Why? She knew they weren't Daniel's real parents. But they had raised him, had probably instilled in him their mannerisms and qualities.

Kylie thought of Tom Galen, her stepdad, the man who'd raised her, the man who until recently she'd believed was her real father. Though Kylie had yet to come to terms with his abandonment of his seventeen-year marriage to her mom, she couldn't deny she'd taken on some of his mannerisms. Not that she didn't see more of Daniel in herself—from her supernatural DNA to her physical features.

"We read this was a home for troubled teens." An apology rang in the old man's voice.

She recalled Daniel telling her that his adoptive parents had loved him and would have loved her if they'd known her.

Love. Emotion crowded her chest. Trying to decipher the sensation, Kylie remembered Nana—her mom's mother—and how much she'd adored her, how much she'd missed her when she died. Was it knowing the Brightens were old—that their time was short—that made Kylie want to pull back?

As if the thought of death had somehow caused it, a ghostly chill filled the room. *Daniel?* She called to him with her mind, but the coldness prickling her skin was different.

As frigid air entered Kylie's lungs, the spirit materialized behind Mrs. Brighten. While the apparition appeared feminine, her bald head reflected the light above. Raw-looking stitches ran across her bare scalp and caused Kylie to flinch.

"We're just concerned," said Mr. Brighten. "We didn't know you existed."

"I ... understand," Kylie answered, unable to look away from the spirit that stared at the elderly couple in puzzlement.

Seeing the spirit's face again, Kylie realized it was the same woman from earlier today. Obviously, her shaved head and stitches were a clue. But a clue to what?

The spirit looked at Kylie. "*I'm so confused.*"

Me too, Kylie thought, unsure if the spirit could read her mind the way the

others had.

“So many people want me to tell you something.”

“Who?” Realizing she’d whispered the word out loud, she bit her lip. Was it Daniel? Nana? *What do they want you to tell me?*

The spirit met Kylie’s gaze as if she understood. *“Someone lives. Someone dies.”*

More puzzles, Kylie thought, and looked away from the ghost. She saw Holiday glance around, sensing the spirit. Mrs. Brighten looked at the ceiling as if searching for an AC vent to blame for the chill. Luckily the spirit faded, taking the cold with her.

Pushing the ghost from her mind, Kylie looked back at the Brightens. Her gaze took in the mop of thick gray hair on the elderly man. His pale complexion told her that he’d been a redhead in his younger years.

For some reason, Kylie felt compelled to wiggle her eyebrows and check the couple’s brain patterns. It was a little supernatural trick she’d only recently learned, one that mostly allowed supernaturals to recognize one another and humans. Mr. and Mrs. Brighten were human.

Normals and probably decent people. So why did Kylie feel so jittery?

She studied the couple as they studied her. She waited for them to make some declaration of how much she looked like Daniel. But it didn’t come.

Instead, Mrs. Brighten said, “We’re really excited to meet you.”

“Me too,” Kylie said. *As well as scared to death.* She sat in the chair beside Holiday, opposite the Brightens. Reaching under the table, she sought out Holiday’s hand and gave it a squeeze. A welcome calm flowed from the camp leader’s touch.

“Can you tell me about my father?” Kylie asked.

“Of course.” Mrs. Brighten’s expression softened. “He was a very charismatic child. Popular. Smart. Outgoing.”

Kylie rested her free hand on the table. “Not like me, then.” She bit her lip, not meaning to say it out loud.

Mrs. Brighten frowned. “I wouldn’t say that. Your camp leader was just telling us how wonderful you are.” She reached across the table to rest her warm hand on Kylie’s. “I can’t believe we have a granddaughter.”

There was something about the woman's touch that stirred Kylie's emotions. Not just the heat of the woman's skin—it was the thinness, the slight tremble of the fingers, and the defined bones that time and arthritis had changed. Kylie remembered Nana—remembered how her grandmother's gentle touch had grown more fragile before she died. Without warning, grief swelled in Kylie's chest. Grief for Nana, and maybe even the forewarning of what she would feel for Daniel's parents when their time came. Considering their age, that time would come too soon.

"When did you learn Daniel was your father?" Mrs. Brighten's hand still rested on Kylie's wrist. It felt oddly comforting.

"Just recently," she said through a knot of emotion. "My parents are divorcing and the truth sort of came out." That wasn't altogether a lie.

"A divorce? You poor child."

The old man nodded in agreement, and Kylie noticed his eyes were blue—like her dad's and hers. "We're glad you chose to find us."

"So very glad." Mrs. Brighten's voice trembled. "We've never stopped missing our son. He died so young." A quiet sensation of loss, of shared grief, entered the room.

Kylie bit her tongue to keep from telling them how she'd come to love Daniel herself. From assuring them that he had loved them. So many things she longed to ask them, to tell them, but couldn't.

"We brought pictures," Mrs. Brighten said.

"Of my dad?" Kylie leaned forward.

Mrs. Brighten nodded and shifted in her chair. Moving with old bones, she pulled a brown envelope from her big white old-lady purse. Kylie's heart raced with eagerness to see the pictures of Daniel. Had he looked like her when he was young?

The woman passed the envelope to Kylie, and she opened it as quickly as she could.

Her throat tightened when she saw the first image—a young Daniel, maybe six, without his front teeth. She could remember the images of her own toothless school pictures, and she could swear the resemblance was amazing.

The photos took her through Daniel's life—from when he was a young teen with long hair and frayed jeans to when he was an adult. In the adult photo, he was with a group of people. Kylie's throat tightened even more when she realized who was standing beside him. Her mother.

Her gaze shot up. "That's my mom."

Mrs. Brighten nodded. "Yes, we know."

"You do?" Kylie asked, confused. "I didn't think you ever met her."

"We suspected," Mr. Brighten spoke up. "After we learned about you, we suspected that she might have been the one who was in the picture."

"Oh." Kylie looked back down at the images and wondered how they could have gotten all that from one photo. Not that it mattered. "Can I keep these?"

"Of course you may," Mrs. Brighten said. "I made copies. Daniel would have wanted you to have them."

Yes, he would. Kylie recalled him trying to materialize as if he had something important to tell her. "My mom loved him," Kylie added, recalling her mom's concerns that the Brightens might resent her for not attempting to find them earlier. But they didn't seem to harbor any negative feelings.

"I'm sure she did." Mrs. Brighten leaned in and touched Kylie's hand again. Warmth and genuine emotion flowed from the touch. It almost ... almost felt magical.

A sudden beep of Kylie's phone shattered the fragile silence. She ignored the incoming text, feeling almost mesmerized by Mrs. Brighten's eyes. Then, for reasons Kylie didn't understand, her heart opened up.

Maybe she did want them to love her. Maybe she wanted to love them as well. It didn't matter how little time they had left. Or that they weren't her biological grandparents. They had loved her father and lost him. Just as she had. It only seemed right that they love each other.

Was that what Daniel had wanted to tell her? Kylie glanced down at the photographs one more time and then slipped them back into the envelope, knowing she would spend hours studying them later.

Kylie's phone rang. She moved to shut it off and saw Derek's name on the screen. Her heart missed a beat. Was he calling to apologize for leaving?

Did she want him to apologize?

Another phone rang. This time it was Holiday's cell.

"Excuse me." Holiday rose and started to leave the room as she took the call. She came to an abrupt stop at the door. "Slow down," she said into the phone. The tightness in the camp leader's voice changed the mood in the room. Holiday swung back around and stepped closer to Kylie.

"What is it?" Kylie muttered.

Holiday pressed a hand on Kylie's shoulder, then snapped her phone shut and focused on the Brightens. "There's been an emergency. We'll have to reschedule this meeting."

"What's wrong?" Kylie asked.

Holiday didn't answer. Kylie glanced back at the Brightens' disappointed faces and she felt that same emotion weaving its way through her chest. "Can't we—"

"No," Holiday said. "I'm going to have to ask you folks to leave. *Now.*"

The camp leader's tone was punctuated by the jarring sound of the cabin's front door opening and slamming against the wall. Both of the elderly Brightens flinched and then stared at the door as the sound of thundering footsteps raced toward the conference room.

Chapter Two

Three minutes later, Kylie stood in the parking lot and watched the Brightens' silver Cadillac drive away. She turned to glare at Della and Lucas, who'd stormed into the office and interrupted her meeting with her grandparents. Perry had been with them, too, but he'd wisely disappeared. Holiday, who had followed them outside, was on the phone again.

"Would someone please tell me what's going on?" Kylie asked, feeling as if her chance to discover more about her father were disappearing along with the Cadillac. She suddenly realized she still held the brown envelope of images of Daniel, and she clutched them tighter.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. We're just watching your back." The tips of Della's canines peeked through the corners of her lips. Her dark eyes, with a slight slant, and her straight black hair hinted at her part Asian heritage.

"Watching my back for what?"

"Derek called." Holiday closed her phone and stepped into the circle. "He was worried." Her phone rang again, and after looking at the call log, she held up a finger. "Sorry. One minute."

Patience wearing thin, Kylie looked back at Della and Lucas. "What's up?"

Lucas moved in. "Burnett phoned us and asked us to make our presence known to the visitors." His gaze met hers and, as earlier, concern flickered in his blue eyes.

Burnett, a thirty-something vampire, worked for the FRU—Fallen

Research Unit—a branch of the FBI whose job it was to govern the supernaturals. He was also part owner of Shadow Falls. When Burnett gave an order, he expected people to obey. And they usually did.

“Why?” Kylie asked. “I needed to ask them questions.” Unexpectedly, the memory of how Mrs. Brighten’s hand felt on hers flashed in her mind—gentle, fragile. Emotions came at Kylie from every direction.

“Burnett never gives his reasons,” Della said. “He gives orders.”

Kylie glanced at Holiday, who was still on the phone. She looked worried, and Kylie felt Holiday’s emotions join the others already dancing along her spine.

“I don’t understand.” She fought the tightness in her throat.

Lucas stepped closer. So close that she could smell his scent—a scent that reminded her of how the dew-kissed woods smelled first thing in the morning.

His hand came up and she thought he was going to reach for her, but he lowered his hand just as quickly. She fought against disappointment.

Holiday hung up the phone. “That was Burnett.” She stepped forward and rested a hand on Kylie’s shoulder.

She didn’t want to be calmed; she wanted answers. So she removed the camp leader’s hand. “Just tell me what happened. *Please.*”

“Derek called,” Holiday said. “He went to see the P.I. who helped you find your grandparents and found him unconscious in his office. Then Derek discovered the man’s phone on the floor outside of his office with blood on it. Bottom line, Derek doesn’t think the P.I. sent that text to you about your grandparents. He called Burnett, who’s there now.”

Kylie tried to understand what Holiday was saying. “But if the P.I. didn’t send the text, who did?”

Holiday shrugged. “We don’t know.”

“Derek could be wrong,” Lucas said, his lack of affection for the half-fae deepening the vibration in his voice.

Kylie ignored Lucas and his vibrations and tried to digest what Holiday was implying. “So ... Derek and Burnett think that Mr. and Mrs. Brighten were impostors?”

Holiday nodded. "If Derek's right and the text was sent by the person who hurt the P.I., then it makes sense that these two could have been sent here for other reasons."

"But they're human," Kylie said. "I checked."

"Definitely human," Della said.

"I know," Holiday explained. "That's the reason I didn't detain or question them. The last thing I need is to bring more suspicion on Shadow Falls. We already have the locals breathing down our necks. But being human doesn't mean they aren't working for someone else. Someone supernatural."

Kylie knew by "someone," Holiday meant Mario Esparza, grandfather to the murdering rogue who'd taken a liking to her.

For a split second, Kylie got a vision of the two teenage girls she'd met in town, the two who'd died at the hands of Red, Mario Esparza's grandson. More frustration and anger wound its way into her emotional bank.

"But they brought me pictures." She held up the envelope.

Holiday took the envelope and quickly glanced through the stack of pictures. For some odd reason, Kylie wanted to jerk them back, as if Holiday's action were somehow irreverent. "There aren't any family pictures in here. You would think there would be one or two of them with their son."

Kylie took the pictures back and slipped them into the envelope, trying to wrap her head around what they were insinuating. Then her thoughts went elsewhere. "But what if they really are my grandparents and whoever went to the P.I. is going to try to get to them?" She remembered the frailness of the elderly woman's palm on top of hers. What little life the woman had left could easily be yanked away from her.

Kylie's chest ached. Had she put Daniel's parents in danger by finding them? Had that been what Daniel had wanted to tell her? She felt Lucas's gaze on her, as if offering some small amount of comfort.

Holiday spoke up again. "I don't see any reason for someone to involve them. However, Perry is following them. If anyone tries to harm them, he'll take care of things."

"Yeah, Perry could seriously kick ass if he has to," Della said.

“And I’m sure the P.I. is working a hundred different cases,” Lucas said. “The P.I. being attacked doesn’t mean it’s linked to Kylie. It could be one of his other cases. Private investigators piss people off all the time.”

“True,” Holiday said. “But Burnett was concerned enough to want the Brightens away from the camp. We need to be cautious.”

Kylie’s mind took a U-turn and parked on the fact that it was Perry, one of the resident shape-shifters, following the Brightens. “What was Perry when he took off after them?”

The last time she’d seen Perry in an alternate form, he’d been some kind of pterodactyl creature that looked as if it had stepped out of the Jurassic age. Of course, Kylie supposed that was better than the SUV-sized lion or the unicorn he’d turned into before that. Oh hell! If he wasn’t careful, Perry could end up giving the elderly couple heart attacks.

“Don’t worry,” Holiday said. “Perry won’t do anything ridiculous.”

Miranda chose that moment to join the group. “Please, Perry and all things ridiculous go together like toads and warts,” she said, and pushed her tricolored dyed hair over her shoulder as if to punctuate her attitude.

Miranda was one of seven witches at Shadow Falls, and she was also Kylie’s other roommate. From Miranda’s tone, it was clear she wasn’t ready to forgive Perry for being cruel to her when he’d found out another shape-shifter had kissed her ... especially when she’d apologized. The witch’s gaze shot around the group.

“What?” Miranda asked. “Is something wrong?” Concern tightened her eyes, proving that while she might not be over being mad, neither was she over caring for the shape-shifter. “Is Perry okay? Is he?” She reached up and caught a strand of pink hair and twirled it around her finger.

“Perry’s fine,” Holiday and Kylie said at the same time. Then Kylie’s mind returned to her concern for the Brightens—if they really were the Brightens.

She looked at Holiday. “What would anyone gain by pretending to be my grandparents?”

“Access to you,” Holiday answered.

“But they seemed so genuine.” And then Kylie remembered. “No. They

couldn't have been impostors. I ... saw the death angels. They sent me a message."

"Oh, crappers," Della said, and she and Miranda took a step back. While Lucas didn't flinch, his eyes widened. According to legend, death angels were supposed to be the ones who doled out punishment to keep the nonhuman species in line. Almost every supernatural knew of a friend of a friend who'd misbehaved and then gotten fried to a crisp by a vengeful death angel.

While Kylie sensed the power of these angels, she wasn't so sure their harmful reputation wasn't exaggerated. Not that she was eager to test the theory. However, considering she made her share of mistakes and hadn't been burned or turned to ash, she questioned the rumors of those who had.

"What message?" Holiday asked, her tone free of any misgiving. The camp leader, another ghost whisperer, was one of the few who didn't fear the death angels.

"Shadows ... on the dining hall wall, then..."

"When we were in there?" Della asked. "And you didn't tell us?"

Kylie ignored Della. "I heard a voice in my head say to go find my destiny. Why would I get that message if they weren't my grandparents?"

"Good question," Holiday said. "But maybe they just meant this situation is what will lead you to the truth."

"She should have told us," Della muttered to Miranda.

Kylie recalled Daniel showing up, the urgency she'd heard in his tone in what little he'd communicated. Had she totally misunderstood what he'd wanted to tell her? Had he come to warn her that the couple weren't his adoptive parents? Doubt built, and she didn't know what she believed anymore.

Kylie breathed in, and another concern dove right into her worry bank. "Is the P.I. going to be okay?"

"I don't know." Holiday frowned. "Burnett said Derek was at the hospital with him now. Burnett is still investigating the crime scene."

Worry for Derek tightened Kylie's chest. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed his number.

When he didn't answer, she didn't know if it was because he couldn't or if he was back to not talking to her. Back to pushing her out of his life.

Men!

Why was it that boys said girls were so hard to understand, when she hadn't known a single guy who hadn't confused her to the point of screaming?

* * *

As everyone hung out talking, Kylie snuck away and went around back to sit beside her favorite tree. She opened the envelope and slowly went through the pictures, noting all the little things about Daniel. The way his blue eyes lit up when he smiled, the way his hair flipped up just a bit on the ends when he wore it long. She saw so much of herself in him, and her heart doubled over with grief at missing him.

When she came across the picture of her mom and him, Kylie found herself smiling at the way Daniel was looking at her mom, and the way her mom was looking at him. Love. Part of Kylie wanted to call her mom right then and tell her about the photo, but considering what Holiday and the others thought, she supposed it was best to keep quiet. But hopefully not for long.

"Hey."

Lucas's voice pulled her attention up, and she smiled. "Hi."

"Mind some company?" he asked.

"I'll share my tree with you." She scooted over.

He dropped down beside her and studied her face. His shoulder, so warm, came against hers, and she savored his closeness. "You look happy and sad, and confused." He brushed a few strands of her hair from her face.

"I feel confused," she said. "They were so nice and ... I don't know what to believe now. How could they have these pictures if they aren't really the Brightens?"

"They could have stolen them," he said.

His words hurt, but she knew he could be right. But why would anyone go that far to convince her they were Daniel's parents? What could they possibly gain by doing that?

He looked down at the pictures she held in her hand. "Can I see?"

Nodding, she passed him the stack of photos.

He slowly flipped through them. "It must be weird looking at someone's face who you look so much like and not knowing him."

She gazed up at Lucas. "But I do know him."

His brows arched up. "I mean ... in person."

She nodded, understanding his inability to grasp the whole ghost thing, but wishing it weren't so hard for him.

"Burnett will get to the bottom of this." His gaze lowered to her mouth. For a second, she thought he was going to kiss her, but he stiffened and looked up toward the woods.

Fredericka, scowling at the two of them, walked out from behind the bushes. "The pack is looking for you."

Lucas frowned. "I'll be right there."

She didn't move. She just continued to stare. "They shouldn't have to wait on their leader."

Lucas growled, "I said I'd be right there."

Fredericka walked away, and Lucas looked down at her. "Sorry. I should go."

"Is something wrong?" Kylie asked, noting the concern filling his eyes.

"Nothing I can't handle." He pressed a quick kiss on her lips and slid the photos back into her hands.

* * *

"Are you going to be okay?" Holiday asked when Kylie walked back onto the office porch.

Kylie plopped down in one of the large white rocking chairs. The sticky heat seemed to cling to her skin. "I'll live." She set the envelope on the small patio table between the chairs and pulled her hair back and held it off the back of her neck. "Do you really think they were impostors?"

Holiday sat in the other rocker. Her red hair hung loose around her shoulders. "I don't know. But Burnett won't let it rest until he gets to the bottom of this. He feels guilty that he wasn't more on top of things and let

Mario get to you. I imagine after this, he's not going to want to let you out of his sight."

"He had no way of knowing what the creep was up to," Kylie said.

"I know that. You know that. But Burnett has a tendency to be a bit harder on himself."

"Aren't all vampires?" Kylie considered Della and the emotional baggage she carted around.

"Not really," Holiday said. "You'd be amazed how many vamps refuse to take any responsibility for their actions. It's always someone else's fault."

Kylie almost asked if Holiday was referring to a certain vampire who'd broken her heart in the past. But her thoughts went back to the Brightens. "You were there. Didn't you read their emotions? Weren't they sincere? I felt somehow ... connected to them."

Holiday tilted her head as if thinking. "They were very guarded, almost too much so, but ... yeah, they read sincere. Especially Mrs. Brighten."

"Then how could they—"

"Reading emotions is never a hundred percent certain," Holiday said. "Emotions can be disguised, hidden, even faked."

"By humans?" Kylie asked.

"Humans are masters at it. Better than supernaturals. I've often thought that since their species lack any superpower to control their worlds, they have worked harder at controlling their emotions."

Kylie listened, while her heart chewed on concern for the Brightens.

"Narcissism, detachment, schizoid personality, sociopath—these things run rampant in the human race in varying degrees. Then you have the actors who can create an emotion within themselves by simply borrowing it from a past experience. I've attended plays and shows where the emotions flowing from the actors were as real as I've ever felt."

Kylie leaned back in her chair. "I'm part human and I can't seem to control anything."

Holiday glanced at her with empathy. "I'm sorry I had to send them away. I know you were hoping to learn something. But I couldn't risk that Derek might be right."

“I understand.” And she did. She just didn’t like it. “Mrs. Brighten—if she really was Mrs. Brighten—reminded me of my grandmother.”

“Nana,” Holiday said, and Kylie remembered that Nana’s spirit had paid Holiday a visit.

“Yeah.”

Holiday sighed. “I know this is difficult for you.”

The camp leader’s phone rang and Kylie held her breath, hoping it was news on the Brightens, Derek, or the P.I.

The camp leader glanced at the call log. “It’s just my mom. I’ll call her later.”

Kylie pulled one knee up to her chest and wrapped her hand around her leg. The silence that followed called for the truth. “I feel as if nothing in my life makes sense anymore. Everything is changing.”

Holiday wrapped her hair into a rope. “Change isn’t the worst thing, Kylie. It’s when things aren’t changing that you have to worry.”

“I disagree.” Kylie dropped her chin down on her kneecap. “I mean, I know change is necessary for growth and all that stuff. But I’d like one thing in my life to feel ... grounded. I need a touchstone. Something that feels real.”

Holiday raised her brows. “Shadow Falls is real, Kylie. It’s your touchstone.”

“I know. I know I belong here, it’s just that I still don’t know *how* I belong. And please don’t tell me that I should make this my quest. Because that’s been my quest since I’ve been here and I’m not any closer to figuring it now than I was then.”

“That’s not true.” Holiday pulled her knees up, and in the oversize rocking chair, her petite form looked even smaller. “Look how far you’ve come. Like you said, you know you belong here. That’s a big step. And your gifts are coming in left and right.”

“Gifts that I mostly don’t know how to control or when they might or might not pop in again. Not that I’m complaining.” Kylie dropped her forehead on her kneecap and let go of an exaggerated sigh.

Holiday chuckled.

Kylie glanced up. "I sound pathetic, don't I."

Holiday frowned. "No. You sound frustrated. And to be honest, after what happened to you this weekend, you deserve to be frustrated. You might even deserve to be a little pathetic."

"Nobody has the right to be pathetic," Kylie said.

"I don't know about that. I think I've earned the right a few times in my life." Holiday set her rocking chair into a slow swaying motion.

Kylie stared at the camp leader, and she had a distinct feeling that there were a lot of things Holiday still hadn't told Kylie about herself.

"Did I sense a new spirit earlier?" Holiday asked.

"Yeah." Kylie leaned back in the chair. "She's still not making sense. Says she's confused." Kylie recalled the angry-looking stitches she'd seen on the woman's head. "I think she died of a brain tumor or something. She had a shaved head and scars."

"Hmm," Holiday said.

"And I think she's buried at Fallen Cemetery."

"Really? Did she tell you that?"

"No, but that's where I felt like I picked her up. Driving here this morning, my mom had just passed the cemetery when the spirit popped into the backseat."

"I guess that could be it."

"But you don't think so?" Kylie asked, unsure of Holiday's logic.

"I'm not saying it can't be that simple, but I've found the majority of spirits that come to us have ... connections more than just our driving by a cemetery. Now, I'm not saying we don't get random ghosts sometimes, because we do. The other day, I got a dripping wet, elderly man, naked as the day he was born. He died in the shower at his nursing home. Wanted me to tell the nurse to please come get him out." Holiday shook her head.

"What did you do?" Kylie asked.

"I called the nursing home and said I was a friend of the family and had tried to call Mr. Banes in his room and he wasn't answering."

"And he went away?"

"Crossed right over."

“I hope this spirit is that easy. I could use a break.” Then Kylie remembered what the spirit had said. “You know ... the spirit said that there were people who wanted her to tell me something.”

“Tell you what?”

“I asked, but ... she said something like, some people live and some people die. It didn’t make sense.”

“They seldom do at first.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. “Could it be my dad trying to tell me something? He tried to appear right before I saw the Brightens—or whoever they were.”

Holiday stopped rocking. “What did he say?”

“He couldn’t completely manifest. All I got were a few words.” Kylie frowned. “Why does he have to stop coming to see me?”

Holiday’s expression filled with sympathy. “Death is a new beginning, Kylie. One can’t begin the new until they let go of the old. He has held on to the past for a long time. He needs to move forward. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Kylie stopped her chair’s swaying. “Understand it? Maybe. Like it? No.” Sighing, she stood up. “I told Miranda and Della I’d meet them back at the cabin.”

“Sure.” Holiday hesitated a moment. “I thought now might be a good time to chat about your new gifts.”

“What’s to talk about? Just because I ran through a concrete wall?” Kylie used sarcasm to cover up her unresolved feeling.

Holiday grinned. “And you healed Sara. And Lucas.”

Kylie sat back down. “We hope I healed Sara.”

“From what you said, I’d be surprised if you hadn’t.” Holiday continued to stare. “If one of your gifts is that you’re a protector, Kylie, this could only be the beginning of your talents. I’m surprised you aren’t peppering me with questions.”

“Maybe I’d like a few answers before I start asking more questions. And I don’t even mean about what I am, but about who the Brightens are. And what my dad wanted to tell me.”

Holiday's eyes filled with understanding. "It's all happening very fast, isn't it?"

"Yes, and talking about it's not going to change anything." Her chest swelled with emotion.

"It could. Sometimes things don't feel real until we talk about them."

Kylie released a breath. "I'm not sure I want it to feel any more real right now."

"Perhaps we should take a walk up to the falls?"

"No," Kylie said, unsure she could go there and not get upset if all she got from those magical waters was a voice telling her to be patient. Hadn't she been patient long enough? "Can we just talk later?"

"Fine." Holiday started to touch her and then pulled back. "But only a temporary postponement. We really need to talk."

"Yeah, I know." Kylie popped back up and reached for the envelope.

"Can I keep these for a while?" Holiday asked.

Kylie's heart clutched. "I..."

"Just for a few days. I'm sure Burnett is going to want to check and see if they are originals or copies."

Kylie nodded. "They're important to me."

Holiday smiled with honest understanding. "I know."

Kylie took one step off the porch and turned back around. "You will let me know the instant you hear something from Burnett or Derek, right?"

"The instant," Holiday assured her.

Kylie started to leave and then turned back, walked over to Holiday, and hugged her. Hugged her really tight.

"Thank you," Kylie said.

"For what?" Holiday sounded confused, but it didn't stop her from hugging Kylie back.

"For being here. For being you. For putting up with me."

Holiday snickered. "You're beginning to sound melodramatic, and that's just a hair away from pathetic."

Kylie broke the embrace, smiled back at Holiday, and took off down the trail to her cabin.

* * *

She hadn't gotten halfway there when the hair on the back of her neck seemed to dance and she felt the unmistakable sense of being watched. She glanced to the woods on her left but saw nothing but trees and underbrush. She fixed her stare to the right and found the overgrown terrain to be equally empty. But she still felt it—even stronger.

Glancing up at the cloudless blue sky, she blinked. A bird soared high overhead. The broad wingspan, the hooked beak, and the white splash of coloring on his chest identified him as an eagle. She studied the creature, slowly gliding as if taking his sweet time, as if he were transfixed by ... the view?

What view?

Did he watch her? Was the feeling she got from the bird? Was it just your average eagle? Or was it like Perry, who could change his form into anything he desired? She continued to watch him, feeling uneasy.

Without warning, the eagle changed course. His movements quickened as he charged. Close. Closer. She met his eyes. The fierceness made her shudder. Or was it his thick talons held out as if prepared to attack?

The *whoosh* of air from his wings hit her face, and she slammed her eyes shut.

Chapter Three

Kylie threw up her arm to protect her face, but she felt nothing, no claws cutting into her flesh. Not on her face or her arm.

She heard rustling at her feet, accompanied by a rattling noise. Uncovering her face, she looked down. Her breath caught. She lurched back as the eagle used his sharp beak and talons to attack the snake that lay a few inches from her feet. The rattling noise hit again. She noticed the diamondlike shapes on the back of the brown-and-tan snake, then her gaze followed the coiled reptile to the dry, tan appendage growing from its tail.

A rattlesnake.

She lunged back. The bird buried his talons into the round, thick flesh of the snake. The eagle's wings worked overtime as he carried the squirming snake a few feet off the ground. The flapping of wings, the *whooshing* of air, and the distinctive rattle of the reptile filled her ears. The eagle hung a few feet above the ground, his wings slapping against the air.

She stood in the middle of the path and watched as the huge bird flew away with his prey. Looking back at her feet, she saw dusty marks in the path where the snake had fought for its life and lost. Beside the marks, a pair of shoe prints pressed into the ground. Her shoes. Had the eagle not charged, would she have seen the snake? Or would she now have the rattler's venom running up her leg?

Was she just lucky, or had this meant something? She considered turning around and finding Holiday, but logic intervened. She was in the woods in the Texas Hill Country. Her father—stepfather—had warned her constantly

about snakes.

Convincing herself that this was just an uncanny moment that she'd gotten to experience nature at its scariest, she took another step forward. She did glance up one more time, though. The eagle, with the snake still tightly in his clutches, circled above. She stared, her breath caught in her throat. And as crazy as it seemed, she could swear the eagle stared back.

She stood, hand shadowing her eyes, and watched him until he was a dark speck fading into the massive blue sky. A thought hit that she should be grateful to the eagle, but the cold look in the bird's eyes flashed in her mind and sent a shiver down her spine.

Moving her hand away from her brow, she started for her cabin when her gaze clashed with another cold pair of eyes. Fredericka. Kylie remembered how angry Fredericka had been when she'd caught her and Lucas behind the office. Not that they'd been doing anything but looking at pictures of Daniel and talking.

"How does it feel to be a play toy?" Fredericka's voice sounded tight with anger, the kind of anger that could bring out the claws. And the hint of orange in the girl's dark eyes said the claws were definitely an option.

Kylie inhaled and reminded herself not to show any fear. "Jealousy isn't becoming on you."

"I'm not jealous." Fredericka flashed a smug smile. "Especially now."

Now what? Kylie wanted to ask, but to do so would have given the bully credence, and Kylie refused to do that. Instead, she started walking away. She told herself to forget about Fredericka, that she had other problems to chew on right now. Kylie pulled out her phone to see if Derek had ever returned her call about the detective. He hadn't.

"Lucas's bloodline is pure, he values that," Fredericka spouted from behind Kylie. "The forefathers value that, too. They've made that clear. So when it comes time for him to seek his true mate, he won't dirty up his bloodline with the likes of you."

Nonsense, Kylie told herself, and kept walking. Fredericka was just talking nonsense. She had grandparents or pretend grandparents to worry about, so she wouldn't let this she-wolf upset her. Then the memory of the

eagle filled her mind. Maybe she should worry about that, too.

* * *

Less than an hour later, still not hearing from Derek, Perry, or Burnett, Kylie sat at the kitchen table in her cabin with Miranda and Della. She'd told them about the snake and eagle and her thoughts that the incident was somehow more than it appeared.

"I would have smelled it if we had intruders," Della assured her.

"And I would have felt it if magic was being used to cover someone's tracks," Miranda said.

"See, that's why I need you guys," Kylie said. "You keep me from losing it." She leaned back in her chair, wishing their confirmation had chased away all her doubts. Then again, maybe it wasn't the doubts bothering her, but everything else on her plate.

Kylie's pet, Socks Jr.—the kitten Miranda had accidentally turned into a skunk—leapt up and landed in her lap. While Kylie still felt caught in the tailspin of the emotional storm, doing something as commonplace as their diet soda roundtable discussions brought some solace.

Miranda, up first in the discussion of their weekend woes and whines, retold everything about her witches' competition, in which she'd placed second. "I was excited that I placed so high," she said. "I thought my mom would be happy. But no." Miranda hesitated. "Second just means you're the first loser," she recounted her mother's words. The tone in Miranda's voice told Kylie how much her friend was hurting. "I wanted to impress her, and for a minute there, I thought I'd actually, finally done it. I'll never make that woman happy."

Della rolled her eyes. "Why would you want to make her happy?"

"Because she's my mom." Miranda answered with so much honesty that sadness tugged at Kylie's heart. She remembered feeling much the same way about her own mom before they found their peace.

"News flash," Della said, waving her hand. "Your mom's the biggest b ... witch I've ever heard of. At least my parents' attitude is because they're worried I'm hurting myself by doing drugs and not because they aren't happy

with me.” Tears brightened Miranda’s eyes and anger tightened her expression as she stared at Della.

Kylie felt tension thickening in the air. “I think what Della means is—”

“I’m sorry,” Della interrupted Kylie. The smartass look on Della’s face quickly faded into a frown. “That sounded mean, and I ... Truth is if my parents knew the truth, they’d probably rather me be a drug addict than a vampire.” Della studied Miranda and sighed. “It just makes me furious at your mom. I know how hard you worked to impress her. And you took friggin’ second place, which is fabulous.”

“Thanks,” Miranda said, her anger dissolving but her eyes getting wetter.

“For what?” Della flopped back into the chair, as if aware she’d shown a softer side of her personality. Della seldom let that side show. Not that Kylie and Miranda didn’t see it. Well, Kylie saw it. Miranda had a harder time seeing through Della’s guarded front.

Miranda brushed her hand over her cheek again and sat up taller. “Enough about that. I’ve got other news. Todd Freeman, a warlock, came over and asked if he could have my cell number. He’s like the hottest guy in my old school. So at least someone noticed I did good in the competition.” She grinned. “Not that I think it was my trophy he was interested in. I caught him at least three times checking out my girls.”

“Jerk,” Della said. “I hope the only thing you gave him was your middle finger.”

“Duh, didn’t you hear me? Cutest guy in school. Besides, big boobs are natural guy magnets—that’s just the way it is. Why wouldn’t I give my number to him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you still want to suck face with a certain shape-shifter?”

“Please, I’m so over Perry,” Miranda snapped.

Della tapped the end of her nose. “Pheromones don’t lie.”

“No arguing on the first day back,” Kylie said. “Tomorrow you two can threaten to tear each other’s limbs off, but today ... just give me a little peace today.” She picked up Socks from her lap and placed him on the table. “Besides ... you’re gonna upset Socks and then we’re all gonna end up

getting skunked.”

Della and Miranda looked at Socks. The little skunk/cat, uncomfortable being the center of attention, scurried closer to Kylie.

“Truce?” Kylie asked, stroking the scared animal’s trembling body.

Thankfully, Miranda and Della nodded.

Miranda leaned closer. “I think I’ve figured out how to turn our little stinker back into a kitten. But I need the first rays of sunshine to do it.” She reached over to pet Socks, but he backed away from her touch and then jumped back into Kylie’s lap.

“Smart skunk,” Della said, grinning. “No telling what you’ll accidentally turn him into next time.”

Miranda frowned. “Maybe I’ll turn *you* into a skunk.”

“And maybe I’ll rip your heart out and feed it to our resident pet.”

“What happened to the truce?” Kylie whined. Socks’s nose nudged deeper into her armpit.

“Fine.” Miranda huffed and then looked at Della. “Your turn. Give us the lowdown on your weekend.”

“You mean besides constantly being told to go pee on a stick? They tested me four times. I think one was a pregnancy test. Like I’ve been doing the dirty with anyone.” Della picked up her cup of blood and gave it a hard look. “The only thing we did all weekend was go see a movie, some old classic my mother loved. Boring. At least I got to sleep without having to explain why I seemed so tired in the middle of the day.” She exhaled rather loudly. “So that’s my weekend. Nothing exciting to tell. Nothing.” She stared back into her cup.

It wasn’t her avoiding direct eye contact that gave it away, more like the emphasis on the second “nothing” that hinted at the truth. Miranda shot Kylie a quick look that said she’d heard it, too. The little vamp was holding back ... as usual.

While Kylie debated the wisdom of trying to push Della into giving more, Miranda, who spoke first and seldom thought things through, knocked wisdom out the window and went for it.

“Liar,” Miranda accused. “If I could hear your heartbeat right now, I bet it

would prove it, too. What happened? What are you not telling us?”

Della snarled at Miranda. Kylie could feel the fragile truce shattering.

“Chan didn’t show up, did he?” Miranda asked.

Kylie hadn’t thought about that. “Did he show up?” Kylie seconded Miranda’s question—not out of curiosity, but out of concern.

Chan, Della’s cousin, was also a vampire and had helped Della through the turn. However, Chan was also under suspicion of murder by the FRU. After meeting the wild-eyed Chan when he’d broken school policy and dropped by for a visit several weeks earlier, Kylie wasn’t completely sure he wasn’t guilty of the crime. Not that Kylie would tell Della that.

“No, he didn’t show up,” Della said. “But he e-mailed me.”

Miranda made a funny noise. Kylie looked at her.

“Frog in my throat,” Miranda said, and returned to glaring at Della.

When no one said anything, Della looked at Kylie. “Your turn. It’s much more exciting than what happened to me.”

“What do you mean by ‘what happened to you’?” Kylie asked.

“I knew it!” Miranda leaned forward. “Something did happen. ’Fess up. Did it involve a boy? Tell us! Spill your guts, vamp.”

Chapter Four

“No, it’s my turn.” Kylie, regretting her inquiry, held up her hand, hoping to prevent an out-and-out war between her two best friends. She took a deep breath. “I already told you most of it when we talked on the phone. But what I still can’t get over is that I healed both Lucas and Sara. Which means another ability you can add to my hodgepodge of gifts. Any idea what it could mean? Because I’d really like to figure out what I am.”

“We can’t figure you out,” Miranda said. “You’re just a weirdo.” She snickered, and even Della cut a quick smile.

Kylie frowned.

Miranda wiped the humor off her face. “Just joking. But seriously, you are ... different. Just the fact that no one can see deep into your pattern, and that it changes, well, it’s not normal.” She squinted her eyes and stared at Kylie’s forehead. “I’ve never seen a brain pattern shift like that, unless it was a shape-shifter during a shift.”

Kylie bit into her lip and considered the wisdom of asking the question now needling her brain. But if she couldn’t ask her two best friends, whom could she ask? “What do you know about protectors?”

Silence filled the room. Then Miranda exchanged a quick glance with Della.

“Why?” Miranda asked.

“Shit!” Della said. “Oh, my friggin’ God! You’re a protector? I mean, I’ve never met one, but from what I heard they are like ... super, super rare.”

Kylie held up her hand to stop Della from jumping to conclusions. “I

don't know anything for sure, but Holiday seems to think it's possible. She said that would explain how Daniel died—because he couldn't protect himself. And it would also explain why I couldn't help myself with the vampire."

"You did help. You broke down a concrete wall," Miranda said.

"Only after I heard the rogue beating Lucas."

Miranda's eyes widened. "And you were only able to take on Selynn when you thought she'd hurt your mom. Holy shit, I'm rooming with a protector. I mean, nobody will mess with me anymore because you'll kick their ass." Her voice rose. "I'm friends with a protector. Do you know how cool that makes me?"

Miranda and Della gave each other a high five.

Kylie stared at them. "Do you know how much more uncool it makes me?"

"That doesn't make you uncool," Della said. "It makes you amazing. You wouldn't believe all I've heard about protectors. It would mean that when you get all your powers, you would be even stronger than I am." A frown appeared in her dark, slightly slanted eyes. "I don't know if I like that, but it's still amazing."

"But I don't want to be amazing. I just want to figure out what I am and then go through my hybrid supernatural life with my not-so-grand gifts. Help a ghost out here and there and, yeah, it will be neat to heal a few people. I'd be fine with that. Because..." Kylie hesitated, unsure about being completely honest, but then decided what the hell. "Maybe it's not so much that I don't want to be amazing, it's that I'm not so sure I can live up to ... amazing. I'm not like you." She pointed to Della. "I'm not fearless and I'm certainly not brave. I like things easy, low or no risk."

Miranda cleared her throat as if waiting for Kylie to add her to the declaration.

"I'm not like you either," Kylie said. "I'm not—"

"Don't worry," Miranda said. "I know I'm not a kick-ass girl."

"You're still braver than I am. And you're never afraid to speak your mind. You don't care what people think. I wouldn't ever dye my hair out of

fear that people wouldn't like it."

"But the day you kicked Selynn's ass, you weren't afraid," Della jumped in. "You just acted. And eventually, you'll get used to putting yourself out there. It's not a big deal."

It felt like a big deal to Kylie. "Are most protectors a certain species?" If so, she hoped this might lead her to discovering what she was.

"No," Miranda said. "They can be anything, but they're known to be good and pure. Sort of the Mother Teresa of supernaturals."

"Which I'm so not," Kylie said.

Della and Miranda looked at each other and then back at Kylie. "Yeah, you are," they said at the same time.

"Am not! I'm not any better of a person than you two. I mean, look what I did to Selynn and Fredericka."

"Because you were protecting someone else. And that's exactly what protectors do." Miranda shrugged as if in apology when she spotted Kylie's frown.

"But ... I'm not a saint. The other day I practically shoved Socks off the bed for waking me up. And ... I ran over a squirrel once."

"On purpose?" Della asked.

"No."

"Then there you go," Della said. "I'll bet you even cried and felt guilty."

Kylie's frown grew tighter.

Della arched a knowing brow. "See? That's what makes you so good. You hardly ever get mad."

"I get mad. I get furious at you guys all the time. Remember—"

"Wait, something doesn't make sense," Miranda said. "I've never heard of a protector being anything but a hundred percent supernatural."

"See? That proves it." Kylie slapped her hands on the table, wanting to believe it. "I'm not that nice of a person, and I know I'm my mother's daughter. So I'm not a protector."

"Or maybe you're just the first hybrid protector to exist," Miranda said. "I mean, usually there's only one protector born every hundred or two hundred years. But, hey, enough about that. Let's get to the good part about what

happened that night.” She waved her hands through the air as if to push that thought to the side.

“What good part?” Kylie asked.

Miranda’s grin spread into the perfect smile—one that could be used to sell teeth-whitening strips. “Pleeeasse. You were there, in the dark, late at night, for several hours, and alone with Lucas. Who happens to be the hottest werewolf alive. I mean, I’m so not into werewolves, but even I can see it. He’s like a god. So...” She held out her two palms. “What happened? And don’t you dare tell me nothing. Because I will totally, completely lose faith in romance if nothing happened.”

Kylie opened her mouth to answer and then saw Della leaning forward, turning her head slightly, as if to listen to Kylie’s heartbeat to see if she attempted to lie.

“The little witch has a point,” Della said. “This might be the good part.”

Kylie frowned at Della. For a girl who always kept secrets, she sure didn’t give anyone else a break. Then Kylie looked at Miranda, who held her breath in anticipation of Kylie baring her soul.

“Sorry,” she said. “Nothing happened.”

“Ugh.” Miranda dropped her arms on the table and sank into them.

Della stared, and Kylie knew the vamp was listening to her heartbeat and checking for lies again. Frankly, Kylie wasn’t sure what Della would hear. It wasn’t actually a lie. Nothing happened. Except ... She’d felt so safe when Lucas had held her, except that she’d turned into Wonder Woman when she’d heard the rogue hurting Lucas. What did that mean? Kylie wasn’t sure. So how could she explain it?

Miranda lifted her head off the table. “See what I mean? You’re Mother Teresa. Pure. Without lust.”

“No,” Kylie snapped, not wanting to be viewed as a saint. “I ... lust.”

Della and Miranda shared a pensive stare. “Sorry,” Della said. “When it walks like a saint, and quacks like saint—it’s a quacking saint.”

“He held me,” Kylie said. “Held me close. And I fell asleep on his shoulder. It was nice. And kind of ... He was hot.” Though she meant temperature hot, she didn’t mind if they drew their own conclusions.

“Yes!” Miranda smiled extra big again. “Did he kiss you? Like the awesome kiss he gave you at the creek when you first got here?”

“No,” Kylie said.

Her two friends met each other’s gazes again. “Mother Teresa,” they said in unison.

“But he kissed me when I got back here,” Kylie blurted out, deciding she’d rather kiss and tell than be considered a saint. “And he almost kissed me when he followed me to the office earlier.”

Miranda squealed and Della laughed. “So he planted one on you, huh?”

Kylie looked at the humor on her roommates’ faces and didn’t find any of this so funny. “I’m so confused.” She dropped her head on the table. Socks, now back up on the table, stuck his nose against her head and sniffed her scalp as if he were concerned.

“Confused about what?” Miranda asked.

Kylie lifted her head and rested her chin in her palm. “Confused about what I feel for Lucas. Confused about what I feel for Derek—other than pissed off. I’m really angry at him right now.” Socks bumped against her hand, seeking some TLC. Feeling as if she could use some herself, she offered the little guy some affection.

“And you should be pissed!” Della shot Miranda an odd look. “She needs to know.”

“Know what?” Watching the two of them exchanging gazes, Kylie got a bad feeling.

They didn’t get a chance to answer because she heard a cracking sound and the cabin’s front door swung open. Burnett walked inside, and behind him stood Holiday. Behind Holiday stood Perry.

Did they have news about the Brightens? Kylie’s heart jolted.

“I told you to knock,” Holiday snapped at Burnett.

“I did.” He looked back at Holiday.

“Well, usually after you knock, you wait until someone tells you to enter.”

Burnett shot Holiday a tight smile. “Guess you need to be more specific next time.” He glanced back at Kylie, and she could see concern in his eyes.

“What’s going on?” Kylie’s gaze went back to Perry, who looked almost

guilty. But guilty about what? Oh crap! What had happened?

“I’m sorry.” Perry’s eyes turned deep green.

Kylie’s chest tightened. “Sorry for what?”

Perry looked at Burnett and then at Holiday.

“What happened?” Kylie asked. “Are the Brightens okay? Answer me!”

Perry just stood there looking guilt-ridden.

“I’d answer her,” Della said to Perry in her snarky voice. “She might go after your ears again if you don’t.”

Chapter Five

“I don’t know what happened.” Perry moved in closer, his eyes brightening to emerald green.

“How could you not know?” Kylie looked to Burnett and then Holiday, waiting for one of them to pipe up. When they didn’t, she refocused on Perry. “You were following them.” Suddenly, the guilt she spotted on his face did a flying leap and landed right on Kylie’s own shoulders. If something really bad had happened to them, it was her fault. She’d been the one wanting to contact them. But damn it, she’d been so sure it was the right thing to do.

“They disappeared,” Perry said. “One minute they were driving down the freeway in that silver Cadillac and then, poof.” He waved his hands out in front of him. “They were gone. Cadillac and everything. Gone. Poof.”

Kylie’s chest grew heavy. “People, human people, don’t just go poof.” She managed to keep her voice low, but her frustration laced the tone with sarcasm.

Then the truth hit. She only thought people didn’t go poof. Not too long ago she didn’t think people could turn into unicorns, or that vampires and werewolves existed. She wouldn’t have thought she could use her dreams to communicate with people or that she could break down a concrete wall. So who the hell knew if people went poof or not? And if they did go poof, did that mean...?

Kylie’s stomach knotted. “Are they dead?”

Holiday frowned. “Let’s not start assuming—”

“We don’t know,” Burnett interrupted. “I have agents working on finding

out, though. The agency is sending me pictures of the Brightens any minute now. At least then we'll know if they were impostors."

Burnett's phone rang and he snatched it up. "What you got?" His expression hardened. "That can't be. I checked them this morning." He paused and eyed Holiday, who moved closer to Burnett's side.

Della leaned over to Kylie. "The cameras aren't working." Her sensitive hearing had obviously picked up both sides of the conversation.

Footsteps sounded on the cabin porch and Kylie looked up as Lucas stepped through the doorway. His gaze found hers, his concern for her reflecting in his eyes, and he stopped beside her. His arm brushed against hers, and she felt his warmth. The memory of his kiss flashed through her head and she felt a little guilty about sharing it with Miranda and Della.

Kylie saw Lucas glance at her two roommates and nod. It wasn't an overtly friendly nod, either. Kylie had heard that werewolves were pretty standoffish, and she supposed it was true. Other than Lucas, Kylie hadn't really befriended any of them at the camp.

"Did Burnett get the pictures of your grandparents yet?" Lucas looked down at her.

"Don't know." She found herself staring at his blue eyes. For just a second, she wished she didn't question what she felt. Wished he weren't another unanswered part of her life. It would feel so good to just give in. So, why didn't she?

"You okay?" He mouthed the words more than spoke them. She nodded but wasn't so sure how true it was.

"Then someone tampered with them!" Burnett paced across the living room. "Have you gotten the Brightens' DMV records yet? I want to see a copy of their licenses to determine if they're who they said they were." He tightened his jaw muscles and glanced up at Kylie. Empathy for her flashed in his eyes, but it faded within a flicker of a second. Showing emotion, even a glimmer in his eyes, seemed too much for him.

Everything about the man looked hard and dark. And he seemed to like it that way. He had black hair, olive skin, and a body rippled with muscles that kept most men at a distance and most women his age wishing he'd get closer.

Kylie saw Holiday studying Burnett and amended her last thought. In spite of the obvious attraction that ran deep between them, Holiday wouldn't let Burnett get close.

"I don't understand what takes them so long," Burnett snapped at the caller. "It's as simple as pulling records at the DMV. I could have done it myself by now." He released a deep, frustrated sigh. "Just send them as soon as they come in." He hung up, dropped his phone into his shirt pocket, and looked at Holiday.

His eyes tightened with frustration. "Someone tampered with our cameras. I checked this morning and everything was working. Conveniently, they went down about an hour before the Brightens arrived. I think we know what that means."

Burnett glanced at Kylie. She knew he thought the Brightens were impostors. And maybe she should be hoping he was right. Because that would mean that it wasn't Daniel's adoptive parents who'd gone poof on the highway. But Kylie wanted proof. Proof of who'd gone poof.

She pressed a hand to her forehead and fought an oncoming headache. "When do they think they'll get pictures of the Brightens?"

"Any time. If they know what's good for them." Burnett's deep voice sounded sincere.

Kylie found herself praying Daniel's parents were okay. That they weren't the couple who'd visited earlier. But even so, she wasn't sure she was emotionally off the hook. Impostors or not, she wasn't sure the elderly couple deserved to ... She stopped herself from mentally pronouncing them dead. Poof didn't necessarily equal death.

The back of Lucas's hand brushed against the back of hers. Somehow she knew the touch was deliberate and meant to comfort her. And it did.

Burnett's phone beeped. He yanked it from his pocket, pressed a button, and stared at the screen. Glancing up, he held the phone over to Holiday. "Is that the couple that was here?"

Holiday looked at the screen and then at Kylie. "No. That's not them."

It wasn't that Kylie didn't believe her, but she had to see for herself. She stepped over, took Burnett's phone, and stared at the two images side by side.

An elderly, partly balding man and an older, gray-haired woman with bright green eyes gazed back from the phone's screen.

"These are the Brightens?" she asked.

Burnett nodded. "Sent from the DMV records."

"It doesn't even look like them." Kylie couldn't deny the relief that washed over her, yet she remembered the touch of the elderly woman's hand, the grief they had seemed to share, and even the sheen of tears in the woman's eyes. Had it all been an act? Kylie looked at Holiday. "Even you said the woman seemed sincere. How could we both be wrong?"

Holiday frowned. "Like I told you, reading emotions is never a hundred percent accurate."

Kylie swallowed the disappointment at having her emotions toyed with by an elderly couple. At least when Derek or Holiday toyed with her emotions, it had always been to soothe or help her. This was different; it had been meant to deceive. And maybe more.

She fought the anger crowding the other emotions in her chest. Targeting her anger toward the elderly couple still didn't seem right. "But I don't understand what they were going to accomplish by pretending to be my grandparents."

"Obviously, they weren't here just to pat your cheek and offer you cookies," Burnett stated. "Luckily, Derek got wind of it and whatever they were attempting got foiled."

Kylie met Burnett's gaze. "Is Mario behind this?"

"Who else could it be?"

Kylie still struggled to understand. "But why would he send an elderly couple to do this when he could have gotten someone more powerful?"

"Because he thought it would fool us. And it almost did." Burnett frowned. "From now on, we're going to have to be more careful. I'm assigning you a shadow."

"A what?" Kylie was certain she wasn't going to like this.

"A shadow," Holiday said. "Someone who stays by your side at all times."

Yup, she was right. She didn't like it.

“I’ll do it,” Lucas said.

“No, I’ll do it,” another deep voice said from the open doorway.

Derek’s voice sent sharp little needles of hurt into Kylie’s chest. She looked up and stared into his greenish—almost hazel—eyes.

Her heart jerked as she soaked in his image. His brown hair was a little mussed, as if he ran his hands through it one too many times. His faded T-shirt clung to his wide chest, and his favorite worn jeans hugged his waist and legs. His gaze pulled her attention up again, so much emotion reflected in those eyes. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed him until now.

Right now.

She wanted to go to him, to lean against him. To assure herself he was okay.

The warmth from Lucas’s shoulder pressed closer.

She saw the slightest narrowing in Derek’s eyes, as if he noted how close Lucas stood. Then Derek frowned.

A storm of emotions swirled inside Kylie. One emotion stood out more than the others. Anger. Derek had no right to be upset about how close Lucas stood to her. He’d walked away, even when she’d begged him not to leave. So why did she feel the urge to add an inch or two between her and Lucas?

“I think you’ve done enough by getting that P.I. involved.” Lucas’s blue eyes drilled into Derek.

Derek’s posture instantly went defensive. “Mr. Smith isn’t behind this.”

“Maybe not,” Lucas said, his voice tight, “but it was through him that trouble arrived.”

The tension in the air thickened so much, it made breathing a chore.

Burnett looked at Lucas. “There’s no reason to lay blame.”

“Burnett’s right,” Kylie said. “Besides, I’m the one who contacted Mr. Smith.” She felt Lucas tense beside her and suspected he didn’t like her standing up for Derek. She wasn’t sure she liked doing it, not when her anger toward Derek still bumped around her chest. Nevertheless, she wouldn’t let Derek get blamed for trying to help her. She continued to stare at the half-fae, wishing she could read his thoughts—or at least his emotions—the way he could read everyone else’s. “Is Mr. Smith okay?”

Derek met her gaze again. Anger flashed in the gold flecks of his eyes. She didn't know if he was reflecting her emotions or if he was angry himself. Probably both. "He's going to live." His gaze left hers, and emptiness swelled in her chest. And something told her it was a feeling she'd have to get used to because nothing had changed between them.

Nothing.

"I can shadow Kylie," Della said.

"Me too," said Miranda.

Burnett looked at the two of them. "Since you are in the cabin with her, you two will have your turns."

"She'll be safer with me," Lucas said.

"Get real!" muttered Della.

"Ditto," Miranda added, and held out her pinky as if pointing out her weapon.

Kylie looked from Miranda to Della and then on to Derek and Lucas. Unreal. They were talking about her as if she weren't even here. Still, she knew they were just trying to help, and she loved them all for it. Well, she would when she stopped feeling pissed off.

Burnett looked back at Lucas and then at Derek. "I'm concerned that both of you might be too close to this."

"Which is why we'd be good at it," Derek said.

"Which is why *I'd* be good at it," countered Lucas.

Derek shot Lucas a dirty look. "You're a real jerk, Parker."

Both guys started slinging insults.

"For cripes' sakes, guys!" Kylie snapped. "This is getting—"

"Stop it!" Burnett ordered. And just like that, Derek and Lucas both fell silent. "This is what I mean. Both of you have other agendas where Kylie is concerned."

Kylie felt her cheeks redden, more from anger than embarrassment. "Here's an idea. Maybe somebody should ask me what I think about—"

"That's ridiculous," snarled Lucas. She blinked at him for a moment until she realized he was referring to Burnett's comment, not hers.

Burnett's shoulders grew tighter and his gaze shot from Lucas to Derek.

“Right now, I don’t think either of you would be focusing on protecting when you’re with her. I’m not saying you won’t be asked to help in the future, but right now—”

“Still ridiculous.” Lucas stiffened beside Kylie, and she could swear she felt his temperature go up a degree or two. “I would die before—”

“As would I,” Derek barked out.

“And my job is to make sure no one dies,” Brunett countered.

At least on that point, Kylie could agree with Burnett.

* * *

An hour later, after Burnett and Holiday went back to the office to assign Kylie shadows, Kylie lay shivering in her bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering when and how her life had gotten so out of control. Right after Burnett left, Lucas had been summoned again by his pack. With regret in his blue eyes, and maybe even still a little anger at her for standing up for Derek, he told her he would see her as soon as his pack business was handled. Kylie hadn’t begrudged him going; she’d kind of needed to be alone. But she couldn’t help remembering what Fredericka had said. *Lucas’s bloodline is pure, he values that. The forefathers value that, too. They’ve made that clear.* Were those just words cast out to cause Kylie doubt? Or was there something going on?

Kylie closed her eyes and moaned. Socks burrowed deeper under the covers at her side, while a dead bald woman paced around the room, jabbering about how she couldn’t remember shit. Kylie released a deep breath, and steam rose from her lips and slowly snaked up to the ceiling.

“*Can’t remember,*” the ghost muttered. “*Nothing but a blank.*”

Little did the woman know that Kylie kind of envied her right now. She wished she could forget. Forget that look of anger she’d spotted in Derek’s eyes, forget the sudden tension she’d felt in Lucas’s body when she stood up for Derek. Forget that she very well might be responsible for killing an elderly couple and getting the P.I., Mr. Smith, sent to the hospital.

“*What’s it called when you can’t remember who you are? Isn’t there a word for that?*” the spirit asked.

“Amnesia.” Kylie considered telling Jane Doe—the spirit needed a name, and Jane Doe was as good as any—that her memory loss might be more about the eight-inch scar running across her head than your average amnesia. Then again, Kylie supposed the reason Jane couldn’t remember didn’t matter. The fact that she had no memory was the problem. How the hell was Kylie supposed to help a ghost who didn’t even know who she was?

Kylie suspected that if she asked Holiday that question, the camp leader would say to start looking for clues in what the woman did and the way she was dressed. The jeans and T-shirt the woman wore didn’t give much of a clue. As for the bald head and scar, yeah, that might be a clue. However, when Kylie first met the woman, she’d had hair and looked as if her abdomen had been ripped open. Was that a clue, too?

Heck, Kylie wasn’t even sure if the woman knew she was dead. Just coming out and asking her seemed a little rude.

“I just don’t get why I can’t remember,” Jane said.

Kylie pressed her palm to her aching temple. She was so not in the mood to deal with this right now. Not that she had a choice. So far, ghosts didn’t seem to respond to rain-check requests.

“Are you listening to me?” the woman asked.

Opening her eyes, Kylie sat up a bit. Socks’s fluffy black-and-white tail fell out from under the sheet. “I am, I just—”

“Does your head hurt, too?”

Kylie looked up at the woman’s angry scar. “A little.” She pulled up her quilt from the end of the bed to ward off the chill. “But I’ve just got boy troubles.”

“Boy troubles?” Jane frowned. *“Be careful. Boys—and men—can really hurt you.”* The words sounded heartfelt. Was this another clue?

“Did someone hurt you?” Kylie asked.

The woman stopped moving, and her brow crinkled. *“Maybe. I don’t remember.”*

“Think hard. I mean, you said it like you remembered something.” The sooner Kylie got the ghost to remember who she was, the sooner she could discover what she needed and help her move on.

The spirit placed her index finger on her forehead. “No. Nothing. It’s empty up here.” She moved her hand to the side of her scalp and traced a finger over her scar. Kylie wasn’t sure if she was just discovering it or not.

“Do you remember what happened? How you got that cut on your head?” *How you died?* Holiday had explained that a lot of the time when a death had been sudden or traumatic, the spirit’s ability to recall it was difficult. However, to help them cross over, the details of their deaths might be important.

“No.” Jane went back to pacing. “*I hate not knowing.*”

After a few more laps around the room, she stopped talking and Kylie went back to thinking about Derek, about how her heart had lurched at the sight of him. She couldn’t help but wonder if that meant her feelings for Lucas were not as important as she’d originally worried they might be.

Suddenly the ghost stopped at the end of the bed and stared at Kylie. “*I gave you the message, didn’t I?*”

Kylie sat up a bit. “You mentioned it, but what was it again?” Perhaps the message wasn’t really a message, but a clue.

“*Someone lives; someone dies.*” Her tone dropped to a whisper and sounded like something out of a scary movie. “*That’s what they said to tell you.*”

Socks, as if responding to the grim note in the spirit’s voice, nestled closer.

“Do you by any chance know what that means?” Reaching under the covers, Kylie gently pushed the skunk’s nose away from her ribs. Considering the little fellow was afraid of ghosts, fate had really screwed up by pairing them together.

“I...” The spirit rolled her eyes as if trying to think. “*They didn’t say.*”

“Who are ‘they’?” Kylie was concerned by the mention of death, but considering she was dealing with an amnesiac ghost, she wasn’t so sure how much stock she could put into the message.

Jane inched closer, moving down the side of the bed, her light green eyes filled with fear. “*You know who it’s from.*”

“No, I don’t know.”

The spirit bit down on her lip as if saying the name caused discomfort. Then she leaned down, bringing her slightly blue lips only a few inches from Kylie's face. "*The death angels.*" Icy crystals floated from her lips and cascaded down onto Kylie's quilt.

Socks bolted from beneath the covers, onto the floor, and under the bed.

"The death angels?" Kylie wrapped her mind around the answer. "How do you know about them?" It suddenly dawned on her that she hadn't checked to see if the woman was a supernatural.

Staring at the spirit's forehead, Kylie tightened her brows. Nothing. Which had to mean something. Everyone had a brain pattern, didn't they? Even humans. Kylie had seen Daniel's brain pattern, and Holiday had said she'd scanned Nana for one, so Kylie knew ghosts didn't just lose them after death. So why didn't this spirit have a pattern?

Closing her eyes, Kylie squinted harder and refocused. Still nothing. The icy chill of the spirit seemed to grow colder, and it clawed at Kylie's uncovered flesh. Yanking the sheet up to her chin, she shifted back from the spirit and asked the question she hated when people asked it of her.

"What *are* you?"

Chapter Six

An hour later, Kylie paced half-moon circles in her tiny room, making almost the same path as the ghost—the ghost who'd vanished without even trying to answer Kylie's question. But the skittish spirit hadn't faded before Kylie noted the sheer panic on her face.

Not that Kylie didn't empathize with the ghost.

How many times had Kylie heard the same damn question? *What are you?* Or rather, *What the hell are you?* Frankly, she didn't like either version.

But did either question instill panic or fear?

Frustration, maybe, but fear? Okay, maybe in the beginning it had scared her, but only after she'd accepted there was a possibility she wasn't human. Should she assume the spirit suspected she wasn't human? Kylie recalled the look on the spirit's face. It was as if the question sent up a red flag or stirred up some forgotten memory. And not a good memory, either.

An eerie chill filled the air, announcing the return of the ghost, and Kylie hugged herself.

"I'm sorry," Kylie said. "I know you're confused. Believe me, I know how you feel. There's a hell of a lot I'm trying to figure out about myself, too." The cold ebbed away. So the ghost wasn't up to talking. Kylie empathized with her on that point as well.

She had almost run to Holiday with questions about the spirit's lack of a brain pattern. Then, because Kylie suspected Holiday would want to go into all the other issues they needed to discuss, she decided to postpone asking the questions. And by issues, Kylie meant her newly acquired gift of healing,

knocking down concrete walls, and the possibility that she was a protector. The healing and the walls, she might be able to handle. The whole protector/Mother Teresa thing? Nope. That could go unhandled for a while longer.

And it wasn't as if she were procrastinating, as Holiday accused her of so often. She was prioritizing. Right now, her top priority was Derek and the on again/off again signals he put out. How could he want to be her shadow when two weeks ago he wouldn't even look at her? Had he experienced a change of heart? Did she want him to have experienced a change of heart?

She considered it. Remembered how close she'd felt to him when they'd snuck off and he'd kissed her senseless. She even missed how he'd made everything look like a fairy tale. What she wouldn't give to be in a fairy tale right now and not have to deal with all this mess.

But did that mean if he said he was sorry, she would forgive him? After she made a few more laps around her small room, she came to the conclusion that her heart was too damn confused to know what she wanted.

As if to drive the point deeper, she had an instant recall of how it had felt when Lucas kissed her. No fairy-tale visions, but she couldn't, wouldn't, deny that it had felt pretty awesome.

Damn!

She slung herself on the bed. She was so friggin' messed up. She gave her pillow one good punch and then screamed into the fluff down.

One deep breath later, she popped back up. She had to do something. Even if it was the wrong thing. After slipping into her tennis shoes, she grabbed her brush. She gave her blond hair a few swipes, slipped on a clean white tank top, and bolted out of her bedroom.

Della popped up off the sofa. "Hey."

"Hey." Kylie continued moving to the door, not wanting to explain where she was going because hearing herself say it aloud might make her think twice. And she didn't want to think twice; she hadn't really thought it through once yet. But she had to do something. She was tired of being in limbo.

"Where are you going?" Della asked.

“Out.” Kylie reached for the doorknob. Instead, however, she ended up grabbing Della’s waist, because Della had shot across the room in a flash and now stood blocking the door.

“Excuse me.” Kylie tried not to let her mood sound in her voice. As moody as Della was, she had no patience for anyone else’s bad mood. And getting into a pissing contest with Della right now wasn’t in Kylie’s plans.

“Where are *we* going?” Della asked.

“We aren’t going anywhere. I’m going somewhere.”

“I gotta come, too.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, she does.” Miranda stepped out of her bedroom. “Kylie Galen, meet your first shadow, Della Tsang.”

“At your service.” Della’s tone dripped with sarcasm. She even gave a little bow.

“Oh, screw this!” Kylie said. “I’m not leaving the camp. I’ll be fine.”

Della frowned. “You’re not leaving the cabin unless I come with you.” Her right hand landed on her right hip as if to punctuate her tone.

Kylie inhaled and tried to calm down before this got ugly. “Look, I want to go talk to Derek, okay? And I’m sorry, but I don’t want you with me. This is private.”

Della’s pissed-off expression vanished into something that looked almost like empathy, and she glanced at Miranda. “You still think keeping this from her is the best thing?”

“Oh hell.” Miranda plopped down on the sofa. “Maybe you’re right. But don’t just tell her, show her.”

Kylie looked back at Miranda and instantly recalled her friends acting all secretive right before Burnett had charged into the cabin. “Keep what from me? Show me what?”

Della snatched her phone from her jeans pocket and started keying in something. “I got it from Chan. I wanted to tell you right away, but Miranda said with you being kidnapped and all that you had enough on your plate.”

“Got what?” Kylie leaned down almost nose to nose with the vamp. Her patience had been stretched to the max.

“Jeez.” Della lunged back. “Patience. You’re acting like it’s a full moon again.” She studied Kylie. “It’s not, is it?” Then Della looked back at Miranda, who was still stretched out on the sofa. “Is it time for the wolves to have PMS yet?”

Kylie considered the question, almost afraid Della might be right. Was the moon cycle making her feel out of sorts, or was it everything that had happened the last few days?

“No.” Miranda popped up and moved in. “We got another week before we have to deal with lunar PMS.”

Kylie frowned. She hadn’t morphed into a wolf the last full moon, but it appeared she’d experienced the typical mood swings that affected weres right before their shift. And obviously her two roommates still considered it a possibility that she might wind up being a werewolf. Not that Kylie thought the consideration didn’t have merit. At this point, she could turn out to be just about anything.

“Somebody better start talking,” Kylie said. “And fast.”

“Good Lord!” Della snapped back. “I’m trying to find it. Here it is.” She looked up. “You see, my cousin Chan sent me a couple of images and asked if this was one of our campers. You know he lives with that vampire commune in Pennsylvania, right?”

She held out the phone and Kylie looked at the image. “That’s Derek.” A few seconds passed. “What was Derek doing in Pennsylvania?” Then again, she didn’t know where the FRU had sent him or where the half-fae had gone looking for his dad.

“I have a better question.” Della pulled back the phone, hit another button, and then held it back out for Kylie to see. “What’s Derek doing sucking face with a vampire in Pennsylvania?”

Kylie’s heart jolted when she saw Derek lip-locked with a dark-haired girl. And it wasn’t just their lips that were locked. The girl’s legs were wrapped around his waist, while Derek’s hands—obviously holding the brunette up and close—were placed on her cute little jeans-covered butt.

An ache settled in Kylie’s chest. “Who ... how ... what?”

“I asked the who question,” Della said. “Her name is Ellie Mason and she

was new to their vampire commune. Chan said someone mentioned Derek was from Shadow Falls and he just wanted to see if his source was telling the truth.”

Ellie? Kylie recalled Derek telling her he’d dated a vampire named Ellie. She also recalled he’d told her that he’d given Ellie blood. Odd how she hadn’t even known she’d remembered it, but now it seemed carved into her memory bank. “Ellie.” The word leaving her lips caused a sharp and painful yank on her heartstrings. The heartstrings must be connected to her emotions, because about a dozen different ones started flapping around her chest like wild birds going after a swarm of moths. Anger, jealousy, betrayal, distrust ... the list went on.

“I need this.” She took Della’s phone and tried to push Della out of the way. Not that her effort got her anywhere. Della stood cemented in place.

“Sorry. I still can’t let you go alone,” Della said. “Seriously, I’m your shadow.”

“Fine, come. Just don’t get in my way! And stay back. Way back. I need to talk to him alone.” Tears prickled Kylie’s eyes.

Tears of jealousy, betrayal, and frustration.

Tears of knowing that she had no right to feel any of those emotions. She wouldn’t let herself cry. But she still felt those tears. Felt them as she swallowed them down her throat and they burned her chest.

* * *

Phone gripped tight, Kylie took off through the woods toward Derek’s cabin, hoping that he was there. She didn’t have a clue what she’d say when she saw him. She didn’t want to think; she just wanted to get there. She leapt over thornbushes, ducked under low-hanging branches, and made darn good speed. Della’s footfalls sounded behind her, staying close—her friend took her job as shadow seriously.

Too seriously.

The thud of Kylie’s feet hitting the earth echoed, and the smell of rain hung in the air. A summer storm brewed somewhere in the distance. But not too far, because thunder rumbled overhead.

Silence followed one particularly big boom. A flash of lightning sent sprays of sizzling silver light dancing through the leaves to the moist earth. Kylie kept running, kept hurting. She could feel the storm, the energy, the power of it, in the air. More thunder followed.

Suddenly, a loud rustle sounded off to her right, and a large deer—a buck with antlers big enough to decorate a hunter’s wall—darted out and jolted to a stop in the middle of her path. Shocked, she came to an abrupt stop, too. A few more inches and she might have impaled herself on the beast’s antlers. She hadn’t caught her breath when a bolt of lightning shot down and struck the trunk of an old tree buried only a foot past the buck. The light still sizzled when Kylie felt Della slam into her.

“What the hell?” Della said.

The buck reared his head back, the heavy antlers dropped forward almost in a threat, and then he shot off. But not before Kylie felt the beast’s cold and somehow evil gaze.

The hair on the back of her neck rose. That calculating gaze meant something. Like the look the eagle gave her earlier. She pulled oxygen into her lungs and hoped it would clear her mind and she might realize she was wrong.

She didn’t want to add something else to her list of things to figure out. But the air in her lungs didn’t help.

The ground still sizzled and popped as tiny sparks danced around the trunk that had taken the direct hit. The smell of burnt wood and oncoming rain flavored the air. Kylie wasn’t sure if she imagined it or not, but she felt a few currents of energy sting the heels of her feet.

“That was creepy,” Della said.

“Yeah.”

“Damn, it almost hit you!”

“But it didn’t.” Kylie stared at the phone in her hand and remembered Derek.

“Damn,” Della repeated. “If the deer hadn’t shown up...”

“Doesn’t matter.” And Kylie wanted it to be so. She heard the sound of driving rain pelting down on the leaves above her before she felt it sting her

skin. The day had almost turned to night. The storm had arrived, and it matched her mood. She curled her hand around Della's phone, protecting it from the rain, and took off again at a dead run.

In a few minutes, barely winded but wet, Kylie jogged up onto Derek's porch while Della hung back. Kylie's second step brought back a memory. She'd come here looking for Derek once before and had seen blood on his porch. She'd thought he'd been attacked and had barged in only to find him ... in the shower.

She'd gotten an eyeful that day, and after he'd gotten dressed, they'd sat here, leaning against the cabin, and talked.

Shared.

Laughed.

She couldn't ever remember feeling closer to anyone. How could things have changed between them so quickly?

She moved to the door and knocked. The door swung open, and Chris—Derek's vampire cabin mate—stood there. “Hey.” His eyes widened and lowered. “Wet T-shirt contest?” he teased.

Kylie looked down, sending heavy strands of wet hair dancing around her shoulders. Her white tank and thin bra were almost invisible. She frowned and pulled her hair in front of her breasts.

“Is Derek here?”

“Yup,” he said. “If he'll come to the door is another thing. He's been brooding in his room since he got back.” He looked over his shoulder and called out, “Derek, you got company.”

Not wanting to stand there to be ogled by Chris, Kylie stepped back from the door and waited at the edge of the porch. Still trying to control her heartbeat, she peeled her soaked shirt from her chest and flapped the fabric back and forth, hoping it would dry.

In a few minutes, familiar footsteps moved to the door. She turned around and faced Derek and had to will herself not to run and throw herself into his arms.

She took one step toward him, then stopped herself. If he rejected her, it would hurt so damn much.

Chapter Seven

Derek ran a nervous hand through his hair. Hair that looked longer than when he left. And softer. She could remember brushing it back from his brow then, and she longed to do it again. She wanted to hit the rewind button and go back to the way things were before. When things between them had been so good. But life didn't have a rewind button.

"Hey." He tucked his hands into his jeans pockets.

"Hey." Her heart raced a little faster and hurt more at the sight of him. She tried not to notice things like the muscles in his arms or how tightly his T-shirt hugged his chest. She inhaled.

While it had stopped raining, the scent of rain still clung to her clothes and hair. It still flavored the air. But it didn't hide the scent that she recognized as Derek.

She felt the phone in her hand and looked down at it.

"Sorry about not calling you back earlier," he said, as if he thought that was why she was here. "I had cut my phone off when I was in the hospital with Brit."

She nodded, not completely sure if she believed him, and felt the rise of emotion in her throat. Her sinuses stung. But she'd be damned if she would cry. At least not now. At least not here.

"Where did you go when you left Shadow Falls?" she asked.

"Just on a job assignment for Burnett." He hesitated. "I'm not really supposed to talk about it."

That hurt. She knew he was probably telling the truth, but there had been

a time she hadn't believed they kept secrets from each other.

His gaze met hers and she could see the gold flecks meshing into his green irises. She saw emotion there. Hurt, jealousy, betrayal, anger. It struck her right then that everything he felt was what she, too, was feeling.

For a flicker of a second, she told herself he didn't have a right to feel those things; but she'd never been a great liar, not even when she lied to herself. Lucas had kissed her. She had feelings for Lucas, albeit confused feelings, but she still had them for him. How could she be so mad at Derek right now and not accept that he deserved his own anger?

She blinked, and the moment grew more awkward with each beat of silence. "I came here to ask you about..." She held out the phone and then dropped her hand back to her side. "But I suddenly realize you don't owe me an answer. I'm sorry, I..." Unable to finish, she turned to go.

He caught her. No sooner had his touch warmed her skin than he jerked away. And that hurt, too. Was touching her so unpleasant that it caused him to flinch?

"Ask me about what?" He frowned. "What has you so upset?"

"It's nothing. I'm fine." She started to walk away again.

"Damn it, Kylie!" He jumped in front of her. "Don't lie to me. I feel it, remember? I feel everything you feel tenfold. You're really upset about something. You came here to say something to me, so say it."

She hesitated and then turned on Della's phone.

He watched her. "What are you—"

"You'll see." She found the picture and held it out.

His expression shot from angry to ... something different. "Shit." He ran a palm over his face.

"It's okay," Kylie said. "I realize you don't owe me an explanation. Really, I overreacted." She tried to step around him, but he grabbed her again. This time his hand lingered for a few seconds before pulling away.

"Please don't go," he said. "Look, that's Ellie. I told you about her when we first met. I dated her for a while. We ran into each other when I was on the job for Burnett. She was ... she was just happy to see someone she knew."

“Yeah, she looks happy,” Kylie said before she could stop the words, and there was an edge of sarcasm to them.

“It looks worse than it really was,” he said, but he couldn’t hide the guilt that flashed in his eyes.

“You really don’t have to explain,” Kylie said, suddenly realizing how unfair it was to confront him about this. The last thing she’d want right now was him confronting her about Lucas. She closed the phone and tucked it in her pocket. “You don’t—”

“Yes, I do have to explain,” Derek snapped. He drew in a pound of oxygen and hesitated before starting again. “Look, I was going to tell you anyway.”

“No, you weren’t,” she said, finding that impossible to believe. “Not that I blame you. We weren’t really going out. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“I was going to tell you. I don’t have a choice.”

She studied him, not sure what he meant, and she saw more guilt in his eyes.

“Look,” he said. “Ellie’s here. I brought her back to the camp.”

The bolt of lightning that flashed in front of Kylie a few minutes ago had shocked her less than Derek’s admission. But she was pretty damn proud of herself for not letting it show. Then again, she didn’t have to let it show. He could read her, but it didn’t stop her from pretending. And if she pretended long enough, she might even believe it herself.

“That’s good.” She forced a smile.

“I had to, Kylie. She’d run away from home and was living in some hellhole of a commune. She needed help.”

“I’m glad you were there for her,” she said.

“Christ, Kylie! Quit friggin’ pretending like I can’t read you. It’s me, damn it.”

“Then stop reading me.” Kylie’s throat knotted instantly. Tears threatened, but she held them back.

“I wish I could. It would solve all our problems. I wish to God I could stop it!” He swung an angry hand through the air.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He shook his head. "You still don't get it, do you? Being close to you is like sticking my finger into an emotional socket. I don't know why. It wasn't like that in the beginning. I mean, I could feel you more than other people, but this last month, it increased tenfold. When I'm with you, it's like being bombarded ... attacked with emotions. I can't think straight, I can't rationalize. And if Lucas's name came up, I could feel your emotions connected to him and..."

He took another breath. "Maybe what I was feeling was even more than what you were feeling, but ... I just couldn't handle it. And it wasn't just Lucas. If you were upset at your dad, I would feel the hurt you felt and I wanted to kill the bastard. I couldn't handle it anymore."

She stepped back, hoping a few inches away from her would help him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did, or I tried to. You just didn't hear me. Oh, hell, I probably didn't make it clear because I didn't understand it. I still don't ... understand it. I just know that being close to you makes me crazy." He did another pass of his fingers through his hair. "I hoped when I got back it would have changed."

"But it hasn't?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Have you asked Holiday about it?" A breeze stirred her wet hair, but it brought with it the smell of sunshine, as if the storm had passed. If only the storm inside her had done the same.

"No. I don't want to..."

"Ask her for help," she finished for him. A spray of bright sunlight snuck behind a low-hanging cloud and caused her to blink.

"It's not just that. I don't want her trying to get inside my head to read my emotions. I've seen things in other people's minds that they don't want me to see. I prefer to keep mine private. It's sort of like seeing someone naked." He half smiled.

She tried to respond with a smile, but she couldn't quite do it. First, because this meant his pride was more important to him than trying to fix the problem. And second, because she couldn't help wondering how many of

those naked emotions were about her and how many of them were about Ellie.

“We’re really mostly just friends, now,” Derek said, obviously picking up on her jealousy.

Mostly? She wondered how one defined “mostly” friends? The kiss must have happened in one of the “unmostly” moments. Then she recalled the kiss she’d shared with Lucas, and guilt ran through her for judging Derek.

She met his gaze again. “You don’t have to explain it.”

He studied her, and God help her, because she knew he was picking apart her emotions. Reading her jealousy, followed by her thread of guilt, and then her feelings of being unfair to him. And he was probably figuring out what had happened, too.

He frowned and stepped back as if standing too close to her caused him pain. “So you and Lucas...?”

The thread she’d tried to push back suddenly tied itself in a big knot in her chest. She searched for the right way to answer, then decided to borrow his. “Mostly friends.”

Hurt flashed in his eyes, and she knew he understood exactly what she meant. Though she hadn’t really said it to hurt him, she tried again. “I’m still trying to sort through things,” she offered, hoping to soften the blow, because damn it, she knew exactly how he felt. Unknowingly, they had done the same thing to each other.

He nodded and met her gaze. “This is killing me.”

The pain in his eyes echoed his words, and the knot in her chest tightened. The tears she vowed not to cry stung her eyes again.

“Same here.” Her tonsils seemed to swell in her throat. “I should go.” She stepped back.

“Wait. Aren’t you supposed to have a shadow with you?”

For some reason, his question reminded her of the bolt of lightning. “Della’s close by.”

“And listening.” He frowned.

“I told her not to.”

“Right.” Cynicism filled his voice.

Kylie took another step back, but the question slipped out before she could stop it. “Why did you offer to shadow me if it’s so hard to be close to me?”

He scrubbed his tennis shoe on the wooden planks of the porch. “Because keeping you safe is more important than anything else.” He inhaled. “But maybe Burnett’s right. I’m too close to this. The fact that someone wants to hurt you makes me feel crazy.” He looked down and then up again. “Besides, you have ... others who claim to feel the same way.” Jealousy sounded in his voice.

She wasn’t sure how to answer, so she didn’t.

“You do know that Brit, the P.I., isn’t behind this. I don’t know how anyone got to him.”

Kylie recalled that Lucas had accused the P.I. of being part of the problem. “I’m not blaming him. I’m sorry he got hurt. Is he really okay?”

Derek nodded. “Yeah.”

“Does he remember anything?” she asked, hoping all this could be solved that easily.

“No. And that’s strange. It’s almost as if he’s had his memory erased. And there aren’t many people who can do that.”

“Maybe it’s just a concussion.”

“That’s what the doctor thinks and what Burnett believes, but...” He ran another hand through his hair. “Be careful, Kylie. I heard about what happened—about that Mario guy and his grandson.” His gaze dropped. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you.”

“You had to do what Burnett wanted,” she said, even though she clearly remembered begging him not to go.

“I’m serious about you being careful. I just think there could be more to all this than meets the eye.”

“More like what?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I can’t explain it. I just remember fighting with that rogue at the Wild Life Park that night, and he seemed different. Eerie different.”

“I got the same feeling,” she confessed.

“Be careful.” He reached out as if to touch her, then pulled back.

“I will.” She watched him stick his hands into his pockets. Their gazes met again, and it took everything Kylie had not to insist he talk to Holiday and try to fix the problem with reading her emotions too strongly. Instead she walked away. Something told her it was the right thing.

But could someone please tell her why doing the right thing hurt so damn much?

* * *

The moment Kylie hit the edge of the woods, she started running, wanting to outrun the living, breathing ache in her chest. In a few seconds, Della was beside her.

“You okay?” Her feet thudded in rhythm with Kylie’s own footfalls.

“No,” Kylie answered, and ducked beneath a tree limb.

“Where are we going?” Della asked a few minutes later when Kylie turned and headed in the opposite direction of their cabin.

“I want to run,” Kylie said.

“Okay.” Della stayed beside her.

They ran and ran. When Kylie spotted the fence at the end of the Shadow Falls property line, she stopped and dropped to the ground. Curling her arms around her bent legs, she rested her forehead on her knees. Her lungs worked overtime as she fed them wood-scented air that still carried the scent of rain.

Della, not even winded, sat beside her. The sounds of the forest surrounded them—a bird stirred in the trees, some unnamed creature shuffled in some underbrush not far away. But mostly Kylie heard her own heart racing, sending gushing sounds through her ears.

“Your heart’s still beating fast,” Della said.

“I know.” Kylie kept her face down.

“He was telling the truth.”

Kylie knew Della was talking about Derek. “I know.”

“I tried not to listen, but it was impossible. I considered moving farther away, but then I wouldn’t be doing my job as shadow.”

Kylie raised her head. Her gaze went to the fence and she realized where

they were. Just through the barbed wire were the dinosaur tracks. And the creek where Lucas had kissed her. She let herself think about it for a second, because thinking about Derek hurt.

Then she looked back at Della. "You listen in on my private conversations, but then you don't share."

"Share what?" Della sounded clueless.

Kylie raised an eyebrow. "What happened while you were at home? I know you were lying. So does Miranda."

"Oh, that." She pulled a long blade of grass from the ground and started tying it around her finger.

Kylie thought Della wasn't going to answer, and then ... "I went to see Lee."

Kylie suspected that Della hadn't stopped caring for her ex. Not that Della had admitted to it. "And?"

"He's practically engaged to another girl. His parents are pushing him to make it official. They like her." The pain in Della's voice matched the pain Kylie felt for Derek.

Kylie hugged her knees. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Della said. "It's for the best. He could have never accepted me being a vampire."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt." And damn if Kylie didn't know that for a fact.

Della hesitated. "She's a hundred percent Asian. Not a mishmosh like me."

"He said that?" Kylie really disliked this guy.

"Not exactly, but he said his parents had pushed him to date her. And I know they didn't like me because I'm half white."

"You need to move on," Kylie said.

"I already have." Della tossed the grass back to the ground.

It was a lie, but Kylie didn't think calling Della on it would do any good. Kylie leaned back and stared up at the trees. The moisture from the recent rain soaked into her clothes, but she didn't care. The coolness felt good in the Texas heat. A blue jay flitted from one limb to another in the tree. Kylie's

emotions seemed to be doing the same.

She studied the bird, so happy, so innocent and trouble-free. Della released an exaggerated breath, as if she were still thinking about Lee.

“Steve likes you,” Kylie said.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Yes, he does.” Kylie glanced at Della. “I saw him looking for you today when we were in the dining hall. You should go for it.”

“If he likes me, he’ll come to me.”

“I don’t mean throw yourself at him. Just be nice. Make yourself more approachable.”

“I’m approachable,” Della said.

About as much as a rattlesnake, Kylie thought.

Della picked up another blade of grass and then lay back on the ground beside Kylie. Their shoulders almost touched. “It’s not easy.”

“Believe me,” Kylie said. “I know.”

They lay stretched out on the damp ground for several long minutes without talking. The sun leaked light through the trees and created shimmering golden shadows throughout the woods. Through the leaves, Kylie saw the sky painted in an array of stormy-looking clouds in a variety of colors. Her mind went round and round and somehow landed back on Derek.

“I can’t believe he brought Ellie with him.” The idea of having to see Derek with Ellie made Kylie’s chest tighten.

“Yeah, that’ll be tough. I mean, if I had to see Lee with his girlfriend, I’d end up killing someone.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Kylie sat up, pulled her hair over one shoulder, and removed a few clinging twigs. “You’d do exactly what I’m going to do.”

“What’s that?” Della sat up.

“Pretend it doesn’t hurt, and hope like hell that one day it doesn’t anymore.”

“Nope. I’d rather kill someone.” Della stood and dusted off the wet grass that clung to her backside. Then she looked down at Kylie. “So does this mean you’re actually going to give Lucas a real chance?”

Kylie stood up and gave her own butt a few swipes to dislodge most of

the grass. “Maybe. If it’s what he wants, too.”

“If? Didn’t you hear him getting pissy with Burnett about shadowing you? He’s got it bad for you. I mean, I know you’re hurting over Derek, but he doesn’t deserve you angsty over him. You have an opportunity with Lucas. Go for it.”

She hesitated to say anything, but it spilled out. “Fredericka said something that made it sound like his pack doesn’t want us seeing each other.”

“Don’t listen to anything that b with an itch says. She’ll say anything to come between you and Lucas.”

Kylie nodded, knowing that Della was right. Or at least she hoped she was.

The bird in the tree called out. Kylie looked up and wondered if that was a mating call. Did birds experience romance? Did they ever suffer from broken hearts? She had to admit it looked awfully lonely up in the tree alone. Almost as lonely as it was where she stood.

“Let’s make a deal,” Della said. “You give Lucas a chance and I’ll give Steve a chance.”

Kylie smiled. “Are you that worried about me, or do you just need an excuse to go after the good-looking shape-shifter?”

“Maybe both.” Della grinned. “We got a deal?”

Kylie considered it, and mentally she stopped trying to hang on, stopped trying to fix something that didn’t seem fixable, and opened herself up to other possibilities. “Yeah.”

Della started walking, and Kylie took a step. Then the cold grabbed her. She turned and watched Jane Doe’s spirit materialize in the beam of sunlight.

The woman met Kylie’s gaze. “*Do you know?*”

“Know what?” Kylie asked.

Della turned around. “What?” She stared at Kylie for a second and then said, “Oh shit. Not again.” She backed up. “I’m not freaking out. I’m not. Really, I’m not freaking out.”

Kylie held up a hand to silence Della and stared at the spirit as she edged closer.

“Do you know what I am?” Jane spoke in a hushed tone that seemed to whisper through the trees. The blue jay in the tree chirped extra loud.

“No,” Kylie said. “I don’t.” Then the bird chirped oddly and fell from the tree and landed with a lifeless thud at the spirit’s feet.

Chapter Eight

“What was that?” Della demanded.

Kylie stared at the bird. It didn’t move. Didn’t make a noise. Was it...? Her heart squeezed.

“Screw this! It’s raining dead birds. Now I’m freaking out. Can we leave, please?”

The spirit looked from the blue jay to Kylie. “*Is it dead?*” She knelt and stared at it. When she looked up, she had tears in her eyes. “*It’s dead. Just like me. Just like the death angels warned. Someone lives and someone dies.*”

“No one is going to die.”

Kylie picked up the limp bird. Its neck flopped to one side. She remembered seeing the bird so full of life just moments before. What happened? She looked back at the spirit. “Did you kill it?”

“No, I didn’t kill it,” Della said. “Wait, you aren’t talking to me, are you? Is this a death angel or just a ghost?”

“No.” Jane looked around as if she were as frightened as Della. She moved closer. “*The others did. They’re not nice.*”

Kylie shivered from the ghostly cold. “What others?”

“*Shh.*” The spirit lifted her finger to her lips. “*They’re coming.*” She faded away.

Della stood back and continued to stare. Kylie cupped her hands around the blue jay. She’d healed Sara. Was it possible that she might be able to...?

Kylie closed her eyes and tried to think healing thoughts.

The bird started quivering. Kylie opened her hands and its wings spread.

Its feathers, a bright royal blue and white, caught a spray of sunshine and shimmered in the light, then the bird lunged to its feet and flew away. Kylie watched it disappear into the tops of the trees, her emotions ambivalent. On the one hand, she'd given something life, and that was cool. On the other ... Well, it was just too freaky.

"Did you do what I think you did?" Della asked. "Did you just bring that dead bird back to life?"

Kylie looked up. "I'm not sure." Suddenly silence filled the forest. The spirit's words echoed in Kylie's head. *They're coming.*

The lack of noise seemed ominous.

She looked at Della. "Can you sense anyone here?"

Della sniffed the air. "No. But it's too damn quiet."

"We should go," Kylie whispered.

"You don't have to ask me twice." Della tore out.

Kylie was right behind her, hoping to outrun the silence, the feeling of danger, and another startling realization about her powers.

* * *

"You sure it was dead?" Holiday asked.

"I didn't listen to its heartbeat." Kylie paced the small office. "But do birds regularly fall out of trees unconscious?"

Holiday bit back a smile. "I don't think so."

For some reason, this news didn't seem near as startling to her camp leader as it did to Kylie.

Kylie, still winded from her run, had left the woods and come straight to find Holiday. Della, who took the job of shadowing seriously, waited outside.

"The ghost was there. Do you think her presence did this? Maybe it had nothing to do with me. The bird came back to life when she left. So maybe it was just her."

"It could be. However, I've never heard of a ghost's presence killing wildlife, even temporarily. Maybe the bird was just stunned. Maybe all this is a clue."

"To what?" Kylie asked, frustrated.

“Her identity, maybe.”

Kylie stopped in front of the desk. “How is a bird dying going to tell me who she is?”

“Sometimes the spirits have crazy ways of communicating.”

Kylie rolled a few things around her already confused mind, and then she remembered. “Jane Doe has no brain pattern. Nothing. It’s blank.”

“Blank?” This time Holiday appeared genuinely puzzled.

“Yeah. I kept trying to refocus, thinking I was ... just not seeing it right. Because I thought we all had brain patterns, like fingerprints.” Kylie dropped in the chair across from the camp leader.

“I’ve never seen one that’s blank, but...”

“I think she’s supernatural.” Kylie chewed on the side of her lip.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because she knew about the death angels.”

Holiday appeared to consider it. “She probably heard you talking about them.”

“Maybe. But ... she’s really scared of something.”

“Dying can be scary if you’re not ready.”

“I think it’s more,” Kylie said.

“More like what?”

“I don’t know yet. But it’s ... something.”

“Wait.” Holiday pressed a hand on the desk. “Didn’t you tell me she had some kind of brain operation?”

“Yes.” Kylie touched her temple. “She has stitches and her head is shaved.”

“It’s probably a tumor. I’ve never seen anyone with one, but I’ve heard tumors can make one’s brain pattern do strange things.”

“But can a tumor make it disappear?” Kylie asked. “And what about her getting freaked out when I asked her what she was? I really think she’s supernatural.”

“I’m not saying she isn’t one of us, but ... rarely do we supernaturals hang around long after we pass. In all my years of dealing with ghosts, I’ve only had three supernaturals.”

“But my dad hung around.”

“But he had a very big reason to hang on. To check in on you.”

Kylie pulled her leg up in the chair and hugged her shin. Her mind zipped from the ghost to her dad to the ghost again. “I don’t know ... There’s something about her that’s ... different. Remember, she told me she had messages from others.”

“That’s not unusual. I often get spirits who tell me something for someone else.” Holiday rolled a pencil between her hands.

“But from the death angels?” Kylie asked.

“No, but like I said, she could have heard you mention the death angels and simply be confusing things. Has she mentioned the message again?”

“Yeah. Every time, like it’s important.” Kylie frowned. “She keeps saying that someone lives and someone dies. And I don’t like the die part.” She hugged her knee tighter.

“Me either,” Holiday said. “But as you’ve learned, ghosts aren’t the best communicators. So don’t panic. Just keep asking questions and watching for clues.”

“Is it possible that the only reason she’s here is to give me this message?”

“Rarely. She’s probably here for something else.”

Kylie frowned. “Then how the heck am I going to help her if she doesn’t even remember who she is?”

Holiday dropped her chin in the palm of her hand. “I think this might be a difficult one.”

“As if any that I’ve had have been easy.” Kylie tightened her hold on her leg. “There’s one thing I want to check out.”

“What’s that?”

“Fallen Cemetery. I know you said she could have come from anywhere, but I still find it odd that this is where she popped into my mom’s car.”

Holiday pinched her brows together. “I’m not going to tell you not to go, but cemeteries aren’t the best place for a ghost whisperer. By now you should be able to see more than just one ghost, and a lot of ghosts hang around the cemeteries for a long time.”

Kylie remembered. “At Nana’s funeral I got a terrible headache.”

“That was probably them trying to get through to you. And that was before you could see them. Sometimes they can come at you all at once and it gets ... difficult.”

“But if that’s the only lead I have, I have to try.”

“You don’t have to,” Holiday argued. “In the beginning, I wouldn’t have ever refused to help a spirit. But I learned that sometimes you have to say no for your own sanity.”

“But they’ll just keep coming back.”

Holiday tilted her head a bit. “Don’t you remember us talking about how to shut them out?”

Kylie frowned. “I remember, but I haven’t mastered that so well.”

“We could go over it again, but...” Holiday looked at her watch. “I have an appointment—”

“I want to help her. There’s something about her.” Kylie might not have amnesia, but there was so much about her life she didn’t know, things she wanted to know.

Holiday nodded. “I understand. And I’ll support whatever you feel is right. But just make sure you check with me before going, and ... as Burnett said earlier, you’re not to go anywhere without a shadow.”

“I’m not too keen on the whole shadow thing,” she said.

“Just until we see how things go.”

Kylie bit down on her lip, remembering the other things she needed to discuss with Holiday. The whole healing and protector issues. Not to mention the questions she had about her sudden overpowering effect on Derek’s emotions.

Then there was ... She would never get rid of the shadows if she confessed her other concerns. But to not discuss them was stupid. And Kylie wasn’t stupid. “Are our security cameras set for ... shape-shifters?”

Holiday leaned forward. “I’m sure they are. Why?”

“It’s probably nothing, but a couple of things happened. They could be nothing, but they didn’t feel like nothing.”

Holiday stopped rolling the pencil in her hands. “What kind of things?”

“When I left to go back to the cabins, I came across a rattlesnake, but I

didn't see it until an eagle swooped down and snatched it up. It was freaky."

"Did it go after you?" Concern darkened her green eyes.

"No, it never got the chance. But the whole thing was just strange."

"Strange like how?"

"The eagle just swooped down." Kylie suddenly felt as if she were overreacting.

Holiday added, "Rattlesnakes are prevalent this time of year, and I admit seeing an eagle swoop down might be—"

Kylie didn't wait for Holiday to continue. "And then when I went to ... run in the woods, a deer—a big buck—came hurtling onto my path. I stopped and, not a split second later, lightning struck right past the deer. If the deer hadn't stopped me, I might have been hit."

Holiday frowned. "I don't like the sound of this."

"And the deer and the eagle, they ... looked right at me as if they were trying to tell me something."

Holiday's brow wrinkled. "You think you can communicate with animals?"

"No. I don't think that. They looked evil."

Holiday tilted her head to the side. "The deer and the eagle appeared evil?" When Kylie nodded, Holiday looked even more perplexed and worried. "With two of these strange things happening, I can't believe they are accidents. However, if I'm understanding you, both the eagle and the deer saved you from getting hurt. How could they have been evil? If anything, they were protecting you."

Kylie pulled a handful of hair over her shoulder and twisted it. "I know it doesn't make sense, but it felt that way."

Holiday set the pencil on her desk and reached for her phone. "We'd better let Burnett ... Wait." She put down her phone. "Burnett left to have a meeting with the FRU. I don't want to disturb him now, but I'll tell him about this as soon as he gets back."

Kylie heard the front door of the cabin open.

Holiday looked at her watch and frowned. "I have another meeting, but we need to talk more about this. Can you wait until I finish so we can

continue this?”

“I can come back later,” Kylie said, not really wanting to hang out at the office. It would make her feel like a kid sent to the principal’s office. “Oh, does Burnett still need the pictures of my dad? If not, I’d like to have them back.”

“He’s having them tested to see if they are originals or copies. It shouldn’t be more than a few days.”

“Hi,” came an unfamiliar female voice from behind Kylie. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had someone in here. I can wait in the—”

“It’s fine,” Holiday said.

Kylie’s heart did a little tumble when she recognized the brunette as the one who’d been plastered to Derek in the picture on Della’s phone.

“Kylie,” Holiday said, “this is Ellie Mason. She’s signing up for Shadow Falls.”

Showtime, Kylie thought. Time to pretend it didn’t hurt. She forced a smile. “Hi.”

“Are you Kylie Galen?”

Kylie nodded, unsure what to expect.

“Derek told me about you.” She smiled, then tightened her brows to check out Kylie’s brain pattern. “Wow. You do have an odd pattern.” She made a funny face as if embarrassed.

“Yeah,” Kylie said. “Everyone tells me that.” Her forced smile melted.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Derek has nothing but great things to say about you.”

“Don’t believe everything he says.” Kylie attempted to soften her tone because she felt like a bitch for not liking her. But how could she like Ellie when all Kylie could think about was how Ellie was most likely one of the four girls Derek had slept with? Then she wondered if a kiss was all they’d shared in Pennsylvania.

“I always believe Derek. Especially about people.” Ellie took another step inside.

Kylie hated to admit it, but Ellie was pretty. Blue eyes, thick brown hair, and dimples.

Ellie's sincere smile widened. "Derek doesn't tend to exaggerate. And being half-fae, he's a good judge of character. If he likes someone, they deserve it."

Kylie wished she could have disagreed. Not so much because she didn't want to be considered deserving. But because Derek obviously cared for Ellie enough to bring her back here, which meant Ellie was a deserving person.

The being-a-bitch feeling hit again, and Kylie tried to push it back. "Maybe I caught him on an off day." She attempted to put some teasing in her voice and stood up. "I should go."

"Kylie, why don't I drop by your cabin in about half an hour?" Holiday asked, concern deepening her tone.

Kylie nodded.

"And be careful," Holiday said.

"I will." Kylie stopped when she neared Ellie. "Welcome to Shadow Falls." And she tried to mean it.

"Thank you," Ellie said.

* * *

"Is my vampire hearing off? Did you actually say, 'Welcome to Shadow Falls'?" Della asked sarcastically when Kylie got outside. "I would have bitch-slapped her."

"No, you wouldn't have." Kylie noticed the stormy weather had passed.

"Maybe not, but I would have wanted to." Concern shaded Della's eyes.

"And you think I didn't?" Insecurities rained down on Kylie. "She's pretty, isn't she?"

"No," Della said, but Kylie knew it was a lie. Ellie was pretty and nice and she'd probably had sex with Derek.

Kylie's chest swelled with unwanted jealousy, and her mind created an image of Ellie and Derek together. Of them kissing ... of them ...

She started walking toward her cabin. Walking fast. Della stayed with her, but somehow she must have sensed Kylie's mood, because she didn't say anything else.

Kylie got to their cabin without speaking, but once she stepped up onto

the porch, she faced Della. “Do you think they had sex?”

“I...” Della made an odd face.

“I know I shouldn’t care. But I guess I do. And damn it, why does it seem that it all goes back to sex? I’m beginning to hate sex and I haven’t had it yet. I’ve got these images flashing in my head. It’s like a porn movie and I just keep seeing them—”

Della pressed her hand over Kylie’s mouth and shifted her gaze to a point over Kylie’s shoulder.

Kylie reached up and peeled Della’s hand from her lips. “Is someone standing behind me?” She prayed the answer was no.

Della’s sassy smile told Kylie her prayer hadn’t been answered.

Swallowing a lump of embarrassment, she tried to imagine the worst person possible standing behind her. Ellie? Derek? No. She met Della’s eyes again and mouthed the word *Lucas*.

Please. Please. Please don’t let it be Lucas.

Della nodded. Kylie bit back a moan. Not quite ready to face him, she stared out at the woods. Through a maze of trees, she saw the sun slip lower in the horizon. She wished she could follow it and disappear.

“Can you give us a minute?” Lucas’s voice came right over her shoulder.

Knowing it was inevitable, Kylie turned. Her face burned when she recalled what she’d said about a porn movie and her whole “I hate sex” conversation. Great!

“Can’t,” Della answered. “I’m her shadow.”

“Well, I’m taking over,” he said, almost growling.

“It’s okay,” Kylie said to Della.

Della frowned. “If something happens to her on my shift, I swear I’ll be all over your wolf ass.”

“Nothing’s going to happen.” His blue eyes grew darker, and around the edges, Kylie saw flecks of burnt orange, which meant anger.

Kylie couldn’t help wondering if that was targeted at Della or—

“Fine.” Della stormed inside. But not without slamming the door so hard, the porch shook.

Kylie met Lucas’s gaze. He still looked half-pissed.

“Let’s take a walk,” he said.

Kylie recalled how he’d stiffened earlier when she’d taken up for Derek. Was he angry at her, too? The thought of hurting him when he’d risked his life to save her made her stomach clutch. He didn’t deserve that, not that she’d meant to hurt him. But neither did Derek deserve to be blamed for trying to help her.

He started off the porch and looked back.

His eyes were a brighter orange now. Kylie remembered a time she would have freaked out at seeing an angry werewolf. Heck, she remembered a time when she hadn’t believed werewolves existed, angry or not.

“You coming?” Lucas asked.

Chapter Nine

She could say no, but she didn't want to. She followed him. The sun hung low, but its light clung to the sky. However, once they moved into the woods and under the umbrella of the trees, the remnants of daylight faded into dusk. They walked without talking.

She remembered the dead bird and the ghost's announcement that someone else was out there. Fear brushed against Kylie's neck. Almost as if she could feel the hot breath of something evil on her nape, she reached up and tried to brush away the sensation. Everything seemed to grow darker.

"Should we be going into the woods?" She heard a rustle and looked to her left. And she walked right into Lucas's back, unaware that he'd stopped. He turned and she saw him lift up his face as if to sniff the air.

"You're scared of me?" he asked.

Even through the dimness she could see anger in his expression.

"No. I'm scared of ... other things." She didn't know what to call them.

"Scared Derek will hear you went off with me?" His tone came with accusation.

"No."

He swung back around and commenced walking again. She matched his steps. He stopped abruptly and faced her again.

"I said I'd be patient and I will, but I won't be made a fool of."

"I didn't make a fool of you," she insisted.

"You stood up for Derek."

"I just stated the facts. You were wrong to blame Derek." Her throat

tightened again. She'd been fighting tears all day, and this time when they crawled up her throat, she was helpless.

She turned away, hoping to stop them before he saw. But when she reached up to swipe away the first tear, he caught her hand. How he could have moved in front of her without making a sound was unnerving.

He let go of a deep breath. "I didn't mean to upset you, it's just..."

She tried to tell him it wasn't him making her cry, but the concern in his tone had the knot in her throat doubling in size. The next thing she knew she was against his chest, her tears and almost silent sobs being absorbed by his pale blue T-shirt and his extra warm chest.

His arms were around her and she felt his cheek resting on top of her head. She felt safe. Safe and something else. She felt cherished. The way his arms held her, the way every inch of him embraced her—she wanted to stay here. Savor it.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, her face still buried against him. "I shouldn't be sliming up your shirt."

"Is it over?" His words tickled the top of her head.

"Is what over? My crying?" She wasn't ready to give up the wall of muscle or having his arms around her. Nor was she ready to let him see her all red and splotchy.

"No. You and Derek." His tone deepened, and she sensed it was hard for him to even ask the question.

"Yeah." She nodded her head against him.

His arms tightened around her. She almost sighed because it felt so good.

"Then you're welcome to slime my shirt," he said, and the undercurrent of anger vanished. "I don't have a lot of rules, but that's one of them. Only uncommitted girls can slime my shirt."

She chuckled.

"Is that a smile I feel against my chest?" His words stirred her hair.

"A slimy one." She snaked her hand up between their bodies to clear her face before looking up.

"I'll bet it's still beautiful."

He inched back, and in the dark woodsy light, she felt his eyes on her.

“You might lose the bet.” She wanted to cover her face but would feel silly doing it.

“You’re right, I would have lost.” He laughed. “You don’t cry pretty.”

She thumped his solid chest with her palm. He laughed again.

“Come on.” He fitted his hand in hers and started walking again, deeper into the woods. With the night sounds around them, she tuned her ears and waited for it to go silent—for something bad to suddenly appear.

She gave his hand a slight pull. “Let’s go back the other way.”

He turned and studied her. “What are you afraid of?”

“If we walk out of the woods, I’ll tell you.” She tried to make light of the dread gnawing at her gut.

A frown pulled at his brows. “I wouldn’t let anything hurt you.”

“I know, but I’d feel better if we went that way.” She nodded back to the clearing.

“Fine.” He began walking in that direction. “But start talking. Why are you afraid? Is it still the elderly couple?”

“No.” She wished she could see the clearing of the woods ahead, but the night seemed to close in on her.

Suddenly, something dark *whooshed* down from a tree. She lurched back and pulled him with her. Her heart shot up in her throat. She tightened her hand in his, and with everything she had, she started to run. He ran with her, two people moving in one solid, fluid motion, his palm clutched tightly in hers.

* * *

Once they reached the clearing, Kylie stopped, bent over, and hungrily sucked oxygen into her lungs.

Finally rising, she looked at him. Out from under the thicket of the trees, night hadn’t completely fallen and she could make out his features.

He stood there, watching her. He didn’t gasp for air or hold his stomach the way she did. Damn it! He didn’t even look winded.

Curiosity filled his eyes. “It was just an eagle.”

“It was?” She looked up at the sky, which was painted with only a few

lingering colors of sunset, and prayed the bird hadn't followed. Thankfully, only the first few stars of the night twinkled back at her. No eagle. At least she didn't see it.

"Did it follow us?" she asked, remembering he could see better than she could.

"No." He studied her. "Something happened, didn't it."

"Yes. Maybe. Just weird stuff." She realized she still held his hand, and while it was balmy outside, his hand felt nice. It warmed her palm in a good way, like a cup of hot chocolate, a comforting feeling. While his touch didn't hold the magic of the fae to calm one's fear, it did calm her.

"Come on." He went back to running. Fast. Then faster.

Every time she'd push herself to meet his speed, he'd increase it. Then he'd glance at her as if to make sure she wasn't having to work too hard. She got the feeling he was testing her, wanting to see just how fast she could run.

"Where are we going?" she asked, barely able to speak.

"To the creek." His voice sounded even.

His pace kept getting faster. Wanting to impress him, forgetting all about the eagle, she pushed herself to keep going. Finally, he stopped. Not prepared for the halt, she continued forward. She felt the tug on her arm where she still held his hand, and then suddenly his arm swooped around her waist.

Out of energy and off balance, she fell into him and they both went down. Not hard, or at least not for her, because she landed on top of him.

"You okay?" Her heart still pumped, her chest moving up and down as she gasped for air. As her lungs expanded again, she became aware of the intimate way her body rested against his.

He laughed. "Me okay? You're the one who can't breathe." He wrapped his arms around her. His hands rested on the small of her back.

"I can ... breathe." She laughed. Warm contentment filled her, and she realized she liked being with him. Liked being this close. Maybe too much.

She could feel every inch of his body under hers, and it made her even more breathless. She rolled off of him. The earth and grass beneath her back felt cool, especially considering how warm he had been. The sounds of the night, crickets and a few birds, sang around them. She stared through a

curtain of her hair at the midnight blue sky and focused on a star flickering its brightness down from the heavens.

“I’m impressed. I didn’t know you could run like that.” He rolled to his side, propped up on his elbow, and brushed her hair from her face.

“Yeah.” One word was all she could manage. She blinked and stared up at his face. Even in the night, she could see and appreciate the angles and lines of his features. He was so masculine. Always had been, even when he’d been seven. But now, with the light shadow of a beard, he was downright stunning.

The temptation to touch his cheek, to run the tips of her fingers over the stubble, tiptoed through her mind.

She inhaled, her lungs still thirsty for oxygen. Suddenly the sound of water trickling nearby filled her senses. “Are we...?” She raised her head and realized they’d arrived at the creek, the spot she’d brought her mother the day she’d asked about Daniel.

Sadness whispered through her when she remembered she might not see her dad again. She pushed that back and tried not to let the happiness of this moment melt away.

“We made good time.” She realized how far they had run.

“How long have you known you could run like that?” he asked.

“Only since I’ve been here. But I’m getting faster.”

He picked up a thick lock of her hair and watched it slide off his palm. His face was only a few inches from hers. She saw him tighten his brows to check out her pattern.

“It’s still a mystery,” she said.

He met her eyes. “You don’t even suspect what you are?”

She frowned. “I wish.”

He pulled a long blade of grass from the ground and twirled it in his fingers. Then he looked over his shoulder at the moon, only half-full. “When I was a kid and lived next door to you, when I’d shift, I’d jump the fence into your backyard and watch you through your bedroom window, waiting and hoping I’d see you turn.”

“You peeped into my window?”

He smiled. “It’s not like you were naked or anything. You mostly wore

that Little Mermaid nightshirt.” A laugh spilled out of his throat. “You looked like an angel. Sometimes I would stay there half the night thinking you still might turn.”

She studied his eyes. “Did you think I was a werewolf?”

“I hoped.” He touched the tip of her nose with the grass. Then he slid it over her lips. It tickled and yet somehow felt seductive.

He continued staring as if remembering. “I wanted to run in the woods with you. To show you how fast I could go. To take you to my favorite watering hole so we could chase each other in the spring and play in the moonlight.”

“Do you still hope I’m a werewolf?”

He hesitated. “Yeah. I probably shouldn’t tell you that, but yeah, I do. It would make everything easier.”

“Make what easier?” She thought about what Fredericka had said.

“Everything.” He brought the blade of grass back over her lips. “I wouldn’t have to be away from you when I shift. We could hunt together. You would be with me when I’m leading the pack.”

The thought of hunting and killing wild animals didn’t sit well with her, even being with the group of weres that included Fredericka didn’t hold a lot of appeal, but she tried not to let it show.

“We’d make a great team.”

“And what if I’m not a werewolf?”

He smiled, but for just a second she thought she saw disappointment in his eyes.

“We still make a good team,” he said.

“Does everyone feel that way?” she asked, not wanting to mention Fredericka.

“What do you mean?”

“The last couple of times we’ve been together, someone from the pack sent for you as if they didn’t want you with me.”

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“You sure?”

He tickled her cheek with the grass. “Trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“You haven’t told me what you’re afraid of.”

She bit down on her lip. He swiped the blade of grass over her mouth.

“Start talking.”

She told him about the eagle and the snake and then about the huge buck and the lightning.

He frowned. “Do you think Derek is doing this? He communicates with animals.”

“No. Derek wouldn’t do that.”

“You say that like you trust him.” Lucas’s tone deepened.

“I do. Please don’t take it the wrong way. It’s over with us, but I know he wouldn’t try to hurt or even scare me. He cares about me.”

“And you him?” His eyes went from blue to almost orange.

“Yes. But it’s still over.” She could tell he didn’t like hearing her say that, but he seemed to understand. For a flicker of a second, she wondered how long it would be before she could understand it herself.

He stared back up at the moon. “If it’s not him, then who?”

“I think Holiday and Burnett believe Mario and Red are behind it. And they sent the impostors posing as my grandparents. But then Della said that they’re vampires, not shape-shifters, so they couldn’t be doing it themselves.”

“Maybe Mario has a shifter working for him. Though it’s uncommon that two species work together like that.” He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “I won’t let that creep lay another finger on you.”

She knew he really didn’t have the ability to keep that promise, but she liked hearing it.

Then, because it felt good talking about it, she told him about the ghost and the bird falling from the tree.

He looked concerned. “Do you think she’s a death angel?” He was obviously more disturbed by the ghost than the fact that Kylie had brought a dead bird back to life.

“No, but I think she’s a supernatural.”

“Did you check her pattern?”

“That’s part of the problem. She doesn’t have one.”

“Everyone has a pattern,” he said.

“But she doesn’t. Before she disappeared, she told me the others were out there.”

“What others? Like more ghosts?” Lucas looked around.

“I don’t think she meant ghosts. She made it sound like they were evil.”

“And ghosts aren’t evil?” he asked in disbelief.

“Not really. At least none of them that I’ve met.”

He shook his head. “I can’t imagine dealing with them.”

She hesitated before answering. “It was hard in the beginning. It’s still freaky, but not as bad.” She met his eyes. “Besides, I can’t imagine shifting into a wolf.”

He smiled. “It’s a piece of cake. I hope you figure that out for yourself, too.”

She chewed on the fact that he really wanted her to be werewolf. No disrespect intended, but she wasn’t so sure she shared his hope.

“I heard you experienced some of the mood swings last month.” His gaze lowered to her breasts. “You also underwent some hormonal changes like female weres do.”

Yeah, she’d grown an inch, a cup, and a shoe size—not so strange until you realized it happened overnight. Not that she really liked being reminded of it. Her face heated.

She pushed back the embarrassment. “True, but there’s just as much evidence that I’m not a were. According to Holiday, weres are seldom ghost whisperers. They start turning when they’re very young and they don’t have the ability to dreamscape.”

A light smile appeared in his eyes and, blast it, she knew exactly what he was thinking about, too. The dream. The one of them swimming, practically naked and ...

“Guess we’ll have to see in a couple of weeks when the moon is full.”

He ran the blade of grass over her lips again and then down past her chin.

Her breath almost caught when it glided across the swell of her breasts above the cut of the tank top. It was just a piece of grass, but it could have been his finger for the sweet sensation pouring into her chest.

He leaned down, his lips inches from hers. "I have a request."

"What's ... that?" She was barely able to think, much less speak.

He swept the blade of grass up and swirled it around her forehead. "When you close your eyes and get images flashing in your mind..."

His words reminded her of what he'd heard her say to Della about the porn movie. Her face grew hot again.

"I want that movie playing in your mind to be of us. Only us."

She felt the warmth of his mouth, then in a flash he pounced over her. He landed in a crouch, then slowly rose, a low growl rumbling from his throat as he stared out at the line of trees.

She scrambled to her feet. "What is it?"

He looked back at her. His eyes glowed that bright burnt orange color. "Someone's coming."

Chapter Ten

Kylie's heart started to pound. "Should we run?"

"No." Lucas's defensive posture relaxed. "It's just—"

"Me," another deep male voice said.

Kylie recognized the voice before she saw Burnett standing behind her. Even in the darkness, she was close enough to recognize the look of discontent on his face. His eyes weren't glowing, so it wasn't about danger, but everything in his expression said he wasn't happy. And he was looking right at her.

What could he be so upset about?

He stepped closer, his presence larger than life. "Holiday is—"

All it took was his two words and Kylie had her answer. "Crap! Holiday was supposed to come by my cabin. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," he said. "And she really got worried when we couldn't find Della, who was supposed to be your shadow." He turned his focus on Lucas, and his grimace deepened.

"Where's Della?" Kylie asked. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She and Miranda had gone for a swim. But none of this would have happened if someone hadn't insisted she be relieved of her shadow duties."

"That's my fault," Kylie insisted.

"It's not anyone's fault." Lucas stiffened his shoulders. "I wouldn't have let anything happen to Kylie."

"That's not the point," Burnett growled into the night. "Considering your

affiliation with the FRU, you of all people should understand the importance of following protocol. I assigned Della as Kylie's shadow, and it's not your place to change my orders. And by changing them, you caused this situation."

"I wouldn't have had to change it if you'd assigned her to me in the beginning as I asked. And considering my affiliation, you should trust me to protect her."

Kylie looked from Burnett to Lucas and then back again. "I'm the one who forgot about Holiday. If anyone is to blame—"

"I came looking for you," Lucas snapped, as if refusing to let her take any blame. He stared back at Burnett. Lucas's eyes started to change colors.

An owl called out in the woods. The half-moon seemed to grow brighter as the two of them, vampire and werewolf, stood staring at each other.

Burnett was the first to blink, not that it came off as weakness, but rather a sign of reasoning. "Trust is earned. Your overconfidence will not serve you well in the FRU."

"My overconfidence only comes second to yours," Lucas said. "And I think it's part of the reason the FRU is interested in me."

"Perhaps. But there is a fine line between indomitable and supercilious. And the latter character trait is nothing the FRU accepts." Burnett pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit a button.

Kylie saw Lucas's jaw tighten, and she knew how hard it was for him to be reprimanded by Burnett, especially in front of her.

Lucas looked away, but not before Kylie saw his eyes glittering with anger. But then he said, "I apologize if I caused a problem." He might be angry, but he was willing to concede.

Burnett nodded and spoke into the phone. "Holiday, I have her. She's fine.... Yes. I will." He hung up and refocused on Lucas. "I'll meet you back in the office in a bit. I need to speak with Kylie."

Lucas met her eyes, as if asking if she was okay with his going.

She nodded. "I'll see you later."

He took off and in seconds was nothing more than a speck shifting between the moonlit trees in the woods. Burnett watched him disappear and then he looked back to her.

Kylie spoke before Burnett. "I should have remembered Holiday was coming."

"True. But Lucas shouldn't have requested you leave your shadow without conferring with me."

"He's not supercilious like you said." She frowned.

"Yes, he is." Burnett chuckled. "But so was I when I was his age. He'll grow out of it. I did."

Kylie didn't like Burnett's answer, but she felt better knowing he wasn't holding a grudge against Lucas.

When Burnett didn't automatically go into what it was he wanted to talk with her about, she asked her own question. "Any more news on the people who were pretending to be my grandparents?"

"No, but the car they were driving was found. It was listed as stolen. We're checking for fingerprints."

Kylie nodded and looked back up at the moon as a lacy cloud passed over it, making the night appear darker. When she looked back, Burnett stared and his brow twitched as if he were checking her pattern. Puzzlement filled his eyes.

She should be used to it, but at times she wanted to wear a shield over her forehead.

"Is Holiday mad at me?" Kylie asked.

"More worried than angry. She saves all her hostile emotions to use on me." He shot her a tiny smile.

"But you're still here. That has to mean something."

"It means I'm a glutton for punishment." He hesitated, and while his words came out with humor, his eyes didn't express the same emotion.

"No, I meant the fact that she accepted you being a shareholder of Shadow Falls has to mean something."

He frowned. "She needed my money."

Kylie had to bite her lip not to tell him about the other investor. "You really like her, don't you?" Her heart ached for him. Not that he wanted sympathy. And maybe that's why she felt it. When someone this strong and prideful had a heartache, it made an impression.

“That’s not important.”

Yes, *it is*. Kylie saw rejection pass across Burnett’s eyes. Somehow, some way, she was going to get Holiday to stop being so stubborn and give the man a chance. It just didn’t make sense why she was so hesitant. If he was ugly or obnoxious, Kylie would understand. But Burnett was none of those. And he cared so much about Holiday that Kylie could almost feel it.

“I wouldn’t say it wasn’t important,” Kylie added.

He shrugged. “Tell me about the snake and the deer incident.”

Kylie told both stories for what felt like the hundredth time. At least now she could tell it without hyperventilating. When she finished, Burnett just stood there, his dark brow pinched and his lips tight.

“You think I’m overreacting, don’t you.”

His frown deepened. “No. I agree with Holiday. With two of these instances happening, it can’t be a coincidence.”

“So the security system isn’t working?” she asked.

“No, it’s working.”

“Then how could—”

“That’s what we don’t know. A shifter has infiltrated the camp, specifically to target you. And I don’t like it one damn bit!”

Kylie felt her stomach drop. He wasn’t the only one.

* * *

That night, the dream came on slow. But this one was different from the others. Kylie wasn’t moving, she’d just woken up here. She saw Lucas standing by the lake where they’d run to earlier, and just like that, those differences didn’t matter. Before she’d gone to bed, he’d tapped on her window. When she opened it, he’d pulled himself up and kissed her quickly on the lips.

“Good night,” he’d said, and dropped back to the ground.

She’d grinned as she watched him leave. And she’d gone to bed wishing he hadn’t run off so quickly.

Suddenly, the dream became her reality, grounded into the world of the mind where everything felt so real. She stood behind him and enjoyed being

this close. Reaching out, she touched his arm and he turned around—not surprised that she was there, but happy to see her. For a second, something didn’t feel right, but when he pulled her against him, she nudged away the feeling.

“Have you always been this beautiful, Kylie Galen?” Lucas’s hands fell to her waist.

She grinned. “Why don’t you tell me? You peeked into my windows when I was five.”

“Shame on me.” He leaned in closer. Uncertainty nagged at her. There was something off, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She smiled up at him.

“Tell me what makes you happy,” he said.

His statement stirred confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Do you want a mansion? A new car? Do you want to go to Mexico and drink beer on the beach? I can give you that and more.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want any of that.”

“Then what?”

These questions weren’t like Lucas, but she felt compelled to answer. “I want everyone to get along. Miranda and Della fought again last night. I want my dad to be able to visit me again. I want the Brightens to be okay. I want to know what I am. And I want to take care of whatever problem it is that this new ghost has.”

“I can give you most of that. Just say yes.”

“Yes to what?” And that’s when it hit her. That’s when she realized what was wrong. Lucas wasn’t hot.

“You’re cold.” She took a quick step back, moving out of his arms. “What’s going on?”

“I wanted to see you. I knew you would leave if...” Suddenly, it wasn’t Lucas standing there. It was Red, the rogue vampire who was Mario’s grandson, the one who’d killed the girls. The one who’d kidnapped her and beat up Lucas. She started to scream, then realized that this was just a dream and she had the ability to wake up.

“My grandfather and his friends don’t think you can be convinced to work

with us. I only want to help...” His last words faded as Kylie shot up on the bed, gasping for breath. She recalled how her senses had told her in the beginning of the dream that something wasn’t right. If she’d only listened to her instincts, this wouldn’t have happened. Then she remembered how Holiday had said she could temporarily shut them off. When she was able to think straight, Kylie leaned back on her pillow and did the visualization.

The last thing she wanted was to see him in her dreams.

Or her reality.

* * *

The next morning, Kylie felt tiny little skunk paws walking up her chest and then felt a wet pointed nose bump her chin as if summoning her awake.

She lay there for a few seconds, not moving and not opening her eyes, trying to decide why something felt wrong. Her first thought went back to the dream she’d had with Red, but no, this wasn’t about that. Then bright light leaked into the corners of her closed eyes. She opened her eyes.

Sitting up cautiously, giving Socks his obligatory morning pat, she looked around. The sun streamed through the blinds and cast horizontal shadows on the floor.

What time was it? She swept her hair from her face.

Her gaze shot to the clock. Seven. Was that what didn’t feel right ... that she hadn’t been nudged awake by an impatient spirit? Was her Jane Doe ghost not a morning ghost? Then again, maybe amnesia prevented someone from judging time.

Not that Kylie was complaining. Her last spirit had rarely let Kylie sleep a minute past dawn.

Seeing her phone, Kylie remembered Holiday and snatched up the cell, hoping to find Holiday had called or texted her. Before Kylie and Burnett had gotten back to the office, Holiday had called Burnett and asked if he could take over the camp for a day or so because she had a family emergency and had to leave. The only thing Holiday had told Burnett was that she had to deal with this.

Burnett had been worried, too. Kylie had heard the frustration in his voice

when he spoke with Holiday and she wouldn't elaborate on the type of emergency.

Kylie had phoned and texted Holiday but hadn't gotten an answer before she'd gone to bed.

Checking her call log, she found two texts. One from Sara, her old best friend whom Kylie had probably just healed of cancer—please let that be so—and then one from Holiday.

Kylie breathed a sigh of relief as she read Sara's message that she was feeling great, then quickly read Holiday's. It was short and simple. *All is ok. B back soon.*

Wanting more reassurance, Kylie dialed the camp leader's number.

"Hey," Holiday answered. "Is everything okay?"

Kylie almost told her about the dream with the rogue vampire, but her gut said Holiday had something else on her plate. Besides, Holiday had already told her how to deal with this, and if Kylie had listened to her instincts, this wouldn't have happened. "Yeah, just worried about you. Are you back at camp yet?"

"Not yet. I should be there this afternoon." She grew quiet. "I'm sorry I had to bail before we talked. Are you dealing with everything okay? Nothing else has happened, has it?"

"No, I'm fine. We were just concerned about you."

"We?"

"Burnett and me," she said, remembering her promise to herself to play matchmaker. "What happened?" Kylie asked hesitantly, not wanting to overstep her bounds. But her relationship with Holiday felt like more than just camp leader and camper. She truly cared about her.

Holiday was quiet for a moment. "My great-aunt passed away."

"Oh, Holiday, I'm so sorry. Can I do anything?" A cold entered the room. Kylie ignored it and focused on the phone conversation. She'd deal with Jane Doe in a few minutes.

"No. I'm fine," Holiday said. "It was her time. But she didn't get her estate in order and now..."

Kylie felt her mattress dip down. She glanced up, and sitting on the foot

of her bed was an older woman wearing a yellow housedress and a beautiful pale blue tear-shaped crystal necklace.

“The will is taped to the bottom left drawer of my dresser. But I want her to take all my crystal pieces. Don’t let Marty take them, and she’ll try. She’s a sneaky little twit.”

Kylie studied the woman’s gray hair hanging down around her shoulders and then noted her eyes were a bright green that looked vaguely familiar.

Kylie’s hold on the phone tightened and she shivered. Holiday had told her that she would eventually be able to see more than one ghost at a time. It looked as if that time had arrived. But could she handle it?

“Tell her,” the ghost said, and that’s when Kylie knew why the eyes were so familiar. She tightened her brows and checked the woman’s pattern.

Holiday started talking. *“Dealing with the estate is going to be such a—”*

“Uh, Holiday...?” Kylie said. *“What does your great-aunt look like?”*

“Why?”

“Because I think she’s sitting on the end of my bed. If it’s her, the will is taped to the bottom left drawer of her dresser.”

The ghost started floating up to the ceiling as if something were pulling her away.

“Long gray hair,” Holiday answered. *“And green eyes.”*

“It’s her,” Kylie answered, now looking at the spirit floating near the ceiling. *“So you’d better check out her dresser.”*

The ghost smiled. *“Thank you.”*

“Thanks, Kylie,” Holiday said.

Kylie felt another chill and pulled the covers up a bit. *“No problem.”*

The ghost started to fade into the ceiling, then stopped and slid back down. *“Almost forgot. They wanted me to tell you something. Someone lives and someone...”* She vanished, leaving the sentence unfinished.

But Kylie knew what she meant.

“Dies,” Kylie said, and closed her eyes. *Someone lives and someone dies.* The message wasn’t just the mutterings of a crazy amnesia ghost. But how could Kylie make things right if she didn’t know what to do?

Chapter Eleven

Dressed and still fighting the feeling that something wasn't right, Kylie stepped out of her room an hour later. Either Miranda and Della had already left, or they were still asleep. Either way, Kylie was happy not to have to face them. First, she hoped to find Helen, the half-fae who also had the gift of healing. Kylie wasn't sure if the "someone will live and someone will die" message meant she could prevent a death, but she had to try. Then she planned to talk with Burnett and tell him what she knew about Holiday. Not that Kylie was doing it behind the camp leader's back.

Before they'd hung up, she had asked if she could share their conversation with Burnett. When Holiday had wavered, Kylie asked her how she'd feel if Burnett disappeared on "an emergency" and didn't explain himself.

"Fine," Holiday said.

Although she hadn't sounded happy about it.

* * *

A few minutes later, Kylie started out of the cabin, tripped, and landed half on and half off the huge black Lab that was curled up on the welcome rug in front of the door.

"What the heck?" Stunned, she scrambled to get up and, in the process, stepped on the canine's tail. The dog yelped as if in pain, and guilt filled Kylie's lungs. "Sorry."

Was the animal hurt? Once an injured dog had shown up at her doorstep when she'd been a kid. Her mom had her dad take it to the vet and they'd

ended up having to put it down.

Kylie had cried and blamed her mom for killing the dog. With the emotional footprints of that memory tugging at her heartstrings, Kylie crouched down.

“Sorry,” she told the dog again, and let it sniff her hand before she gave it a gentle pat. “Are you hurt? You get hit by a car or something?”

“No. You stepped on my tail, and of course it hurt,” the dog said.

Kylie, still down on her haunches, fell back on her butt and glared at the talking canine.

“What?” the dog asked.

“Don’t do that!”

“Do what?”

“Talk!”

Okay, the sparkles now popping all over the place and the changing eye color told her it was Perry, but seeing a dog talk still freaked her out.

She jumped to her feet and continued to scowl at the animal. Basically, she needed a kick-dog to target her frustration, and she’d just found one. A black Lab that at this moment was changing forms.

She waited until Perry was transformed. “Why the hell is your canine butt sleeping on my porch?”

“I was afraid Miranda would come out, and if she knew it was me, she’d wiggle her little pinky at me and give me zits or something.”

“Okay.” She tightened her gaze. “But that doesn’t explain what you’re doing on my porch.”

“Duh, I was waiting for you,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’m your shadow for the day.”

“Oh, crap. I forgot about ... that.” She took a deep breath and tried to resign herself to having a tag-along following her around like a ... lost puppy.

He studied her with his gold eyes. “You’re mad at me, aren’t you.”

“No,” she said, biting back her frustration. “You’re right. Miranda would have zapped you with zits or something. But you just blow my mind when you’re an animal and you talk.” She put a hand on each side of her head. “It

hurts my brain.”

“No, I meant mad about the shit that happened yesterday.”

Kylie just stared at him. “You’re gonna have to be more specific. Because a lot of shit happened yesterday.”

He grinned, but the smile faded quickly. “I mean how I lost track of the old couple who were pretending to be your grandparents.” A sincere apology filled his eyes. “I failed.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it was. Who else are you going to blame it on? I was the one supposed to follow them.”

“How about we not blame it on anyone?” She started walking down the path toward the office.

He fell into step beside her. “Sounds good.”

They walked a few minutes in silence. Kylie noticed the sky was painted with clouds, the big white fluffy kind, and tried not to think about the elderly couple Perry had followed or exactly what it meant when they went poof.

“Do you think they’re dead?” she asked.

“Who’s dead?”

“The elderly couple.”

His features tightened. “I really don’t know. I’ve never seen humans disappear like that.”

They both got quiet again. The morning temperature hadn’t risen to the uncomfortable level yet, but she could feel it climbing.

Perry tossed his own question next. “Do you think Miranda is ever going to accept my apology?”

Kylie looked at him. “Did you apologize?”

He looked honestly perplexed. “I spoke to her. That’s the same thing.”

Kylie shook her head. “Oh no, it’s not. Speaking to someone is not an apology, Perry. What you did—kissing her like that, then blowing her off—that was mean.”

He frowned and kicked a rock. “She kissed Kevin. I was mad.”

“I get that,” Kylie said, and remembered seeing the picture of Derek kissing Ellie. “And I know it hurts, but it was really Kevin who kissed her.

But even still, two wrongs don't make a right."

She caught him checking out her brain pattern, and she frowned. He continued walking but shifted his gaze to the ground. They didn't talk for a bit, and then Kylie just blurted it out. "Everyone says my pattern moves around like a shape-shifter now. Is it true?"

"Yeah," he said. "But ours only move when we're shifting."

She stopped walking and faced him. "Is there anything else about my pattern that looks like a shape-shifter? I mean, do you see any sign that I might be one?"

He smiled. "You want to be a shape-shifter?"

"No." *Hell, no!* "I mean, not necessarily. I just want to figure out what I am." She bit down on her lip and decided to plunge right into the subject. "How old were you when you started shifting?"

"Oh, I was really young, too young. Five years younger than most shifters. Like barely two years old. Try handling a terrible two tantrum with a shape-shifter. Blew my parents' minds. And their marriage."

Kylie heard the tiniest bit of hurt in his voice. "They split up?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey ... it wasn't my problem."

Oh, yeah, it was. Even his eyes had grown a lonely shade of muted brown. "Who did you live with, your mom or your dad?"

He didn't answer for a minute. "Neither."

She hesitated to ask, but somehow she almost sensed he wanted her to. "Why?"

"Supposedly, I was that hard to handle."

"Where did you go?"

"The FRU has a foster care program. You know, for unwanted strays. I stayed here for a while, and then there for a while."

Kylie felt she understood Perry better than she ever had. And she almost forgave him for being the smartass that he was sometimes.

"Was it terrible?" she asked, and suddenly she knew that she'd lost all her whining rights about how bad her own life had been.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m a shape-shifter, I learned to fit in ... at most places. Of course, I wasn’t invited back to some of them.” He laughed, but as Kylie had already suspected, Perry hid a lot of pain behind his humor.

She also got a feeling there was a lot he wasn’t saying. Not that she blamed him. But damn, she couldn’t imagine how it must have been being passed from home to home.

“You know,” he said as if he suddenly wanted to change the subject, “some shifters don’t start until they’re in their teens. Maybe you’re one of them.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’d only be half. Do half-breed shifters ever have different gifts? Like healing and stuff?”

“Not that I’ve heard. I have some cousins who are half-breeds and they’re limited on what they can shift into. One can only shift into a bird. I used to turn into a cat and chase him around, and one time—”

“Please don’t tell me you ate him,” Kylie said.

“I just tortured him a little,” he said with a grin. “Hey, when he shifted back, he was fine.” He inhaled and almost seemed to get lost in a memory. “You know, I should probably try to find some of my cousins.”

Kylie wondered if he ever thought about finding his parents, but not wanting to pry too much, she didn’t ask. “Oh yeah,” she said, grinning, trying to keep it light. “I’ll bet they would love to see you coming.”

A few minutes later, they’d reached the end of the path where the cabins that housed the office and the dining hall were located. She glanced around to see if she could spot Helen, the shy half-fae who had checked Kylie for a brain tumor, but Kylie didn’t see her.

Because Helen was also a healer, Kylie figured she would be the person to ask about the gift. Questions like “Have you ever brought something back to life?” But Helen wasn’t one of the teens hanging out front of the dining hall. However, Kylie did see Burnett walk into the office and she remembered she had things to talk to him about, too.

She turned to Perry. “I need to chat with Burnett for a bit. I’ll see you in a few—”

“No, you won’t,” Perry said. “Where you go, I go. It’s questionable if you

can pee today.” He grinned. “And I’ve got Burnett’s permission to morph into a giant anteater and kick ass and ask questions later if anyone tries to take over my job.”

Kylie rolled her eyes, knowing Burnett had been talking about Lucas. And thinking of Lucas, she looked around a second time, but he wasn’t in the crowd either.

Looking back at Perry, she added, “Yeah, but I’m going to see Burnett. I don’t think you have to be there then.”

He tightened his shoulders. “Where you go, I go. Until Burnett dismisses me.”

“Oh, hell. Come on.”

* * *

Breakfast started out awkward. As had walking into Holiday’s office, Perry in tow, and seeing Burnett sitting at Holiday’s desk for the second time. Thankfully, Burnett dismissed Perry for their chat. Kylie asked for any update on the elderly couple who had pretended to be her grandparents and was told that nothing had come through yet.

She almost told Burnett about the dream with Red but at the last moment decided she wanted to be able to handle one thing on her own. And this was it. If it happened again, she’d talk to Holiday, but for now, she was flying solo on this mission. As crazy as it sounded, it felt kind of good, too. She wanted to believe she could take care of herself.

When she’d told Burnett about Holiday’s aunt passing away, he’d looked shocked and ... something else. It took her a second, but she’d recognized the emotion in his eyes. Hurt.

“Why would she not tell me this?” he had asked.

“I’m sure she’s just dealing with it in her own way,” Kylie had tried to assure him, but she could tell her efforts were futile. And as she’d turned to leave, she didn’t know what compelled her to do it, but she’d looked back over her shoulder and said, “Be patient with her. She’s worth it.”

Now, in the dining hall, Perry still in tow, Kylie stared at her breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast. For a change, the eggs weren’t runny and the bacon

wasn't raw or burned. But she'd eaten only a few bites, and after being painfully aware that everyone was staring at her forehead again, she decided she must have left her appetite at the cabin.

A symphony of noise—people jabbering, forks clinking, and trays being dropped onto the tables—bounced around the large cabin. Both Miranda and Della were missing in action, and Kylie hadn't spotted Helen or Lucas either.

Unfortunately, she had spotted Derek and Ellie.

They sat together at a table toward the back. It was only right that Derek sit with her, considering she was the new kid at camp. Last night, staring at the ceiling for a good two hours, Kylie had resigned herself *not* to hate Ellie or Derek, but to accept things—even if it meant seeing them come together as a couple—and move on.

Kylie had also resigned herself to making good on that promise to Della and give Lucas a chance. However, even after all that resigning she'd done, seeing Derek and Ellie whispering to each other stung like a fire ant bite between the toes.

Time, Kylie told herself. In time, it wouldn't hurt. "I need a fast-forward button," she muttered.

"A what?" Perry asked.

"Nothing," Kylie said. "Just muttering to myself." She looked up and caught another three or four people twitching their brows at her. She turned and looked at Perry. "What's it doing now?"

"What's what doing?"

"My friggin' pattern. Everyone's staring again."

Perry twitched. "Oh, shit! It's doing that shifting thing again. Only faster."

Kylie closed her eyes. "I'm so tired of being everyone's entertainment, of being the freak on display."

"You're not a freak," Perry said, sounding concerned. "You're just different." He gave her a nudge with his elbow. "But everyone likes you anyway."

Opening her eyes, she muttered, "Thanks."

"Are you going to eat that piece of bacon?" Perry asked.

“No.” She pushed her tray over to him. Miranda came strolling by with her breakfast tray in her hands. Stopping, about to plop down beside Kylie, she spotted Perry.

She froze. “What is *he* doing here?” she asked as if Perry couldn’t hear her.

“Eating breakfast,” Kylie said, hoping to deter Perry from saying something smartass. Seeing him open his mouth, she gave him a good kick under the table. He flinched but closed his mouth.

“Well, I’ll just join my sister witches today and let you enjoy each other’s company.” Miranda turned to leave.

Kylie grabbed Miranda by the arm, bringing her to a sudden halt that almost had Miranda’s eggs taking a flying leap off her tray.

“Sit down. Please,” Kylie begged. When Miranda looked about to argue, she added, “I could use the support.” She cut her eyes toward Derek and Ellie. And it was true, she could use the support, but neither could she deny that she wanted to get Miranda over her repugnance of Perry. He really wasn’t a bad guy.

Miranda relented and dropped down on the bench seat. Kylie mouthed, “Thank you,” and then asked, “Where’s Della?”

“Off drinking blood with the other vamps,” Miranda answered just as she shoved a piece of toast into her mouth.

Kylie grabbed her milk and took a long sip while searching for a topic of conversation that would get Miranda and Perry talking.

“So,” Kylie said, dropping the half-empty milk carton. “Does anyone know if Holiday has hired any teachers yet for the school year?”

Perry, as if he’d figured out what Kylie was up to, jumped into the conversation. “When I was at the office last night with Burnett, he got a call from some fae dude that Holiday had supposedly hired. I think he’s supposed to show up and move into his cabin next week.”

Miranda, as if she’d figured out what Kylie was up to, too, started forking eggs into her mouth.

Kylie and Perry chatted a few minutes about the fae teacher and how it would be odd to actually go to real classes at the camp in the fall. Miranda

continued to shove food in her mouth as if needing an excuse not to talk.

Accepting that her last subject had proved to be a failure, Kylie reached for her milk again and went back to brainstorming topics. Finally putting her milk down, she looked at Miranda and said the first thing that came to her mind. “Did you know that Perry nearly ate his cousin when he was two?”

Chapter Twelve

Kylie watched as Miranda dropped her fork to clatter against the tray, leaned forward, and for the first time made eye contact with Perry.

“What?”

Perry smiled. Just having Miranda’s gaze on him made the boy’s face glow and his eyes turn a nice shade of blue. For just a second, Kylie wondered what his real eye color was.

“I didn’t almost eat him,” he said. “I just chewed on him a little and spit him out. I was a cat and he was a bird. And he was older than me and always stealing my animal crackers.”

Perry continued talking and Miranda continued listening and their eyes met and they both appeared almost mesmerized. Kylie, mentally giving herself high fives, leaned back a bit to make sure not to block the two lovebirds’ views of each other. Then Miranda’s phone rang. She broke eye contact with Perry and snatched up her phone, which sat beside her food tray.

Checking caller ID, she let out an excited squeal. “It’s Todd Freeman. Oh, my God, he’s actually calling me!” Miranda’s grin brightened her eyes, and she did a little butt-wiggling dance on the bench.

It took Kylie a half second to remember that Todd Freeman was the warlock, aka the best-looking boy in Miranda’s old school, who had asked for Miranda’s number at the witch competition. It took Kylie the other half of a second to realize this might not be a good thing. Not for Perry, at least.

Miranda’s gaze shot back to the blond shape-shifter, and for a flicker of a second, she looked guilty. It wasn’t much, but it offered Kylie a bit of hope.

“Excuse me,” Miranda said, and then stood up, phone in hand, and zipped out of the dining hall.

Perry watched Miranda go and then looked at Kylie. His eyes were now a bright green color and they were slightly pinched, giving off a hint of anger. And that contented glow on his cheeks from a few seconds ago was gone. Vanished.

“Should I ask who the hell Todd Freeman is, or do I friggin’ not want to know?”

Kylie’s mind raced as she tried to find the words to answer. “He’s just...” Just when she thought she knew what to say, something that would soothe him and hopefully not make him angry, she spotted Derek and Ellie walking out of the dining hall. Derek’s hand rested against Ellie’s lower back. An innocent enough touch, but it didn’t look so innocent to Kylie.

“He’s just who?” Perry bit out.

Kylie looked back at Perry. Why, Kylie wondered, was she so involved in trying to fix everyone else’s love life when she couldn’t even fix her own?

“I don’t know what to tell you, Perry. Life’s hard. Love’s harder.”

* * *

Thirty minutes after breakfast, Kylie—with Perry still dogging her steps—stood in front of the dining hall again, looking for Helen. Kylie suspected Helen would be among the noisy crowd waiting for the names to be called for Meet Your Campmates hour.

She wasn’t.

Lucas walked up, trailed by Fredericka. “Hey.” He came close enough that his shoulder brushed against hers. His warmth reminded Kylie of the dream last night when he hadn’t been warm. She so preferred him warm. She preferred him to be himself and not some psychotic killer vampire.

“Hey,” she said, and tried not to look at Fredericka, who ambled slowly past.

“Everything okay?” Lucas asked, and then frowned at Perry, who stood on the other side of her, not that it affected Perry. He just nodded.

Fredericka kept slowing down, and unable to stop herself, Kylie glanced

up. The she-wolf shot Kylie a sassy smile, no doubt wanting to rub it in that she'd been with Lucas.

Lucas dipped his head down a bit. "Sorry I missed breakfast. I had some pack business I had to take care of."

Pack business? Kylie couldn't help but wonder if the pack business wasn't all about them keeping her and Lucas apart. Frustration swelled in her chest. It was bad enough to have Fredericka plotting against her, but to think the whole pack was also against her was too much. She looked at Lucas. "I ... have to go."

"You okay?" He leaned in, concern filling his blue eyes. She wasn't sure if he'd picked up on her flicker of fear from last's night dream or if it was her jealousy for the little she-wolf who followed him around like a lost puppy.

"Yeah," she lied, and started walking.

"Where are we going?" Perry asked, his footsteps matching hers.

"To find Helen," Kylie answered, and stared straight ahead, even as she felt Lucas staring after her. She might not be able to solve her romantic issues, but perhaps Helen could shed some light on the whole healing process and the fact that Kylie had brought a dead bird back to life. With Holiday gone, she needed all the help she could get. A blue jay swooped past and hovered right in front of her for a millisecond before flying away. Could things get any crazier?

Kylie shook her head. Oh hell, what was she thinking? She was at Shadow Falls; things could always get crazier.

* * *

As Kylie drew closer to Helen's cabin, she turned to Perry and looked him right in the eyes. "I want to talk to Helen alone."

"No can do," Perry said.

She frowned. "Perry, I'm serious."

"So am I," he said without a touch of sarcasm or humor, and for Perry, that was a rarity. "Look, I know you don't want me hanging around, but Burnett told me what happened with the eagle and snake and then the deer. And on top of not wanting you to get hurt by an evil being of my own kind, I

can't mess up again. I've already screwed up by losing that old couple, and I'm not screwing up again. So you'll just have to suck it up."

Kylie frowned, but she did understand. Who wanted to screw up? And as much as she didn't want to accept that she was in danger, she couldn't argue with the probability that Burnett was right. She didn't want to be hurt by an evil being of Perry's kind, either.

She looked Perry right in his yellow eyes and spotted a touch of insecurity. She felt bad.

"It's just that I need to ask Helen some questions and I'm not sure she'll feel comfortable answering with you here."

"How about I transform into something else and hang back?"

Kylie suddenly got an idea. She didn't know if it would work, because she didn't know how the whole transforming thing worked, but it was worth a shot. "How about you change into a male white cat with bright blue eyes."

"The last time I made myself a cat, you got pissed, bruised my ears, and threatened to neuter me."

"Well, don't start playing Peeping Tom in my cabin windows and you won't be in any danger. Just make sure you're white with blue eyes. Oh ... and you have to be male."

"Like I would ever become a female," he said.

"Then do it already," she said.

"Fine." He waved his hand up and the sparkles started appearing. In just a few seconds, Perry disappeared and a long-haired white cat with a cute piggish little face and beautiful blue eyes stood in his place, swishing its tail back and forth.

The animal was so adorable, she had to stop herself from picking up the little fellow and snuggling with him. "Very cute," Kylie said.

The kitty, aka, Perry, cocked its head to the side as if puzzled. He reached up with his paw and gave his right ear a good scratch.

It worked. Kylie remembered her reasoning for insisting on the specific animal and smiled.

"I can't hear!" Perry said. "How did you do this?"

Kylie had to bite her bottom lip not to smile. "I didn't do it. Most male

white cats with blue eyes can't hear." She said the words slowly so he might be able to read her lips. "You can watch." She pointed to her eye. "But you can't hear."

"That was sneaky," Perry said, obviously able to read lips.

Kylie smiled. "No, it was genius. Now stay back."

"But stay where I can see you."

"Fine." She took off to Helen's cabin and kept an eye out for any unwanted shape-shifters.

* * *

Helen answered the knock almost immediately. "Hey, you came to see me." She hugged Kylie so tight and had such a big smile on her face that Kylie felt a tad guilty for not visiting sooner. Helen was ... well, a little quiet and didn't have a lot of friends.

However, some of the guilt faded when she remembered she had asked Helen to come over to the cabin half a dozen times. The half-fae had declined each and every time because she spent all her free time with Jonathon, her newfound love.

"Come on in," Helen said.

Kylie started to step inside and remembered Perry. "I can't."

"Why?" Helen asked, and ran a hand through her sandy brown hair.

"I've got a shadow."

"Oh, yeah." Helen's hazel eyes widened with concern. "Jonathon was telling me what happened. They think some shape-shifters broke through the security. Are you okay? I mean, after your weekend and now this." Helen stepped out and closed her cabin door. She moved over to the edge of the porch and sat on the whitewashed wooden planks.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Kylie answered, which was a bit of a lie, but she didn't need to dump her problems on Helen.

"Did you actually see the intruder?" Helen asked.

Kylie dropped down beside the girl. Their feet dangled off the edge of the porch. "It was an eagle and a snake and then a deer. And we're not even sure that it's anything. It might not even have been shape-shifters." Or at least,

Kylie had been telling herself that. And since nothing else had happened today, it was getting easier to believe it—as long as she didn't remember the evil look she'd seen in the eagle's and deer's eyes.

Kylie suddenly became aware of two birds soaring overhead. A shimmer of fear ran down her back, and she looked out toward the patch of trees to see if she could spot Perry.

He didn't seem too worried. He'd found a patch of sunlight spilling through the trees and had stretched out, as if to soak in the warmth. "Who's your shadow?" Helen asked, following Kylie's gaze but obviously not noticing the cat.

"It's Perry. I had him turn himself into a male white cat with blue eyes."

Helen arched a brow with understanding. "So he couldn't hear us. Good one." She brushed an ant off her knee.

They sat there for a few seconds in silence, both of them gently pumping their legs back and forth.

Finally, Kylie spoke. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind answering a few questions about healing?"

"That's right, I heard you healed your friend," Helen said. "And then Lucas, too. Pretty cool."

Kylie bit down on her lip. "Yeah. It's cool. I mean, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it, but I like knowing I did it. That's what I wanted to ask you about. I really don't know how it works."

Suddenly, a thousand questions started running rampant in her head. Could she heal anyone? Could she go to the hospital and just heal everyone?

"Holiday hasn't talked to you about it?" Helen pulled one leg up.

"She tried. I just wasn't ready to hear about it. And then she had to leave. Her aunt died, but she's supposed to be back this afternoon."

"That's sad," Helen said with sincerity, then she added, "Holiday said that we two were going to start meeting with her on occasion to discuss healing as a group. I've read up on a lot of it, but I've barely made a dent in all there is to know about the gift."

"There are books on supernatural healing?" Kylie asked, surprised.

"Yeah, there's a whole library on all different supernatural subjects."

“Really? I never heard about them.”

“Oh, yeah. There are tons of books on just about every subject.”

Every subject? If that was the case, Kylie couldn’t help wondering if there might be some information somewhere about anomalies like herself.

“Who...? I mean, where do you get them?”

“From the FRU library. If you can call it a library. More like a vault with books. It took almost a month before I was approved to check out the books I got. Burnett finally went in and got me approved.”

“Why would they not want you to read up on healing or ... any subject concerning supernaturals?”

“Beats me.”

Kylie chewed on that for a few minutes and then asked, “So what did you learn about healing?”

“A lot of it’s about the homeopathic. But some of it covers the basics like the different kinds of healers.”

“There are different kinds?”

Helen nodded. “And different levels.”

“Is any of this based on what type of species you are?”

“Yeah, some. The gift is most common to fairies and witches. But it’s found in all sorts of half-breeds, too. I even read one book that said some half-breeds can have more healing powers than full-bloods.”

Kylie tried to absorb everything Helen was saying. “What are the different kinds?”

“Well, some of us can just ease pain, but not really heal. Some witches can cure things by mixing up brews and performing certain rituals. Then there are those who heal internal diseases like cancer through touch. And then there’s a few of those who are like you.”

“Like me how?” Kylie asked, confused.

“Who can heal internal issues, like cancer, as well as physical injuries, like you did with your friend Sara’s cancer and Lucas’s injuries.”

“You can’t heal physical injuries?” Kylie asked.

“No. I wish. Jonathon fell a while back and cut his hand. I tried several times to heal it, and got nothing.”

Kylie tried to absorb the new information. But mostly what she absorbed was the fact that once again, she was an anomaly. For once, couldn't she fit nice and neatly into a niche?

"You look worried," Helen said, looking at her.

"A little," Kylie admitted. "I'm still overwhelmed, I guess."

"Hey, just be glad you're not like the real freaky type."

"What type is that?"

"The kind that can raise the dead. And every time they do it, they give up a piece of their soul in the bargain. That would be off-the-chart weird, don't you think?"

A chill of fear settled around Kylie's heart. "Yeah. That would be super weird."

* * *

Kylie got a text from Holiday on her walk back to her cabin. *Problems. Can't make it bk til tomorrow. U ok?*

Am I okay? Kylie nearly laughed out loud. Hell, no, she wasn't okay! She'd given away a piece of her soul to a blue jay and didn't know what it meant.

As soon as Perry's shadow duties ended and he was replaced by Della, Kylie snatched her phone and started out of her cabin, feeling desperate. Holiday wasn't here, but Burnett was. He might not have any answers, but at least she could personally tell him she wanted a library card to the FRU's source of books. If there was even the slightest chance that their library held something that would help her figure out what she was, then Kylie would keep her nose in a book for years.

"Where are we going?" Della asked, following Kylie out.

"To talk to Burnett about my problem."

"What problem?"

"You got a problem?" Miranda asked as she, too, joined them on the cabin porch.

"It's just crazy shit," Kylie said, unsure she wanted to explain it, and started walking.

“What kind of crazy shit?” Miranda asked. “Does it have anything to do with Perry being in love with you?”

“What?” Kylie spouted out, low on patience.

“I saw the way he was hanging around all day.”

“Please! He was hanging around me because he was shadowing me.” She met Miranda’s gaze head-on. “Okay, look. I’m gonna say this once. Perry’s in love with you. But if you don’t stop playing hard to get, you’re gonna lose your shot with him.”

“Amen, sister!” Della said.

Miranda’s face tightened and she glared first at Della and then at Kylie. “Since when are you two taking his side?”

Kylie closed her eyes in frustration. “Fine, he was wrong when he did that, but you admitted that you were a little wrong in kissing Kevin, too. It’s time to get past it or get over him.”

“You make it sound easy.” Hurt hummed in Miranda’s tone.

“It is easy,” Della said. “Just kiss and make up.”

Miranda ignored Della and stared at Kylie. “Like you don’t have issues with Derek.” She turned to Della. “And you with Lee.”

“That’s different!” Della snapped, her eyes growing bright as she immediately took the offensive.

No, it wasn’t different, Kylie realized. “Look. Truth is, all three of us are in the same boat. The sucky romance boat. And Della and I made a pact yesterday.” She glanced at Della, hoping she didn’t look upset that she was sharing this with Miranda. But hey, they were a threesome, right?

Thankfully, the vamp didn’t look pissed, and Kylie continued, “We’re moving on. I’m gonna get past the whole Ellie and Derek thing and give Lucas a chance. Della’s going to try to be nicer to Steve and see what happens. You want to join the pact?”

Miranda frowned. “But Todd Freeman called me this morning. He said he may come up here this weekend for a visit.”

“Who’s Todd?” Della asked.

“The cute warlock from her old school,” Kylie answered, and glanced back at Miranda. “Look, if you don’t want to forgive Perry, or can’t forgive

him, then that's one thing. But you can't stay on the fence."

"Yeah. Shit or get off the pot." Della snickered.

"I'm not on the fence," Miranda insisted. "Or a pot."

"Yes, you are," Kylie countered. "You still care or you wouldn't be jealous." So what did that say about her and Derek? Kylie pushed that question aside.

"But what if I blow Todd off and then Perry goes back to being an ass?"

"There are no guarantees," Kylie countered. "Not with love or with life. But we can't go through life never taking a risk. And that's what we are all agreeing to do. Put our hearts out there. Take a chance with a boy. We might end up hurt, but we might not."

Miranda stood there, her expression pinched as if considering the offer. "Okay, how about I make a pact to talk to Perry and try to figure it out?"

"Talking's a good start," Kylie said.

"Making out would be better." Della grinned.

Kylie started back walking. Miranda and Della followed.

"So what's the crazy shit problem you need to discuss with Burnett?" Miranda asked.

Kylie sighed. "I gave away a piece of my soul and I think I want it back."

Chapter Thirteen

“What’s wrong?” Burnett called out from Holiday’s office a couple of minutes later when Kylie stepped inside the camp’s main offices.

The camp leader had set up an office for Burnett in the back of the cabin, but he apparently preferred using Holiday’s office in her absence. Not that Kylie blamed him.

Holiday’s office was small but nice. A tan sofa stood against one wall, leaving only enough room for a desk and a couple of file cabinets. Not that Holiday hadn’t added her own mark to the tiny space. Plants, different kinds of ferns, and even some herbs were stationed at every corner. The air even smelled like Holiday—a light floral aroma. And on top of the large metal file cabinet were several different-colored crystals. The light from the front window streamed into the room and got pulled into the crystals, reflecting rainbow colors on the walls.

Burnett quickly closed a few files that were on the desk and then leaned back in Holiday’s chair. Kylie couldn’t help wondering if Burnett wasn’t using her office simply because Holiday’s presence was so alive in the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked again.

She just blurted it out. “Do you know anything about healing powers?” She dropped into the chair across from the desk.

“Not a lot, but some.”

“If I bring something back to life, do I lose a piece of my soul?”

His brow creased deeper. “What happened? Did someone get hurt? Did you have to—”

“Not someone,” Kylie answered. “A bird.”

“Oh. Holiday told me about that,” Burnett answered. He leaned forward. “However, she said you weren’t sure it was dead.”

“It looked dead,” Kylie said. “And I just want to know, did I lose a piece of my soul when I brought it back to life? And what does that mean?”

Burnett folded his arms on the desktop. “I’m not nearly as up on this as I’m sure Holiday is, but she wasn’t concerned. So I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

Not happy with his answer, Kylie remembered the second thing she wanted to discuss. “I want a library card.”

“A what?” he asked.

“I want to be able to read the books that the FRU have in their library.”

He frowned. “It’s not a library, or not a normal library. Before you are allowed a book, it has to be cleared.”

“Why?”

“Because a lot of items in the collection are FRU documents.”

“What is the FRU hiding?”

He looked almost annoyed at her question. “We’re not hiding anything. But we can’t let normals get their hands on the books.”

She pressed a finger to her forehead. “Do I look normal to you?”

“We still have to be careful.”

“So you’re telling me I can’t check out the books.”

His frown deepened. “I will see about getting you a few books on healing,” he added, as if wanting to console her.

“What other kind of books do you have?” she asked.

“It’s not a library, Kylie,” he said with some firmness, and then settled back and didn’t speak. Finally the awkward silence brought Kylie to another question. “Any more news on the elderly couple who pretended to be my grandparents?”

His guarded expression slipped away. “I just got a call. The fingerprints we were able to pull belong to the owners of the car. I’m afraid it’s not going to help us. I’m sorry. But I can return these.” He handed her the brown envelope that held her father’s pictures. “You really resemble your father.”

The genuine concern in his eyes and his tone should have made her feel better, but it just validated her suspicions that he hadn't been completely honest about the whole FRU and the library. What was the FRU hiding?

Kylie took the envelope. "Thank you," she said. While she wasn't going to start mistrusting Burnett, she would proceed with caution when dealing with him.

Kylie started to leave when Burnett looked at the door and said, "Come in."

Lucas walked in. He met Burnett's gaze head-on. "I'd like permission to walk Kylie back to her cabin."

"That's up to her," Burnett said.

"Without her shadow," Lucas said.

Kylie could see it cost Lucas a chunk of pride to ask permission. She recalled something Della said about werewolves hating to be submissive. And asking permission was a submissive gesture.

However, from the look on Burnett's face, Lucas's request had won him some respect and hopefully a few minutes to be with her. Burnett looked at Kylie as if to make sure it was okay, and she nodded.

"Just back to the cabin. And stay on the path." Burnett looked toward the window. "Della takes over again when she gets to the cabin. You got that, Della?"

"Yes," came her answer, and Kylie rolled her eyes a bit, wondering if Della was always listening in.

* * *

Della and Miranda were gone when Kylie and Lucas walked out of the office. The afternoon air was warm but tolerable. A few campers hung around the front of the lunchroom. Kylie saw Will, another werewolf, standing to one side, watching them. She also saw Lucas shoot him a frown.

"Come on." Lucas started walking toward the path.

Only after they made the first turn and were out of view did Lucas reach for her hand. Right then, Kylie suspected that Fredericka wasn't just blowing smoke about the pack's disapproval of her.

She started to ask, but Lucas spoke first. "Are you okay?" He stopped and turned to face her. His blue eyes studied her with intensity. "For a second, you were scared of me this morning, and then you just ran off with Perry as if you were mad."

She hesitated to tell him, but she wanted Lucas to be honest with her, so she needed to be honest with him. "It wasn't you I was afraid of. Last night I was pulled into a dreamscape. I wasn't sure what was happening, but you were there."

"No, I wasn't," he said.

"I know it wasn't you now. It was Red, Mario's grandson. He appeared as you in the beginning."

Lucas stood there as if contemplating. "He's vampire. They don't dreamscape."

"Well, he did. I don't know how, but he did."

"Maybe it was a regular dream."

She shook her head. "I know the difference now."

"Did you tell Burnett?"

"No," she said. "I ... handled it myself. I know how to shut it off. If it happens again, I'll tell him. Or I'll tell Holiday."

He frowned. "What did the freak do in the dream? He didn't..."

She understood what he was asking. "He only put his hands on my waist. Then I realized he wasn't hot like you are." For the first time, she wondered why Red hadn't tried to do more. Then again, she should just be happy he hadn't. The thought of kissing him was too much.

Lucas pulled her against him. "I really want to catch that slimy vamp." He wrapped his arms around her. She stood there for a few seconds, her cheek pressed against his chest, absorbing his embrace. Finally, she lifted her face and looked at him.

He pressed his lips against hers. It wasn't the really hot kind of kiss, but it was nice. Nice enough that she let her feelings about how he was always followed by Fredericka slide away.

"So you're not mad at me?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted.

He looked perplexed. “About what?”

She didn’t have a clue how to say it but then just blurted it out. “Every time I see you walk up, Fredericka is with you.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “I’ve told you nothing is happening there.”

“I know, and I believe you, but she’s so ... smug.”

He half grinned. “She’s a werewolf; smugness is instinctual.”

“I don’t care. I don’t like it.”

His half smile faded. “She’s part of my pack. I can’t kick her out without just cause and major consequences for her.”

The fact that he cared about Fredericka stung, but then she realized she wouldn’t want bad things to happen to Derek. But it wasn’t just Fredericka causing this problem.

“Your pack doesn’t want you with me, do they.”

He looked a little shocked. She almost repeated what Fredericka told her, but she didn’t want to come off like a jealous girlfriend.

“It’s stupid,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what they want.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t,” he said with firmness. “I refuse to let anyone dictate who I like or see. Besides, you might end up being one of us.”

“And if I’m not?”

“It still doesn’t matter,” he said, but the conviction in his voice had lessened.

“What will happen?” she asked.

“Nothing. Because I won’t let it happen.” He touched her cheek. “This is my issue. Let me deal with it.”

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie walked into her chilly bedroom—yep, she had a ghostly visitor, but Kylie was determined to ignore her. She had to mull over her conversation and suspicions concerning Burnett and her conversation with Lucas. His pack’s attitude was his issue, but it involved her. She also wanted to spend some time looking at her dad’s face. As crazy as it sounded,

she hoped staring at the pictures would somehow bring him closer to her.

“Someone lives and someone dies.”

Kylie frowned. Okay, ignoring the spirit was probably going to be harder than she thought, especially since the so-called message the ghost was delivering was supposedly something the death angels had sent Kylie.

Ditto for Holiday’s aunt, when she dropped in the day before.

“Who lives and who dies?” Kylie turned around to see the ghost woman hovering behind her. She had hair again, long dark hair that hung around her shoulders.

“They didn’t say. But they did say that it isn’t your fault.”

“What’s not my fault?” Kylie demanded.

The spirit shrugged. *“They never explain anything. They just tell me to give you the message.”* She nipped at her bottom lip. *“They scare me.”*

Kylie dropped onto the bed, and that’s when she noticed something else about the ghost. She was pregnant. The pink maternity shirt clung to her round belly.

Suppressing her frustration, Kylie motioned to the woman’s baby bulge. “You’re pregnant.”

She glanced down and dropped her hands around her middle. *“How did that happen?”*

Kylie shook her head. “If I was at home, I could give you a pamphlet to explain it step by step. A sperm meets an egg and so on. My mom gives me one of those every few months. But basically, it means you had sex with someone.”

The spirit’s expression grew puzzled. “Sex?”

“Please tell me you know what that is, because I’m too young to have to give you the whole sex talk. I haven’t even heard it yet. I’ve just read the pamphlets.”

“I know what sex is. I’m just ... Who did I have sex with?” she asked. *“I can’t remember.”*

“I wouldn’t know that.”

The spirit moved closer, and so did her chill. She dropped down on the bed beside Kylie, her palms still stretched across her belly. Closing her eyes,

she sat there in silence. Kylie sensed she was searching her mind, trying to remember.

Kylie pulled a throw over her shoulders to ward off the chill. After several silence-filled minutes, the ghost opened her eyes but continued to stare down at her round middle. Her hands started moving tenderly over the child she carried within, as if to show it affection.

Kylie had never seen so much love shown in a simple touch. For a crazy second, she wondered what it would feel like to carry a child inside her own belly.

When the spirit looked up, she had tears in her eyes. *“I think my baby died.”*

The grief on the spirit’s face and in her voice brought a lump to Kylie’s throat. “I’m sorry.”

Then the spirit pulled her hands away from her belly, and both her palms were bloody. Kylie’s breath caught when she saw the spirit’s rounded abdomen was gone and the front of her dress was drenched in blood. “No.” The deep, painful sob of the spirit filled the tiny room and seemed to bounce around from wall to wall.

Kylie opened her mouth to say something, to ask the spirit if she could remember what happened, to offer more apologies and sympathy. But before she could say anything, the woman disappeared.

The spirit’s cold vanished but left a wave of icy sadness and grief so intense that it filled Kylie’s chest with pain. And it wasn’t just any pain. It was the grief of a mother losing a child. Kylie reached for her pillow and hugged it.

* * *

After a few minutes, Kylie pulled the pictures out of the envelope and flipped through them slowly. When she came to the one of her mom and Daniel in a group of other people, Kylie reached for her phone.

“Hi, sweetie.” Just hearing her mom’s voice brought back some of the empathy Kylie felt for the spirit.

“Hey, Mom.”

Odd, how not so long ago, Kylie felt certain her mom didn't love her, didn't even want her. Now, there wasn't a doubt of her mom's devotion to her. Deep down, Kylie wondered if this was a part of growing up. The part where teens stopped seeing their parents as instruments out to destroy their lives and started seeing them as people.

Not perfect, of course. Kylie knew her mom still had flaws—lots of them—but none of them involved her love for Kylie. And none of them prevented Kylie from loving her.

"I'm glad you called," her mom said. "I've missed hearing your voice."

"Me too," Kylie managed to say without choking up, and she wished her mom were here to hug her. She wished she could tell her mom about the pictures, but then she'd have to explain about the Brightens, and she didn't think that whole mess was explainable. Not yet, anyway.

"I was going to call you tonight if I didn't hear from you," her mom said.

"I'm sorry, I've been going a little crazy since I've been back."

"I figured as much. Sara called and said she'd tried to call you and you hadn't returned her call. She sounded so good. She told me it was like a miracle—her cancer up and disappeared."

"I'm sure it was one of the treatments they did on her," Kylie said, biting down on her bottom lip and wondering how she was going to handle the whole Sara issue. Kylie hadn't returned Sara's call because she'd wanted to ask Holiday first. Poor Holiday. When she did return, Kylie had a list of things they needed to discuss.

"I guess," her mom said. "But I would like to believe in miracles."

"Then you should believe," Kylie said, now unsure what to say to her mom about it. Because more than ever, Kylie knew miracles did exist. The fact that she had been the one performing the miracle still had her feeling out of sorts.

"Are you okay?" her mom asked, as if picking up on Kylie's mood.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not," her mom said. "I hear it in your voice. What's wrong, baby?"

"Just ... boy trouble," she said.

“What kind of trouble?” her mom asked, the tension in her voice indicating that she worried Kylie’s problem concerned sex.

“It’s nothing.” Searching for a change of subject, Kylie tossed out, “How was work today?”

“It was strange,” her mom said. “I got a new client.”

“Why is that strange?” Kylie asked. Her mom worked in advertising and she was always getting new clients.

“*He’s* strange.”

“Strange in what way?” Kylie asked, glad the subject had taken a turn.

“He seemed more interested in me than ... the campaign.” Her mom giggled.

Kylie frowned. “Define ‘interested.’”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just the way he acted,” her mom said, as if she were trying to make light of the subject. “We’re supposed to do lunch tomorrow and discuss his ideas for the special promotion on his new line of vitamins.”

“Is it a work lunch or a ... date lunch?”

“Don’t be silly,” her mom said. “It’s work.”

“Are you sure?” Kylie asked. “I mean, if he seemed interested in you...”

“I think it’s work,” she said, no longer sounding so sure. “But ... if it were a date lunch, how would you feel about it?”

Kylie took a deep breath. An image of her stepfather filled her head. She recalled him sitting on the edge of her bed only a few weeks ago, crying when he told Kylie he’d made a terrible mistake. She knew he wanted to reconcile with her mom, and while Kylie wasn’t sure he deserved a second chance after cheating on her, she couldn’t deny wanting at least one thing in her world to go back to the way it had been.

“You’re not answering,” her mom said.

Kylie swallowed a big lump of indecision and stared down at the image of her mom and Daniel. Was it fair of her to want her mom to forgive her stepfather just to bring a sense of normalcy back into Kylie’s life, especially when she sensed the man her mom really loved was dead? The question bounced around her head, and Kylie decided to be honest.

“That’s because I don’t know what to say. I guess part of me was thinking you and Dad might work things out. Don’t you love him anymore? Or did you ever really love him?”

It was her mom’s time to get quiet. “I loved him. I probably still love him,” she finally confessed. “But I’m not sure I can forgive him. Or trust him. And ever since we talked about Daniel, I just ... I’m not sure that marrying Tom wasn’t a mistake. And if that’s true, then us getting back together would also be a mistake. But I shouldn’t be talking to you about this, Kylie.”

“Why not?”

“Because, my darling, you shouldn’t have to worry about this.”

“You’re my mom. I have a right to worry.” And Kylie realized she did worry about her mom being alone and being lonely. But did that mean she wanted her mom to start dating? To completely rule out getting back with the man Kylie had loved and considered her real dad all her life?

“No,” her mom said. “You’ve got that backwards. Moms have a right to worry about their kids, not the other way around.”

“Then we’ll just have to agree to disagree,” Kylie said.

“You are way too stubborn, you know that?”

“And I wonder where I got it from,” Kylie answered with a chuckle. Kylie’s mom’s phone beeped with an incoming call. “I’ll let you go,” Kylie said. “But Mom...”

“Yes?”

“Enjoy the lunch. Just be careful. And don’t go falling in love or anything. Oh, and no kissing on the first date. That was your rule, remember?”

Her mom chuckled. “I’m sure it’s just a business lunch. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

When Kylie hung up she heard a tap at her window. She looked over, expecting Lucas, but instead the blue jay perched on her windowsill. It flapped its wings, hovered right outside her window for a second, and then flew away.

Great. Now she was being stalked by the blue jay she’d brought back to

life. What did that mean?

* * *

The melancholy from the ghost and the mixed feelings about her mom—as well as the possibility that she’d given a piece of her soul to the blue jay—hadn’t completely faded an hour later when Miranda and Della stormed into her room.

“Get ready,” Della said.

“Ready for what?” Kylie asked, lying on the bed, still hugging her pillow and staring holes into the ceiling.

“Burnett agreed to let us have a party tonight,” Miranda said. “This is our chance to work on our pact. Steve will be there, so will Lucas and even Perry. We’re ordering pizza and playing music. Maybe even dancing. I think I’ll wear the new jeans I bought last weekend.”

“You didn’t tell us you got to go shopping,” Della said.

“Yeah, and I also got this brand-new jeans skirt.” Miranda looked at Della. “It would look fabulous on you. Why don’t you borrow it?”

“Really?” Della said. “You’d loan me your new skirt?”

“Of course. I like you most of the time,” Miranda said, and nudged her with her elbow.

Kylie’s lips were poised to say, “You two go without me,” but she spotted a hint of excitement in Della’s eyes. Kylie remembered that since the vamp was assigned as her shadow, if she didn’t go, Della didn’t go, either.

So Kylie stood up and went to her closet. “I say we get all dressed up and impress the socks off those guys.”

Thirty minutes later, the three of them, dressed to kill, walked into the dining hall. Miranda had loaned Della her new jeans skirt, and it looked really good on her, especially paired with the spaghetti-strap top with art deco black-and-red print with flared tiers of fabric hanging down the front. Miranda wore her new jeans with a low-cut pink lacy tank top that showcased her girls. When Kylie had packed to return to camp, she’d brought some more clothes. Her black knit dress wasn’t fancy, but it still fit well, especially with her recent growth spurt. The hem of the dress now came a tad higher,

and the scooped bustline fit tighter. While she had been faking her enthusiasm in the beginning, somehow getting dressed up had her looking forward to the evening.

The music was already playing and boxes of pizza were stacked on one of the tables that had been pushed against the walls, making room for dancing. Most of the campers were already there, mingling and talking. The smell of pepperoni and zesty tomato sauce filled the air. Then Chris walked in from the kitchen carrying a large pitcher and a bunch of cups.

“Man, that smells good.” Della lifted her face into the air, and Kylie caught the wild berry scent of blood. And though she didn’t like admitting it, her mouth watered more from that aroma than from the pizza.

Not that she would indulge in it, or had indulged in it since she’d tasted blood at the vampire ceremony. If Kylie ended up being vampire, she’d deal with it. But until then, the idea of drinking blood, even when it tasted like ambrosia, was not her cup of tea.

Miranda must have pushed the door closed a little hard because it slammed shut and the crowd looked up. Kylie felt everyone’s eyes on her, or on her forehead, checking to see what her forever changing brain pattern was doing now.

But then she noticed one pair of blue eyes, and they weren’t looking at her forehead. They were looking at her.

She knew Lucas liked her dress. Or at least he liked her in it. And wasn’t that what she wanted?

The desire to do another visual sweep of the room to see if Derek was there hit strong. She fought it. Tonight was about Lucas. And from the way he stared at her, she had a feeling he wouldn’t mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucas didn't smile. Well, not with his lips, anyway. His eyes, however, did smile, and their warmth washed over Kylie as he started moving her way. He took slow, even steps, as though he had all the time in the world, but what mattered was that he was coming. When she first saw all the weres clustered together, she worried he might not want to leave them. Somehow Kylie sensed he did it purposely to send a message to her and to his pack. And suddenly she was glad Miranda and Della had pressed her to come to the dance.

Lucas had gotten about halfway across the room when she felt another pair of eyes on her. Pulling her gaze away from Lucas, she spotted Fredericka. Refusing to let the were bully intimidate her or ruin her good mood, Kylie ignored her and refocused on Lucas. He looked good tonight, too. He wore jeans that fit just right and an aqua blue shirt spread across his chest. The color made his blue eyes appear bluer.

When he stopped beside her, his natural scent filled the air and she could feel her pulse flutter from his nearness. He didn't tell her she looked beautiful; he didn't even touch her. But his eyes did both.

"Hey," he said.

She smiled. "Hey."

His gaze moved to Della. "Burnett said I could take over shadowing."

Della nodded.

"Want to get something to drink?" Lucas asked Kylie, and motioned toward the back where the sodas were waiting and the people weren't. Lucas

wasn't much with crowds. Tonight, she felt the same way.

She nodded and turned to her two roommates. "I'll see you." Then she leaned in toward them. "Remember the pact."

Miranda smiled and wiggled her eyebrows in excitement. Della, who Kylie knew struggled with the whole romance issue, frowned.

"Yeah, yeah," Della said. "But I'm not making a fool out of myself."

"Just be more approachable," Kylie whispered, and then turned back to Lucas. They moved together across the room, and Kylie could feel people staring at them. She forced herself to ignore them.

Lucas moved in a step closer to her. "What's going on with those two?" he asked, obviously having overheard Kylie's conversation with Della and Miranda.

"Nothing really," Kylie answered.

He grabbed them each a drink and then pushed two folding metal chairs against the wall. When she sat down, he edged his chair closer and sat beside her. His jeans-covered thigh pressed against her bare leg. She could feel his warmth through the cotton material, and it sent a fluttery feeling to her stomach.

He leaned in so his voice could be heard over the music. "I'm glad you came tonight."

"Me too," she said.

"You're not mad at me anymore?" The back of his hand shifted against her forearm and she felt his fingers glide gently up past her elbow.

"I think I'm over it." She smiled.

"Good." His gaze swept over her. "You make my blood race," he said, so low that she could hardly hear him.

She smiled. "Really?"

"Feel for yourself." He took her hand and placed it on the back of his wrist. The flutter—more like a vibration, really—was so rapid that it almost felt electric. Her first instinct was to jerk away, but his steady, tender gaze kept her fingers against his warm skin. And after a second, it wasn't actually scary.

"Is this a werewolf thing?" she asked.

He leaned a bit closer until she felt the warmth of his breath against her ear. “Yeah.”

She shivered a little. “So I really didn’t cause it?” she asked, feeling a bit disappointed.

A light smile tilted his lips. “Oh, it’s all your fault. It only happens when I’m ... captivated by something or someone.”

She returned his smile. “Then I’m glad I captivated you.”

The smile in his eyes suddenly vanished, and she could swear she heard a light growl rumble from his throat.

She barely had a chance to wonder what could be wrong when Perry stopped right in front of them.

He nodded at Lucas as if making a point that he wasn’t the least bit afraid of him. “You want to dance?” he asked Kylie.

She was so surprised, she wondered if she’d misunderstood his question. Then she felt Lucas tense beside her. “Uh, not now,” she said, trying to keep her tone light. “But thanks for asking.”

Perry disappeared into a group of campers. When she looked back at Lucas, he scowled into the cluster of people. “Am I going to have to teach a smartass shape-shifter a lesson?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe he actually hit on you when—”

“He wasn’t hitting on me.” Kylie looked back at the crowd and found Perry standing away from the others, watching Miranda, who was surrounded by a group of boys. For a second, Kylie felt bad. Perry had probably wanted to ask her something about Miranda and she’d brushed him off.

“I don’t buy it,” Lucas said, his tone deep.

“He only has eyes for Miranda,” she said. “Look at him, he’s green with jealousy.” And literally, his eyes had changed color to a bright green.

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s true. Believe me; he’s not into me.”

He dipped his head closer. “And you’re not into him?”

She grinned. “Are you jealous?”

“No.” He sat up straighter. “I’m just ... possessive,” he said as if the two

traits were somehow different. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m not into Perry,” she assured him. “We’re just friends.”

“Fair enough. So, who are you into?” he asked, and those blue eyes captured hers.

“I’m sort of falling for a jealous werewolf at the moment.”

He grinned and quickly brushed the back of his hand against her forearm. “Well, don’t tell me his name, because I’m likely to whip his jealous ass.”

They both laughed and then sat and stared at each other until it got awkward. Not awkward because looking at him felt strange, but it just seemed as if one of them should lean in and finish the moment with a kiss. But neither of them seemed to want to take the initiative. Kylie suspected his reason was the same as hers. Too much of a crowd. She just hoped it wasn’t because of his pack.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, did you get the answers from Holiday about the whole bird thing?”

Remembering the bird’s little visit this afternoon, she felt frustration tickle her mind. “No.”

She took a sip of soda, focusing on the music, and tried to push all the negative stuff back. Unfortunately, it kept coming at her. “Did you know the FRU has a library of books on everything supernatural?”

“Yeah, I heard about it. Why?”

“Do you know why they don’t let us read them?”

“I think some of them contain government documents.”

“But why would they need to hide anything?” she asked.

He shrugged. “The same reason the U.S. government hides things. Some things might skirt the ethics line, or if certain information got into the hands of the wrong people, it could be detrimental.”

The music changed to a slow song. Kylie looked up and saw several couples moving to the center of the dining hall to dance. Helen and Jonathon, holding hands, were among the first to make their way to the empty floor space. They wrapped their arms around each other and started swaying to the music. They didn’t even appear to be dancing, just holding each other and occasionally doing a small side step. Not that it looked dorky; it sort of

looked sweet.

A few other couples moved to the dance floor and started to sway to the beat of the music. The lyrics of the song spoke of love, being close, and kisses. Someone turned down the lights, and since Kylie didn't think the lights had a dimmer switch, she suspected it had been one of the witches using a touch of magic.

Maybe they'd even added a bit of romance potion to the air, because Kylie felt it. Suddenly, she wanted to be out on the dance floor, too. She wanted to feel Lucas's hands on her waist while she rested her cheek on his shoulder.

She glanced at Lucas, leaned in, and asked, "Do you want to dance?"

He made a funny face as if she'd asked him to stand on his head or something. "I ... no. Sorry."

"I guess that might upset the guards too much, huh?" She looked over at the pack of weres watching them.

"It's not that." Lucas released a deep breath. "Come on." He took the plastic cup that held soda from her hand and set it on the floor beside their chairs. He caught her fingers and pulled her up. For a second, she thought he meant to take her out on the dance floor, but instead he headed to the front of the dining hall.

"Where are we going?"

"Outside."

He pulled her through the crowd so fast, Kylie didn't have time to ask his reasons. When he stopped, they stood outdoors and off to the side of the dining hall.

Alone.

The music, while only a distant humming, could still be heard, and it seemed to play along with the night sounds. Crickets and a few birds sang along with the lyrics.

"Isn't this better?" He took her hands and placed them around his neck and then set his hands around her waist as if to dance.

"So the pack won't see us?" she asked, insecure.

"No," he insisted. "Did you see one were out on that dance floor?"

She had to think, but then she shook her head. “No.”

“We don’t like drawing attention to ourselves in public.”

The air was warm, but not as warm as Lucas’s hand pressed against her hip. Kylie glanced up and saw a half-moon offering the night a minimum of light. Not that it was all that dark outside; the stars appeared to be working overtime. No clouds hung in the heavens, so the sky seemed sprayed with stars. She could hardly find a piece of sky that didn’t have a tiny diamond shape twinkling and adding a silver glow to the night. Slowly, he started moving to the distant music.

“But in private, that’s another matter.” He didn’t just sway but danced. And he obviously knew how, because his steps encouraged her feet to follow the same pattern his were making.

With scents of pizza and blood no longer perfuming the air, Lucas’s own scent stood out and mingled with the woodsy scent of the night air.

She looked up at him again. “Who taught you to dance?”

“My grandmother. She told me it was the way to a woman’s heart,” he said, his voice a light whisper against her ear. His head dipped down and his lips brushed against her cheek. “I personally believe when two people get this close, it should be in private.”

His words made her realize how close they were standing to each other. She gazed again into his eyes, and his mouth met hers. They danced and kissed for what seemed like forever. Not that she was complaining. She felt as if they were floating, lost in a moment. His kiss didn’t push for more than she was ready to give. It was just a soft meshing of his mouth on hers, with an occasional slip of his tongue across her bottom lip.

The kiss finally ended. She placed her hand on his warm chest right beside where her head rested and listened to his heartbeat, which was very fast.

“Is your blood still rushing?” She raised her head, rested her chin on his chest, and smiled up at him.

“More than before.” His tone rang deeper than it had been. He adjusted his hands on her waist and she could feel the racing of his pulse where his wrist touched the bottom of her rib cage.

“Feel it?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Leaning her head back on his chest, she decided she could stay there forever with his breath stirring against her hair. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the closeness and the sensation of being held, of being cherished.

With her ear again pressed to his chest, she heard a soft humming, almost a purring. The sound filled her head and she felt as if it pulsated inside her. She sensed he’d pulled her closer, his nearness warmed her inside and out, and the floating sensation returned even stronger this time. Leaning into him a bit more, she longed to be closer still.

His fingers pressed against her waist, making tiny little shifts up and down. The light touch tickled and caused a fluttering sensation deep in her belly. Then his hands glided up her sides, almost to her breasts. The slightest warning whispered in her head, but she pushed it back. This felt too good to —

He inhaled, sharply, and she thought she heard him swear, then he yanked his hands from her and stepped away.

Without his support, she almost felt dizzy. She gazed up at him confused. “What...?”

“We should ... we should go inside.”

When she met his eyes, they glowed a brighter blue. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. It’s ... just safer inside.”

“Safer from what?” She looked around, thinking he’d seen something. Had the eagle or deer returned? It could even be the blue jay, back to—

“From me,” he said, and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m low on willpower tonight, Kylie. About a week and a half before the change, I tend to run more on instinct than logic. And right now, my instinct says to pull you in the woods, find a soft spot of grass, and have my way with you.”

She moved in and placed a hand on his chest. “I know you well enough to know that you would never force me to do something I didn’t want to do.”

He pulled her palm from his chest and held her hand gently in his. “I would never force you, Kylie. Never. But I’m not above trying to persuade you. And...” He tilted her head back with his other hand as if to make sure

she knew he was serious. “Werewolves have a knack for persuading. And that’s not how I want this to happen.”

She blinked and tried to understand what he was saying. Her insides still felt like liquid, and she missed his warmth against her. She tried to move closer to regain what she missed, but he took another step back.

He pulled her hand to his lips, and after placing a quick kiss to her knuckles, he tightened his grip and gave her a tug back toward the dining hall.

She took a few steps. Then, still trying to process what he’d said, she put on her mental brakes. “What do you mean by a ‘knack for persuading’?”

Chapter Fifteen

Lucas didn't answer. Instead he just tugged on her arm, and she let him pull her back inside the dining hall. But the more she thought about what he'd said, the more she wanted answers. For a minute back there, she'd felt almost drunk with ... passion. Did werewolves, like faes, have the ability to manipulate a girl's feelings so she would ... give him anything he wanted?

Kylie stared up at Lucas, who was holding her hand and leading her back to the place where they'd sat earlier. Mentally, she sorted through her emotions.

She wasn't angry at Lucas; she didn't even regret their slow dance in the moonlight. On the contrary, she'd loved every second of it. So, what was the problem?

A tiny internal voice answered the question. The problem was she didn't want to think that someone other than herself could persuade her to do something that she might not have done otherwise.

And yet, another little voice whispered, wasn't that what passion and seduction were about? All the magazines talked about how women wanted to be seduced. So was it a bad thing?

Okay, so she was confused. She looked at her hand where Lucas's fingers locked with hers and tugged her along. She followed him through a small crowd of campers to get their seats. Finally settled in their chairs again, she wondered when any of this was going to get any easier.

"You want something else to drink?" he asked, having to raise his voice for her to hear him over the music and the crowd of voices.

“I’m fine.”

“Pizza?” he asked.

“Not now.” She almost asked for an explanation about what he’d said earlier. Then she realized that the noise and the crowd would make having a lengthy and private conversation impossible. She glanced at Lucas and found him studying her, staring deep into her eyes—almost as if he were trying to read her thoughts.

He leaned in and rested his forehead against hers. “Are you upset with me?”

“No,” she said honestly, and meant it. It wasn’t anger she felt, just uncertainty, confusion. Because even if Lucas had the ability to seduce her to do certain things, he hadn’t done it.

Blinking and offering him a smile, she decided tonight, at least at the party, might not be the time to talk about this. However, before she did any more moonlight dancing or make-out sessions by the creek, she needed answers.

She recalled Holiday’s words weeks earlier when they were talking about boys and sex: *What I’m asking is that when you decide to do something, that it’s something you’ve thought about and decided to do. Not a spur-of-the-moment decision that you might regret later.*

Did Holiday’s words of wisdom have more meaning to them than Kylie had guessed?

* * *

An hour later, they’d indulged in pizza and drunk enough diet soda to drown an Italian fish. The number of couples dancing had dwindled; now, almost everyone was eating and mingling. Even the lights had been brightened. When people started stopping by to chat, Kylie had expected Lucas to disappear, but he hung in there and was even very friendly, which was so out of character for a werewolf. He was doing this for her, and she appreciated his effort.

Both Della and Miranda had stopped by and said hello as they got drinks and pizza. Kylie wanted to ask them if all “pact” things were going well, but

she couldn't find a way to do it without being overheard, so she decided to wait until later to get an update.

As soon as the pizza disappeared, someone lowered the lights again and several couples started making their way back to the makeshift dance floor. As Kylie's vision adapted to the change of light, her eyes lit on Della being led to the dance floor by ... Chris.

Kylie immediately did a sweep of the room for Steve, and she was pretty sure he was the guy in the black T-shirt, standing in the shadowy corner talking to a couple of girls, one of whom was Fredericka. The other looked like ... Ellie.

Kylie's gaze moved around the room for one quick second, searching for a certain fae. She didn't find him and wondered if he hadn't come because he knew she'd be here.

I'm not thinking about Derek. She closed her eyes and repeated those words to herself as if they were her new mantra.

When she looked back up to find Della, Kylie spotted Miranda moving on the dance floor with Clark. Kylie didn't know Clark that well, except that he was a warlock and known to be a bit of a troublemaker.

What were Miranda and Della doing? What happened to their pact? Why weren't they going after the right guys?

"Something wrong?" Lucas asked.

She glanced over at him and realized she was frowning. "Not really. It's just..." She looked back at the crowd, stalling, trying to figure out how much she could tell him. Before she could come up with an appropriate answer, she spotted Perry. Perry, who looked angry enough to chew nails and spit out staples. His gaze met hers, and then he started walking to the door.

"Give me just a minute, please," she told Lucas, and shot up and took off after Perry.

By the time Kylie got outside, Perry was nowhere around. Then she saw him. Well, it had to be him. One of those big prehistoric-looking birds stood in front of the main office.

"Perry!" she called out, and ran to catch him.

His wings, a span of about five feet, were spread open, and he appeared

ready to take flight.

“Don’t just run away,” Kylie snapped.

“I’m not running. I’m flying. And for a damn good reason. If I have to stand there and watch her flirting with all those guys, I’m gonna end up hurting someone.”

Kylie watched the bird’s beak move up and down as it talked. “First, turn yourself back into human form before you speak to me. Second, you don’t have to just stand there. Go ask her to dance.”

Diamond-shaped sparkles started appearing around the bird. From where Kylie was standing only a foot from him, the air seemed to get thin. She wasn’t exactly sure what happened when Perry shifted, but it had to do some weird stuff to the ozone.

One of the sparkles floated up; on its descent, it brushed against her arm and popped like the blow bubbles she’d played with as child. But instead of a tickling sensation, Kylie felt a jolt of electricity run up her arm.

Suddenly Perry stood there instead of the pterodactyl. His eyes were red, angry. “Ask her to dance so she can reject me in front of everyone? Do I look like an idiot to you?”

“No, right now you look like a coward afraid to take a chance on what you want.”

“I’m not a coward!” he growled. “I have more power in my pinky finger than ten of you supernaturals.”

“Then prove it by standing up for yourself.” He didn’t look convinced, so Kylie added, “I have a feeling she won’t reject you.”

He just stared at her, disbelief shining in his eyes as they changed from red back to his normal blue.

“Trust me,” Kylie added.

She could see he wanted to give in. But then he waved a hand back toward the door. “She’s already dancing with someone else.”

“Then cut in.” Kylie frowned when she saw Lucas standing in the shadows. Then she remembered he was her shadow. He had to follow her.

“Cut in?” Perry asked, as if he weren’t familiar with the term.

“Go tap on the guy’s shoulder and just say you want to cut in.”

“And he’ll just step aside and let me dance with her? Where the hell did you get that idea?”

“It’s not an idea. It’s proper dancing etiquette. When someone wants to dance with someone who’s already dancing, you’re supposed to tap on the guy’s shoulder and just say you’re cutting in.”

Perry frowned. “And what happens if he says no?”

“He’s not supposed to say no.”

Perry rolled his eyes. “In the human world, maybe, but—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” She held up her hands in frustration. “Just try it.”

“Fine,” he said. “But if he gives me any shit, I might end up hurting him.” His eyes turned red again. Blood red.

“No, you can’t hurt—”

Before she could finish, Perry shot back inside. She took off after him. Oh, friggin’ great. Maybe this hadn’t been the best idea.

Lucas called to her, but she didn’t slow down.

* * *

Kylie had barely made it back inside when she heard the commotion. She took off toward the dance floor.

“I said I’m cutting in!” Perry’s voice rose over the music and chatter of the other campers.

Kylie tried elbowing her way through, hoping to get to them in time to prevent things from escalating, but a crowd had already started to circle and her elbows must not have been sharp enough because everyone just grunted and ignored her.

“And I said go to hell!” a voice, obviously Clark’s, answered back.

“What about what I want?” Miranda said.

Kylie stood on her tiptoes to get a better view but still couldn’t see anything.

The sound of a scuffle filled the room. Most of the female campers started squealing, while the males just started cheering the fight on.

“Stop it!” Kylie yelled, and started jumping up and down, hoping to see what was happening.

“Watch out!” someone screamed, and like a wave, everyone dropped to the ground as a fireball the size of a volleyball shot through the air.

“Crap!” Kylie yelled, and took advantage of everyone’s position to move in. By the time she’d stepped over two or three people, apologizing when she felt fingers or feet beneath her step, she spotted Miranda giving Clark hell.

“I said I wanted to dance with him!” Miranda yelled.

Perry stood there watching, listening to Miranda with a big smile on his face.

Miranda continued her rant, and Kylie couldn’t make it out because of everyone else’s chatter, but she could see Clark’s face turning angry red. Miranda poked him in the chest. Clark retaliated by shoving Miranda back and calling her a name.

Miranda hadn’t caught her balance when diamond sparkles started popping off like fireworks. A huge green dragon the size of an eighteen-wheeler appeared where Perry had just stood. Smoke billowed up from the dragon’s long, bumpy snout. Most of the campers started running like cockroaches in a Raid commercial.

Well, everyone but Kylie, Miranda, and Clark. Kylie moved in and grabbed Miranda’s arm, hoping to get her out of the way of danger. But the little witch slipped out of Kylie’s hold and stood there staring up at the dragon with what looked like admiration.

“Oh my, he’s beautiful,” Miranda muttered.

Kylie gazed up at the huge green beast, and while she couldn’t agree with Miranda, she decided to forgo speaking her mind. Especially when Perry swiped his fifteen-foot tail around the room, knocking down several of the daring onlookers and tossing a few others across the room. The building shook again, and then everyone left standing moved back.

Della swooped in and screamed at Kylie and Miranda to get back. Miranda ignored Della, too. And until Kylie could get Miranda out of harm’s way, she wasn’t leaving.

“He won’t hurt me,” Miranda snapped, and then she turned her angry eyes on Clark. She started wiggling her pinky and chanting.

Unfortunately, right then Burnett swooped in, landing directly in front of

Clark. He looked mad enough to kill innocent puppies. He opened his mouth, no doubt to give them all hell, but before he spoke a swirl of rainbow colors started swirling around him like ribbons. Then the hard-as-nails vampire vanished into the smoke-filled air and standing in his place was a very pissed-off kangaroo.

“Oh, shit!” Kylie said.

“Oh, shit!” screamed Miranda.

Burnett, now a very unhappy kangaroo, started hopping around like a marsupial on speed. Miranda, shaking and dancing from one foot to the other, had her pinky in the air, muttering out chants so fast that Kylie couldn’t catch one word.

Perry, aka the large, out-of-control dragon, took a step toward Clark.

Clark, looking about ready to crap his pants, started tossing more fireballs. One missed and hit the dining hall wall. One slammed into the trash can containing the pizza boxes, which immediately burst into flames. Another went sailing through the air, heading right for ... Miranda.

Kylie felt her blood fizz and rush to her brain. Without thinking, without even realizing what she planned to do, she jumped into the fireball’s path, caught it, and tossed it to the other side of the room.

Perry released an ominous sound, half roar, half cry. Smoke shot out of his nostrils. Clark tossed another fireball. Before Kylie could stop this one, it hit Perry—in dragon form—and singed the green scales on his side.

The smell of burned dragon, along with burning pizza boxes, scented the air. Smoke rose to the ceiling.

Perry reared his head back and roared so loudly that it shook the whole dining hall to its rafters. It wasn’t so much a cry of pain as a cry of warning and of complete and utter fury.

Lucas suddenly appeared beside Kylie and caught her hand in his. He looked at her palm. Then, appearing perplexed, he grabbed her by the elbow and started yanking her away. She pulled free and leapt over some turned-over chairs to grab Miranda.

Just as Clark tossed another fireball, Della swooped back in and was hit by a cylindrical flame in the hip. It knocked the little vampire back a good

five feet, and she landed in a dead heap on the floor.

Kylie screamed, Miranda chanted louder, Perry snorted more fire, and Kylie bolted back over the chairs to get to Della.

Before Kylie got to her side, Della popped back up, apparently unharmed. But Kylie had never seen her so pissed. Her eyes glowed bright green, her fangs extended past her bottom lip, and if looks could kill, Clark was worm bait. Growling with raw anger, Della shot across the room after Clark. Burnett, in all his kangaroo glory, jumped in front of Della, blocking and preventing her attack.

Perry let loose a breath of fire that shot clear across the room and left black marks on the log walls and the ceiling.

Miranda, pinky still in the air, chanted louder. Then another swirl of rainbow colors flew across the room, and Burnett zapped back to vampire form. Not a happy vampire, either.

With eyes glowing neon red, he let loose a scream that matched Perry's dragon roar. "Everyone stop! Right now!"

The commotion stopped. Even the crowd standing at the front of the building ceased jabbering. Silence reigned.

Burnett looked first at Clark. "Throw another fireball and you'll be expelled from Shadow Falls until the day I die. And I plan to live a very long time." He turned his gaze to Lucas. "Can you please put the garbage fire out before this whole place goes up in flames?" Whirling, he faced a very angry Della. "As much as I'd love to let you rip this guy's head off"—Burnett glared at Clark—"I think Holiday would disapprove. So, go cool off somewhere." He pointed toward the door.

Before he lowered his hand, Della was gone, leaving only an angry blur in the air.

Taking a deep breath, Burnett aimed his angry gaze at the dragon. "Change back this instant!"

Perry let out one roar of protest, but then the sparkles started floating down from the ceiling to the floor. Kylie noted that everyone else knew to avoid the little bubbles of electricity. Funny how people didn't warn her about these things.

A second after it stopped raining charged, diamond-shaped bubbles, the dragon disappeared and Perry stood before Burnett. He didn't look any less angry than Burnett. Then, proving Kylie's assumption, he took a flying leap over Burnett and landed on top of Clark. Fists started swinging.

Burnett reached effortlessly into the scuffle and yanked Perry up by the collar of his shirt and held him a good five inches off the concrete floor. "No more fighting." He dropped Perry on his feet.

Perry glared at Clark and then looked at Burnett. "He pushed Miranda," Perry said, fury in his tone. "You never, ever hurt a female. You taught me that when I was six."

Six? Kylie looked from Burnett to Perry. Did that mean Burnett knew—?

"I know," Burnett said. "And I'll take that up with him later. But you have to learn to deal with things without shifting, or you'll never be able to coexist with humans."

"He was throwing fireballs!" Miranda piped in. "It's logical that Perry would shift into something that could deal with it."

Kylie saw Perry cut his gaze to Miranda. The anger in his eyes faded and he stared at her in something like astonishment. Something told Kylie that Perry wasn't accustomed to people standing up for him. Right then, her heart broke a little bit more for the shape-shifter who'd been abandoned by both his parents.

Burnett let go of a deep breath and his angry gaze went back to Clark. "Go to your cabin. I'll be there shortly to dish out your punishment."

Clark took off, but not without sneering at Miranda. For a second, Kylie thought Perry was going to attack again. So did Burnett, for he reached out and latched on to Perry. "Don't you dare shift."

Again, Kylie noted the familiarity with which Burnett treated Perry. Obviously, Perry's stint with the FRU foster program had brought him into contact with Burnett. And somehow she sensed that Burnett had taken the orphaned shape-shifter under his wing. It weakened Kylie's earlier misgiving about Burnett and the FRU library. Not that she was completely over it, but everything in her said Burnett wasn't the enemy.

Lucas returned, bringing with him a scent of smoke, and stood by Kylie's

side. She looked over at the trash can that minutes ago had been shooting flames up to the ceiling. It had been extinguished, and now only a few wisps of smoke floated up from the rim of the can.

Lucas reached for Kylie's hand again, opened her palm, and studied it. Then he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Are you really okay?"

"Yes," she said, perplexed by his question.

He stared at her hand again and tenderly ran his finger across her palm. "It should have burned you."

She remembered catching one of the fireballs aimed at Miranda. "Well, it didn't." Then she recalled how she'd felt as if her blood had turned into soda and she'd felt it fizz into her brain.

His look of awe changed into a tight frown. "Nevertheless, the next time I try to remove you from a dangerous situation, don't fight me."

She frowned right back at him. "I wasn't fighting you. I just wasn't leaving Miranda or Della."

He shook his head as if she exasperated him. "You really are a protector, aren't you?"

"Maybe I'm just a good friend." For some crazy reason, she sensed he preferred she not be a protector. Why? Did her being a protector mean she had less a chance of being a werewolf?

Burnett looked back at the crowd of campers watching them. "You guys go back to your cabins. Party's over."

As soon as they left, he fixed his gaze on Miranda. "You so much as twitch that finger at me again and I'll..."

"Della says she'll rip it off," Miranda said, and giggled, not the least bit intimidated by Burnett. Burnett let go of a growl, not appreciating Miranda's candor.

"She didn't mean to turn you," Kylie and Perry said at the same time.

"It was Clark she was aiming at," Perry added, frowning at Burnett.

"I don't care," Burnett said. "It will never happen again. You understand that?" He glared harder at Miranda.

Miranda nodded. "Understood. I'm sorry."

Kylie could tell she had to work to look reprimanded, but the apology

rang sincere. And that was when Kylie knew all the campers had accepted Burnett as one of the leaders. He might not have Holiday's easy, somewhat loving method of connecting with the campers, but he made up for it in other ways.

Burnett folded his arms over his chest. "Now, all of you go back to your cabins."

They all turned to leave. Lucas slipped his hand in Kylie's, letting her know he'd be walking with her.

But then Burnett added, "Everyone but Kylie."

Oh joy. What now? Kylie stopped moving and turned around to face Burnett.

Chapter Sixteen

As soon as the sound of the heavy wooden front door closing echoed in the empty, still smoky dining hall, Kylie decided to confess and get it over with.

“I know, it’s my fault. I apologize. I thought I was helping.”

Burnett, arms still crossed over his chest, stared down at her. “What’s your fault?”

“This,” she said, suddenly wishing she hadn’t been so gung ho to take the blame. Then again, accepting responsibility was right.

Burnett stared down at her as the seconds passed, which only intensified Kylie’s growing need to fill the silence. “Okay, look,” she said. “I’m the one who told Perry to cut in on Miranda and Clark.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I heard that. I was in the office.”

Kylie frowned, wondering if he’d also eavesdropped on her conversation with Lucas.

He dropped his arms to his sides, making him appear less intimidating. “But that doesn’t make it your fault.”

“So you didn’t have me hang back to read me the riot act about starting this mess?”

“No.” He reached down and snatched two chairs upright and motioned for her to sit down.

“Am I in trouble for something else?” she asked as she sat down.

He flipped the chair around and straddled it. “No. I just wanted to talk to you.” His palms curled around the back of the chair. “Is your hand okay?”

She held out her palm for him to see. “Yeah.”

He looked down at her hand, then up at her face again. "Holiday called and was worried about you."

"Why?"

He seemed to struggle to find the right words. "I told her what you'd asked about the bird."

"What did she say?" Kylie leaned in a bit, ready to get at least one answer to her long list of questions.

"She said you shouldn't be worried. If you did bring the bird back to life, it would only cost a very, very small piece of your soul."

"But I did give some of it away?"

"Possibly," Burnett said.

Kylie hesitated to ask, but she needed to know, so she just did it. "Did she say anything about the bird stalking me?"

"Stalking you?"

"Yeah, it was flying around me today, but I wasn't so sure it wasn't just some fluke. But then it came to my window earlier today and tapped on it."

Burnett's eyes widened a little in surprise, and then his inscrutable expression slammed down again. "Are you sure it's the same bird?"

"No, but it's too much of a coincidence not to be, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," he said. "Did you feel any kind of threat from the bird? Like you did with the eagle and the deer?"

"No, nothing. It was all peaceful and serene."

"Good." He stared down at his hands as if he had something else to say and it wasn't going to be easy. "Look, about the FRU library..."

"What about it?" she asked, immediately feeling nervous.

"I don't want you to think I was lying earlier. I wasn't. However, considering that I work for the FRU, I'm only allowed to say so much."

"So you did lie to me?" she asked.

"No." He tightened his lips as if frustrated. "I told you as much as I could. The truth is that there are some books there I'm not allowed to see."

She felt suddenly cold, the kind of a chill that came from being afraid of where their conversation was headed. Of being afraid to discover the truth about herself.

“There are books about ... others like me, aren’t there?” she asked. “Others who don’t know what they are.”

He hesitated again and laced his fingers together in a tight ball. “I don’t even know what all is there, but if they were there, I doubt very seriously that I could obtain permission to allow you to read them.”

“Why?”

“The FRU considers ninety percent of what they have collected as classified.”

Frustration built in her chest. “What’s the big secret? I mean, the key to understanding what I am could be in that library. And you’re locking me out—it’s so frustrating. It’s like you’re deliberately trying to keep me in the dark about my powers, my identity.”

“You’re not being kept in the dark, and the key to understanding what you are is much more likely to be elsewhere—here in the outside world—than in that library. There’s a lot of classified information at stake, but there’s nothing we’re trying to hide from you.”

“It sure as hell feels that way,” she said. “Tell me the truth, please. Do you know what I am?”

“No,” he said again, and her instincts told her he wasn’t lying. “Look,” he said. “The only reason I brought this up is that I don’t want you to stop trusting me. I’m as perplexed by you as ... well, as you are.”

Kylie slumped in her chair, resigned to the fact that he wouldn’t, and maybe even couldn’t, give her anything more. “Fine.”

He nodded and then looked around the dining hall. “You think we might convince everyone not to tell Holiday about this disaster?”

Kylie looked up at the singed wood, which had been marked by the dragon’s breath and Clark’s fireballs. “It might be difficult.”

He looked around and frowned. “I guess so. But damn, I wanted to prove to her that I could run the show without screwing up.”

“You didn’t screw up,” Kylie said. “All’s well that ends well. No one’s hurt.”

He let out a deep gulp of air. “I got myself turned into a kangaroo.”

Kylie couldn’t help but snicker. Then Burnett laughed. Kylie couldn’t

swear by it, but she thought it was the first time she'd ever heard him do that. "Holiday is going to enjoy that one, isn't she?"

Kylie continued to grin. "Oh, yeah. Can I be the one to tell her?"

"Afraid not." Then he flashed her what she could have sworn was a smile. "If it involves making her laugh, I'll keep that pleasure for myself."

She studied him for a few moments, again feeling his devotion to Holiday. Thinking of devotion and Burnett, she decided to ask another question that had been pulling at her mind. "You and Perry have a history, right?"

He paused for a second and then said, "Sort of. Why?"

"The way you two relate to each other."

He nodded but didn't offer any details.

"It was through the foster program, right?" she asked. "Were you like a caseworker or something there at one time?"

Burnett's expression stayed stoic. "He told you about the foster program?"

"Yeah."

Burnett nodded. "Yes. We crossed paths through the program."

He didn't seem eager to share anything else about his past, so Kylie decided to drop it, or at least drop part of it. "Perry's not going to get in too much trouble for this, is he?" She frowned. "I mean, I was the one that sort of caused it. He was leaving and I stopped him."

Burnett arched a brow. "Truth be told, he behaved extremely well ... considering." He looked around again. "You wouldn't believe the kind of messes I've had to clean up because of him."

Kylie imagined Burnett coming to the aid of a younger Perry—a Perry who had no one because his parents abandoned him. Her doubts about Burnett and trusting him practically vanished. Without thinking, she said, "You know, you aren't near as badass as you pretend to be."

Burnett frowned as if he didn't like being considered anything but bad. "I wouldn't bet on it," he said. "Just ask Holiday." He stood up. "Come on, I'll walk you to your cabin. I need to go deal with Clark before it gets any later."

"You don't need to walk me. I think I can manage."

“Nope. You’re still under shadow guard.”

As they walked out of the dining hall, Kylie welcomed the night air without the scent of smoke. The memory of her dance with Lucas tickled her mind, but she pushed it back, not wanting to think about that with present company. Especially when she half feared that Burnett might have been privy to their entire conversation.

They started down the path to her cabin. A few night creatures rustled the underbrush along their way. Burnett cut his gaze from one side to the other, always aware, always on guard.

“You haven’t experienced any more threats, have you?” he asked.

“No.”

“It always amazes me what just having a shadow with you can prevent.”

Kylie looked up at him through the darkness. “Do you think that’s the only reason it hasn’t happened again? That someone, more than likely Mario or his grandson, is still waiting to get me alone?” She considered telling him about the dream but didn’t see how it would help.

“I think we can’t be too careful.”

Kylie felt a familiar chill slide past her, slowly, and she knew they had company. She gazed around to see if the spirit had materialized yet, but she saw nothing.

But the sense of grief that seemed to seep into her pores told her it was Jane Doe. Kylie’s mind shot back to the spirit and the loss of her child. A need to help the spirit tightened her chest. If Holiday were here, she’d talk to her about it. But she didn’t think Burnett would be helpful where ghosts were concerned. Especially when it involved a pregnant ghost.

“Who’s shadowing me in the morning?” she asked.

“I believe it’s Della,” Burnett said, and looked around almost as if he felt the ghostly presence.

“Would you mind if we go to the cemetery in Fallen tomorrow?”

Burnett stopped walking. “Why would you want to go there?”

Kylie rubbed her arms to try to chase away the chill. “It has to do with my latest ghost.”

“Which is a good reason not to go,” he said.

Kylie frowned at the thought that she and Holiday were the only ones who weren't antighost. "The spirit can't remember who she is, and because the first time she appeared to me was when my mom and I were driving past the cemetery, I think she might be buried there. I asked Holiday about going and she said it would be okay as long as I had someone with me and if you guys knew where I was."

His expression didn't change, but something about the way he held his shoulders told her he'd given in. "Let me check with Holiday. If she says it's okay, I'll ... I'll go with you."

"You shouldn't have to go. I'm sure Della and I would—"

"No." From his tone she knew he wouldn't budge. "Until we know the threat against you is over, you won't leave the camp without me." His stern gaze punctuated his words, and then he continued, "I'm serious about this, Kylie. I don't want to scare you, but if this is Mario or Red, they won't give up. They're waiting for a time that you are at your most vulnerable to attack again. And next time you may not be so lucky."

* * *

Kylie, with a cloud of the spirit's cold following her, walked into the cabin a few minutes later. Della and Miranda were sitting at the kitchen table, chatting.

Miranda popped up. "Did you see Perry? Was he not totally off-the-chart awesome? He even fought for me when he was in human form."

"Yeah, I saw that," Kylie said, hanging back a bit, not wanting to ruin the moment by having them sense the spirit. Kylie looked at Della, whose eyes still glowed with anger.

"Is Burnett sending Clark packing?" Della asked. "Because if he doesn't, I'm gonna have to teach that warlock a lesson he'll never forget."

Kylie recalled Della taking a hit with the fireball, and she knew that for a vamp that was probably embarrassing—especially when Kylie had somehow managed to catch one and toss it aside. "I know Burnett is going to see him now, but I don't know what he plans on doing about it."

"He burned Miranda's new skirt!" Della held up the skirt, which had been

scorched.

Miranda waved a hand. "I told you it's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal," Della retorted. "If Kylie hadn't been there, he could have hurt you."

"What about you?" Kylie asked, looking at Della. "Did you get burned by the fireball?"

"A bit, but I've already healed." Della's gaze went to Kylie's hand. "You must heal fast, too."

"Yeah." Kylie decided not to tell them that she'd never been burned by Clark's fireball. Or at least she hadn't gotten the sensation that she'd been burned. She recalled Lucas's remark *You really are a protector*. And again, she wondered why he'd sounded almost unhappy about the possibility.

The spirit's cold drew closer, and Kylie ran her hand over her forearms where goose bumps chased goose bumps over her bare skin. She leaned back against the edge of the sofa.

"How pissed is Burnett at me for turning him into a kangaroo?" Miranda asked.

Kylie grinned. "I think he's over it."

"I'd still avoid him for a few days if I were you," Della suggested. "I mean, did you see how mad he was when you turned him back?" She grinned. "Though not as mad as I'd have been. I swear, if it'd been me, I'd have hopped all over your ass, right after I'd kangaroo-punched Clark out. But damn, it was funny seeing Burnett hopping mad."

"I didn't mean to do it," Miranda said. "I wasn't even going for a kangaroo."

"What were you going for?" Kylie asked.

"A cockatoo. I guess I said it wrong." She pursed her lips as if thinking. "But hey, at least I figured out how to turn him back. I should get some credit for that."

"Credit?" Della snickered. "If you hadn't been able to change him back, I have a feeling you'd be kangaroo food right about now."

Miranda sighed.

Kylie decided to change the subject and looked at Della. "So what

happened with the pact?”

Della frowned. “Let’s just say it didn’t work out as well for us. But forget about us. How did things go with Lucas? I saw you two went outside for a while.”

Kylie bit down on her lip, unsure how much she wanted to share. “It went good.”

“How good?” asked Miranda, never one to appreciate privacy. The little witch even rubbed her hands together in giddy anticipation.

“Really good,” Kylie answered, remembering how it had felt to dance with Lucas—to kiss him as if they had all night. The memory chased away some of the ghostly chill prickling her bare arms. Kylie glanced around again to make sure Jane Doe hadn’t manifested.

“Good as in first base? Second base?” Miranda’s hazel eyes got big. “Or are we talking third?”

“We just kissed.” Remembering their accusation that she was up for sainthood, Kylie added, “And slow danced in the moonlight. It was very romantic.”

“Romantic or sexy?” Della asked. “There’s a difference, you know.”

Kylie frowned. “No, there’s not.”

“Oh yes, there is,” Della smarted off. “Romantic is ... ‘Oh, he’s so sweet,’ and sexy is ... ‘He’s so hot, my panties might just catch fire.’ So which was it? Romantic or sexy?”

“Panties catch fire?” Kylie rolled her eyes.

“It’s just an expression, but you know what I mean,” Della insisted. “So which was it? Romantic?” She held out one hand. “Or sexy?” She held out the other.

Kylie considered the question and then admitted the truth. “It was both.”

Miranda squealed. “Was it as hot as the kiss at the creek he gave you?”

Kylie remembered being at the creek with Lucas over a month ago. She’d fallen on top of him and they had kissed. Kissed deeply while the cold, crisp water ran over them and Lucas’s hot body pressed against hers. And she decided Della might have a point about the difference between sexy and romantic. The kiss at the creek had been sexy. Tonight had been ... well,

more romantic, but still sexy.

“You know, you guys have to start having your own romantic escapades. I’m tired of being the only one sharing this stuff.”

“We’re working on it,” Miranda said, and shrugged. “So? Give us more details. Was tonight as hot as the famous creek kiss?”

Socks waddled out of her bedroom and came and bumped his pointed nose against her ankle. “Not quite as hot,” Kylie said, reaching down to pick him up. She pulled the little skunk close and nuzzled his nose. “But almost.”

Remembering just how “almost as hot” tonight had been, Kylie looked at her two best friends and wondered if they might know the answer to the question she planned on asking Lucas later. “How much do you guys know about werewolves and their powers?”

“I know they’re not nearly as powerful as vampires,” Della piped up.

“I’m not talking physical strength. Other kinds of power.”

“What other kinds of power?” asked Della.

Kylie tried to figure out how to put it. “The power to persuade a girl to do things?”

“Things? What kind of things?” Della glanced at Miranda, whose eyes grew round. “Do you mean...?” They both turned back to Kylie.

“Okay, spill it,” Della said. “Just what the hell happened out in the moonlight?”

“Yeah,” Miranda added. “And don’t leave out a single juicy detail.”

Chapter Seventeen

Kylie felt her cheeks begin to redden. “Okay, it’s not what you think...”

Even as she said the words, she knew she was lying.

“Okay, fine,” she said. “It’s exactly what you think.”

Miranda’s mouth dropped open. “You mean ... Did you—”

“No.” Kylie slapped her hand against her chest. “God, no. I mean, like I told you, we just danced and kissed. But...”

“But what?” Della demanded.

“Yeah,” Miranda said. “But what?”

Kylie took a deep breath. “But ... he said something that made me think that maybe he had the ability to convince me to, you know.” She blushed again.

“Do the horizontal bop?” Della offered. “Do the Humpty dance? Knock boots?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “Where do you come up with that stuff?”

Della grinned. “I get around.”

Miranda giggled.

“Uh-huh.” Kylie felt her cheeks grow even hotter. “Anyway, yeah, that’s what I mean,” she added before the smart-mouthed vamp could come up with some more half-vulgar, half-hilarious terms for sex. “I just want to know if werewolves have any special powers, okay?”

Della leaned back in her chair. “Maybe he just means he’ll seduce you by kissing you. Let’s face it, he’s pretty hot and you said his kisses were out of this world. Hey, he makes my knees weak, and I’m vampire with a natural

dislike for weres.”

“He is hot,” Miranda added.

Kylie tried not to think about her two roommates weak-kneed for Lucas.

“Then you don’t believe that power really exists?” she asked instead.

“Yeah, it exists,” Miranda said, and her brow pinched as if she were thinking. “I’ve heard something about it. Nothing specific, but just a few mumblings.”

“What have you heard?” Della and Kylie asked at the same time. Kylie put Socks down, moved to the table, and dropped onto a kitchen chair. For some reason, the ghost had decided to move on, which didn’t bother her at all. She could use some downtime.

Especially right now.

“I can’t remember the details,” Miranda said. “Just that it’s a little dangerous to date a were. It has something to do with animal pheromones. They’re basically animals, and all animals have a natural way of attracting the opposite sex.”

“Attracting like how?” Kylie asked.

“Well,” Miranda said, “lizards have a brightly colored balloony thing that they blow out from their throats and supposedly girl lizards find that all kinds of sexy.”

Kylie shook her head. “Lucas doesn’t have a balloon in his throat.”

“Hey,” Della added. “Have you ever seen those blackbirds—grackles, I think they’re called—do the mating dance? They jump around on one foot and ruffle their feathers out. The females supposedly get horny just seeing the male birds do it. I mean, the guy with the better feathers always wins. Or is it the bigger feathers?”

Miranda snickered. “And I heard some male baboons have brightly colored buttocks and they go around mooning the females. Supposedly it’s a huge turn-on.”

While Kylie was serious about finding answers, she couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t think Lucas has colored buttocks, either. Not that I’ve seen them.” She laughed harder.

Before their conversation was over, Della was on the computer looking up

strange mating behaviors that included everything from exploding testicles to slinging poop with a tail, and they laughed themselves silly until way past midnight. It was, Kylie decided as she finally slipped into bed, just the type of evening she needed.

Although she still didn't have the answer to her original question: Just what kind of power did Lucas really have?

And could she trust him not to misuse it? Her gut said she could. But was her gut being persuaded by outside influences?

* * *

The floating sensation filled Kylie's head several hours after she went to bed that night. Mental alarms went off. Was this Red again? Then she realized the difference: she was floating, which meant she was the one moving.

She considered trying to stop it, but she was too tired, so she just let herself go. Let herself float and zip through the air—moving through clouds of sleep.

The sense of freedom was exhilarating. She didn't have a clue where she was going, and she didn't care. Obviously, her subconscious had a plan. But what?

And then she saw him. He looked so good, lying in his bed, that her breath caught and she put on her flying brakes. He was shirtless, too. The covers came low on his waist, several inches past his belly button. Her gaze moved up and then down his bare torso. There was a lot of skin to appreciate.

Then she studied his face. So peaceful in his slumber. His eyelashes rested against his cheeks. His hair rested against his brow in a ruffled mess, as if he'd run his fingers through it too many times. Her heart spasmed and then she felt herself moving closer, into the room, into the bed, into his ... head.

No! She stopped herself at the last moment.

She'd vowed to get over Derek. To move past him. Unfortunately, her subconscious hadn't gotten that message. Then, as if gravity, or maybe her own will, started pulling her backward, she let herself sail through the clouds, back through the universe of sleep.

She woke up with a start, as if she'd been slammed back into her body. Catching her breath, she reached for her pillow and hugged it tightly to her chest. The vision of Derek asleep filled her head. *No! No! Don't think about Derek. Think about Lucas.*

Lucas, who'd danced with her in the moonlight. Lucas, who'd kissed her so sweetly. Lucas, whose blood raced every time she was with him.

Closing her eyes, she lost herself again in the oblivion of sleep. The sweet nothingness of slumber. The next thing she knew, she stood in a room of clouds, in front of Lucas. Thoughts of Red hit, but Lucas spoke. "It's me. Feel me. I'm hot." He reached out and took her hand in his. His touch sent warmth through her palm and her heart.

She remembered telling herself to think about Lucas, and she wondered if she was learning to control her dreamscapes. A little thrill ran through her as the sensation of accomplishment filled her chest. With so many unknowns and out-of-control issues happening, it felt great to think she'd mastered something.

He smiled up at her with his sleepy blue eyes. "I was beginning to think you would never visit me in my dreams again."

Suddenly, the clouds evaporated like unwanted fog and they were back outside where they'd danced earlier that evening. The moon and stars cast lovely shadows around them. Only this time, the night played the music. Crickets and an occasional bird harmonized with the sound of a light breeze stirring through the leaves of shrubbery and the rustle of live oak trees.

"Shall we dance?" He held out his hand.

She started to place her hand in his palm when she realized he didn't have on a shirt. Instead of jeans, he had on a long, loose-fitting pair of boxers. The kind boys slept in—if they didn't sleep nude. The kind the movie stars often wore in those sexy photos.

She swallowed a nervous tickle. He looked really good. Warm and so touchable. And almost naked. As if nothing more than a flick of his thumb could leave him completely bare.

"Uh..." She waved her hand up and down. "Shouldn't you get dressed?"

He grinned and then laughed outright—something he didn't do often.

“This is your dream, Kylie. You dressed me for the occasion. You’re in charge of what I wear. So, the better question is ... is this how you want me to be dressed?”

She felt her face heat up and wished she could deny it, but Holiday had told her as much during their discussions of dreamscaping. She controlled everything, from the person she visited to what happened during her visit. So what did it mean that she had visited Derek first?

And why had she wanted Lucas half-dressed?

Okay, that was a stupid question.

“Oh...” She let her voice fade away, not really sure what else to say. That’s when she noticed what she was wearing. The same short pajama set she’d worn to bed—they consisted of a pale blue body-hugging tank top and a pair of tight dark blue boy shorts. A bathing suit would have shown more skin, but she still felt slightly naked.

She wasn’t sure how she could change the clothes they were wearing, but she closed her eyes and concentrated for a couple of seconds. When she opened her eyes again, she saw she was back in her black party dress—much more appropriate. Lucas wore jeans and a white T-shirt with a big yellow smiley face on it.

He looked down at his shirt and then back up at her with a funny frown. “Seriously? This is what you chose?”

“I’m new at this,” she said, defending herself. “But it’s not that bad.”

“A smiley face?” He chuckled again. “Just remind me to never let you buy me clothes.”

She laughed, and then he held out his hand again. “Are we here to dance?”

This time, she took it and let him pull her against him.

When his warm arms went around her and his chest melted against hers, it reminded her how it felt to slip into a warm bed on a cold night. She sighed at how comforting it felt to be held by him again. When she rested her cheek on his chest, his hand moved around her waist and his almost electric pulse fluttered against her lower back. That flutter seemed to move inside her and caused her blood to pulse.

She recalled the question she needed to ask him and lifted her head and rested her chin against his chest. He looked down and met her gaze. His blue eyes were hooded with something that looked like passion, and she wondered if her own eyes showed the same emotion.

“Can I ask you something?”

“It’s your dream,” he whispered. “We can do *anything* you want.” There was an emphasis on the word *anything* that caused a ripple of nervousness to move through her.

Anything.

Taking a deep breath, she stopped dancing and slid her hand up his chest to where she felt his heart pumping.

“Tonight, you mentioned that you were good at ... the art of persuasion.”

His lips curled into a smile. “Yeah, I remember that.” His voice had a teasing, sensual quality that made her want to shiver and press herself closer to him.

“What ... what did you mean by that?”

His smile turned ultrasexy. “I’d rather show you.”

She nipped at her bottom lip, considering his offer. She was tempted—Lord, how she was tempted. And what would be the harm in saying yes, just this one time? After all, this was just a dream. Anything that happened here would have no effect on her real life. Right?

“Relax, Kylie,” he said. “It’s just a dream.” His words echoed her own thoughts. Then his warm lips brushed against her brow and the ripple of unease increased.

“Maybe it’s just a dream,” she said. “But it feels real and I’m ... I prefer you just answered my question the old-fashioned way.”

He nodded. For a second, he appeared not to want to continue, but then he said, “It’s not like a trick or anything. It’s part of what I am. It’s instinctual.”

“What’s instinctual?”

“When a were is with a potential mate, our bodies react in certain ways.” He paused as if he knew his explanation wouldn’t be enough. “Last night, when you had your head on my chest, you heard the sound ... the low growl.”

“Like a purring or humming,” she said, remembering being lulled by the soft noise.

He nodded. “Well, that reverberation is supposed to be somewhat hypnotic. It encourages our potential mate to want to be closer.”

Close and naked, Kylie thought, but didn’t say it. “It makes one dizzy, too,” she said, remembering how she’d felt last night.

He caught her face in his hands. “I guess maybe a little.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek. “But it’s not a ploy to trick girls into bed. It’s just a natural thing male weres do. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not exactly worried,” she said. And she wasn’t. Because as potentially dangerous as the werewolf’s purr could be, she didn’t think she had to worry about Lucas misusing it. Last night, he’d had a chance to let things escalate between them and he’d put a stop to it.

“Like I told you,” she said. “I trust you.” And she still did.

He studied her face. “But?”

Okay, there was a but. She hesitated to find the right words. “But knowledge is power. I like knowing what I’m dealing with. And I like being the one in the driver’s seat, if you know what I mean.”

He frowned slightly as if he didn’t like her answer. “It’s not like entrapment. A female has to be close, really close, to a male were before she’s even aware of it.”

Kylie smiled. “So I guess I need to be careful how close I get to you.”

“Or not.” He leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. “I really, really like you, Kylie Galen.”

“And I you, Lucas Parker.” She raised herself up on her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips.

His eyes met hers and he let go of a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?” she asked, sensing his remark meant something.

“Okay, I’ll be a bit more patient. Okay, I’m happy with this. With just being this close to you.” He picked her up and twirled her around.

She grinned when he set her back on her feet. “Thanks,” she said, and touched his lips with her fingertips.

He caught her hand. “We just have to be a little careful when we’re not

dreaming.”

“Careful about what?”

“Like I told you last night. The closer to the full moon, the more I run on instinct. And sometimes, my instincts are short on patience.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. “Do you mean we can’t see each other when it’s time for your change?”

“I didn’t say that.” He frowned. “We can see each other. But we shouldn’t ... dance in the moonlight for too long. Or roll around on the ground by the creek.” He grinned. “Or go skinny-dipping at the swimming hole.” His tone seemed to deepen.

“That was just a dream.” She felt her face flush.

“A good one, too.” He smiled. Then he breathed in as if to sober his thoughts. “But basically, we’ll be fine as long as we don’t play too close to the fire until after the change.” He ran his hand through the curtain of her hair and brought a handful of it to his nose. “Unless you change your mind. You do know that what happens in dreams isn’t really real, right? I mean, we could—”

Suddenly, she felt something yanking her from behind and pulling her away from Lucas. Pulling her to someplace she didn’t want to go.

Lucas yelled out her name. But a cloud appeared between them. She realized that two men dressed in white lab coats had her in their grips. One on each arm, holding her so tightly that she couldn’t get away. The camp had dissolved. Now she was in a building of some kind, and the two men pulled her down a dark, dismal hall. She screamed and tried to pull away, but she was helpless.

Her heart thumped in her chest, and she tasted fear on her tongue. Nothing made sense. Then she remembered—this was a dream. All she had to do was wake up.

She slammed her eyes shut. Tight. Then tighter.

Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

Suddenly, a bright light shone in her eyes. Everything had changed again. The men who had dragged her away were gone. She felt disoriented, lost, alone. Empty. She felt empty. What was happening to her?

The light shifted from one eye to the other, and she saw a man's face inches from her nose. She realized she was lying in a bed. Not her bed, though. Not the twin one at camp or her full-size mattress at home. This bed felt different. She tried to move but felt numb. No, not numb—she felt paralyzed.

“Is she okay?” a female voice asked. Kylie cut her eyes to the side to see her new captor, but she was out of vision range, and Kylie was unable to turn her neck. Panic started to tighten her throat again.

“She should be,” said the man, shining the flashlight into her eyes.

Kylie blinked and when she opened her eyes, she saw his pattern. He was vampire.

Then he turned her chin in his large hands and ran his finger over her head. Oddly enough, Kylie realized he touched her bare scalp. She was missing her hair.

Missing her hair?

She blinked again and remembered her ghost, Jane Doe. Was that what was happening? Was this a vision sent to her by the amnesiac ghost—one of those crazy ones where Kylie actually became the spirit? Fear swelled in her chest. She cut her eyes to the side and stared at the man's eyes until she saw her own reflection. Or saw the ghost's reflection.

It should have calmed her, but the panic built higher. She wanted out of here. She hadn't wanted to be here to start with. She'd already lost everything that mattered. Thoughts, feelings, and emotions collided in her chest and she wasn't sure which ones were her own and which ones belonged to her spirit.

“Wake up. Kylie, wake up!” Kylie could hear voices coming from somewhere far away. But then the voices faded and she felt the vampire's hand on her head again.

“She's healing nicely,” he said. “Maybe she'll just take a while longer to come around. Let's do another MRI scan on her.” The man stood up and twitched his brows at her. “Then again, it could be more. Her pattern still hasn't emerged.” He frowned. “I don't understand that. Something isn't right.”

“What do I tell her husband? He woke up several hours ago and is asking

for her,” the female voice said. Kylie had yet to see the owner of that voice.

Help me! Kylie screamed in her head, because she couldn’t make her throat work.

“Tell him she’s doing fine. But we’re keeping her for observation. Release him if he’s ready to go.”

“Do you think she’s going to live?” asked the woman again.

“I don’t know.” He slipped his flashlight into his coat pocket. “But I guess it’s inevitable that we will lose a few subjects. We just have to remember it’s for a good cause.”

“I guess,” said the female voice.

“Get me the results of the test. However, if she hasn’t awakened by tonight, go ahead and extinguish her.”

Extinguish her?

Kylie’s fear ratcheted up a notch.

Noooooooooooooo!

Chapter Eighteen

“Damn it! She’s not breathing!” a familiar male voice boomed in Kylie’s ears, and she wanted more than anything to answer him. She tried to move but couldn’t. She still felt paralyzed.

Help me. Please ...

“She did this once before.” That was Della talking now, but panic filled her voice. Della never showed panic or fear. To the contrary, the vampire was fearless.

“Kylie, wake up!” the deep male voice said, and this time Kylie recognized it as belonging to Lucas.

Suddenly, Kylie’s lungs opened up and demanded air. She opened her mouth and gasped and started coughing as if her lungs wanted to reject the oxygen. Rolling over on her side, she continued to cough, certain she was going to blow a lung. Finally, she opened her eyes and realized she was on the kitchen floor in her cabin.

After a few more seconds passed, the coughing stopped and she focused on breathing. Someone grabbed her and pulled her up into their lap and held her. Heat surrounded her. He was hot. So hot. And she was cold. So damn cold.

She focused on the face of the person cradling her so tenderly. So close. So warm. And his eyes were so blue. Lucas.

Then his face faded and she saw a strange woman’s face moving close. The feel of Lucas’s arms around her seemed like a memory that time was pulling away a little bit each moment.

“She stopped breathing again!” Lucas shouted, and he started rocking her. “What do I do? Someone tell me what to do!”

“Holiday says she’ll be okay.”

Kylie recognized Burnett’s voice, but it seemed to be coming from somewhere else, from someplace far, far away.

“Holiday thinks she’s probably having a vision. That sometime...” His voice faded into the background.

The vision yanked Kylie back completely, and she watched in horror as a group of women brought something up to her face. Only it wasn’t her. She was experiencing Jane Doe’s life, but it felt as real as if it were happening to her.

She felt a thick, nubby towel being forced against her mouth. She gasped, tried to move, but couldn’t. She—Jane Doe—was paralyzed, and someone was smothering her.

The unfairness of it stung her throat as her lungs begged for air. Everything went black and then she saw the spirit standing over her. She leaned down, her blue lips frosted over. “*They killed me. They really killed me,*” she said. “*You must breathe, though. You must live.*”

Kylie’s lungs screamed for oxygen, but she felt unable to gasp for the air she needed. Then she became aware that she was back in her kitchen.

Kylie heard Miranda chanting in the distance. She heard Della muttering that Lucas should give Kylie CPR. And Burnett kept asking questions to Holiday over the phone.

“Breathe, damn it!” Lucas yelled.

She pressed her forehead tight against Lucas’s bare chest and pulled big swallows of oxygen into her throat. Tears filled her eyes, and she cried for the life that had been so brutally taken. Cried for the woman whose name she didn’t know. Cried for the woman who, in addition to losing her life, had lost her child. How unfair was that?

“She’s breathing again,” Lucas said, cradling her tighter in his arms. “And she’s crying.” He dipped his head. “Shh,” he whispered for her ears only. And then he said to the others, “I’m taking her to her bed. She’s so cold.”

Kylie felt herself being lifted in his arms. She vaguely recalled that he’d

been the one to carry her to the bed that night weeks ago when she'd had the vision of Daniel, and for some reason, it felt right him being here now. It felt right when he lowered her on the bed and then crawled in beside her and held her against his chest, with his arms around her. And being so tired, too emotionally spent to talk to anyone, it especially felt right when she fell asleep with her head pillowed on his warm chest.

* * *

Unfortunately, when Kylie stirred awake a short while later, still curled up in Lucas's arms, Burnett, Miranda, Della, and Lucas all stared at her in shock and concern, and it felt a bit like getting caught French kissing a boy in public. It didn't feel so right.

She pushed off his chest, brushed her hair from her face, and gazed at all her onlookers, who stared at her as if her head might start spinning or something. Didn't they know their own abilities and powers were just as weird to those who didn't have them?

The words *You okay?* and a couple different variations of the same question came from all four people.

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"She's awake and says she's fine," Burnett said into his cell phone, which he held to his ear. "Yeah, I'll have her call you as soon as she's able."

Kylie recalled hearing Burnett talking to Holiday. "I'm sorry," she said. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to apologize. What happened wasn't her fault. Though she still wasn't sure exactly what had happened, beyond her getting caught in a vision about Jane Doe's death. Still, she supposed it was a good idea to apologize for causing a scene in the middle of the night.

She looked at Burnett. "How did ... Why are you...?" Embarrassment fluttered in her stomach. "Was I screaming so loud it woke the whole camp or something?"

"No. You hardly screamed at all this time," Della said. "I woke up when you were walking around the kitchen, muttering and, well, screaming just a bit. When I went to see if you were okay, you were, like, totally out of it. I mean, the lights were on but nobody was home kind of thing. You weren't

here.”

“Yeah,” Miranda said, moving in. “And I woke up when Lucas was trying to bust down our door saying he had to check on you.” Miranda looked at Lucas. “How did you know she was having another one of her dreams?”

Lucas didn’t answer, and Kylie recalled that she’d been dreamscaping with him when the vision had started. Had he seen it, too? He must have if he ran here.

“I ... uh...”

Kylie figured he didn’t tell them they were dreamscaping because he knew she probably wouldn’t want him to share that with everyone.

“It wasn’t a dream,” Kylie answered, hoping to shift the question from Lucas. “It was a vision.”

“That’s what Holiday says, too,” Burnett said, sitting in a chair beside the bed. When Kylie glanced at him, he added, “I was walking the camp when I heard the commotion and I came running.”

Kylie nodded and glanced at the clock on her bedside table. It was almost three in the morning. “You guys should all be in bed asleep. You should go.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Burnett asked.

“I’m fine,” Kylie said, and she was fine. At least she thought she was, but she needed to figure out what the vision meant without an audience.

“Holiday wants you to call her,” Burnett said.

“I will,” Kylie said, and the words scratched her raw throat.

Burnett nodded and waved for Lucas to follow him out. But Lucas stayed sitting on the corner of her bed. “I want to talk with her just a second,” he said.

Burnett looked at Kylie, and when she nodded, he started out. “Keep it short.”

“Do you need us?” Miranda asked, and stifled a yawn.

“No, you two go to bed. I’m okay. Thanks.” Kylie watched both Miranda and Della walk out, and then she looked at Lucas. He was frowning, his brow crinkled and his blue eyes filled with all sorts of concern.

He leaned in a bit and spoke low. “Are you sure you’re okay? That was freaky.”

“You saw it, too?” she asked.

“I saw you being pulled away by two guys. But then all of a sudden it wasn’t you. It was some other woman. And then it was like you disappeared in a cloud. I woke up, scared shitless, and I ran over here to make sure you were okay. When I got on your front porch, I heard you walking around and I guess I lost it.” Fear flashed across his face. “Does this ghost vision stuff happen all the time?”

She wondered if he knew she was equally frightened of him turning into a wolf. “No. Not all the time.”

“What is it? Why does it happen?”

Kylie hesitated. “It’s the spirits’ way of showing me what happened to them.”

“The spirits who are haunting you?” He looked mortified and even glanced around as if thinking they were there.

“Yeah. But you can relax. She’s not here now.” She settled back against the pillows. And then, “It’s not as bad as it seems.” She recalled how helpless she’d felt in the vision. She recalled the horrifying sensation of being smothered to death, and her heart hurt for the ghost. Okay, maybe it was as bad as it seemed, but if it helped the spirit pass on, then Kylie would do it.

Kylie’s phone rang. It startled her until she remembered she was supposed to call Holiday. “I should ... It’s probably Holiday,” she said.

He leaned down and pressed a quick kiss on her cheek. “Call me if you need me.”

She watched Lucas go and reached for the phone. She didn’t check the caller ID. She just assumed it was Holiday. Who else would be calling her at three in the morning? But she assumed wrong.

“Are you okay?” Derek’s voice filled the line, and the image of him shirtless in his bed, with the covers pulled to his waist, filled her head.

Her cheeks flushed. “I’m fine. How did you ... know?”

“You came to me,” he said. “In a dream.”

“I did?” she asked, and bit down on her lip and stared at her lap. Had she returned to Derek and not known it? She saw Socks crawl out from under the bed and leap up to be with her. No doubt he’d been scared of Lucas.

“You were here for only a second and then you left.”

She felt a little better. “Oh yeah. I realized what was happening. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“I wouldn’t have been disturbed,” he said, sounding disappointed. “I thought maybe you’d come to me because you needed something.”

“No. I’m still learning how the dreamscaping works. I woke up ... there.”

He paused. “So you don’t need me?”

“No. I’m fine.” She closed her eyes and tried not to let the caring sound of his voice lure her into wanting things she couldn’t have. He was with Ellie now. Or maybe not with Ellie. It didn’t matter. What did matter was that he’d ended their relationship. He hadn’t even wanted to try to fix whatever it was that made it hard for him to be with her.

And she’d moved on. She was with Lucas—maybe not actually going out, but practically. And he’d been here for her. He wanted to be here for her.

“Okay, I just ... wanted to check on you. I do care about you, Kylie.” His voice dropped, and for a moment he sounded like the old Derek. The Derek who’d cared about her. The Derek who’d have done anything to make her happy. “You know that, don’t you?”

She swallowed before answering. “Yeah,” she said honestly. “I care about you, too.” And then she forced herself to ask, “How’s Ellie doing?”

He was quiet for a second, as if he knew what she was doing. Reminding him that they were just friends. “She’s good. Adapting.”

“Good,” Kylie said. “I met her briefly the other day. She seems nice.” *And very pretty.* She bit down on her lip.

“She is nice,” he said.

“Yeah. Well, I’m happy for you.” Kylie wasn’t sure how true it was, but she wanted it to be true, and for that reason it didn’t feel like that big of a lie.

“I told you we’re not really together,” he said, sounding frustrated.

“Yeah,” she said, and when he didn’t say anything else, she decided to do the right thing. “I need to go. I’m supposed to call Holiday.”

“Okay,” he said.

She disconnected the call and pushed away the melancholy. She did need to call Holiday, and then she had to figure out what the ghost had meant her

to learn from the vision.

* * *

Even though she was sleep-deprived, Kylie called her mom first thing the next morning. She had to know what happened.

“So?” Kylie dropped back on the bed.

“So, what?” Her mom sounded as if she were still sleeping.

“Was it a business lunch or a date lunch?”

“Oh. It was...” Her mom’s pause told Kylie more than her mom probably wanted to share. “It was fun.”

“How fun?” Kylie tried not to let her emotions leak into her voice as she knotted a handful of sheet in her hand.

“Just fun. I enjoyed myself, that’s all. I don’t mean ... It’s not as if ... Look, baby, we had a good time, but I’m not sure anything will come of it.”

“He didn’t ask you out again?” Kylie petted Socks, who had jumped up to get some attention.

“He said he’d call. But you know men always say that. And they never do.”

Kylie tightened her hold on her phone. “If he calls, will you go out with him?”

“I don’t know,” her mom said. “Oh, someone’s knocking on the front door. I’d better run.” The line went dead.

Kylie sighed. She had a sneaking suspicion nobody was at the door. Her mom just didn’t want to talk about it. Not that she could blame her.

Seconds ticked by, but Kylie didn’t move. She just lay there, stretched out on her twin mattress, staring up at the ceiling. Ambivalence filled her chest. Did this mean her mom and her stepdad would never get back together?

* * *

A quick shower later, Kylie walked out of the bathroom with a towel around her to find Miranda standing attentively in the hall, as if waiting on her.

“What’s up?” Kylie asked.

“I’m your shadow,” Miranda announced proudly.

“I thought Della—”

“You don’t think I can protect you?” She held out her pinky. “I have powers, girlie.”

Actually, Kylie had doubts about Miranda’s protecting abilities, but she wouldn’t dare say that. “No, I just remember Burnett saying it was Della this morning.”

“She went to her sunrise ceremony and I’m supposed to get you to the office, where Della will meet us in about five minutes. So let’s go.”

Kylie looked down at her towel. “Can I get dressed first?”

“Someone’s not a morning person this fine day.” Miranda made a funny face, and Kylie took off to her room to get dressed.

A few minutes later, they walked out the cabin door. Miranda turned back to the door, waved her arms around, and began to chant. The last time Miranda did that, she felt unwanted visitors; it turned out Mario and Red had been hanging out, watching Kylie.

“What are you doing?” Kylie asked. “Do you sense someone’s here again?”

Miranda frowned. “A little.” She pinched her right thumb and forefinger together.

“A little?” Annoyance snaked through Kylie. “How can you sense someone here just a little? I mean, they’re either here or not, right?”

“Don’t wig out on me,” Miranda said. “I just got a feeling and I thought it couldn’t hurt to do a protection spell.”

“Have you told Burnett?” Kylie asked.

“I was going to but I’m kind of scared to talk to him alone after...” She flushed. “You know.”

The memory of a marsupial Burnett hopping around the dining hall, dodging Clark’s fireballs and Perry’s dragon breath, flashed across Kylie’s mind. Hence, part of the reason Kylie doubted Miranda’s ability to protect her.

“Anyway,” Miranda went on, “you said Holiday would be back today. So I figure I’ll just tell her then.”

Kylie rolled her eyes and wanted to point out that if Miranda was right and there were intruders, Burnett needed to know ASAP, but she bit her tongue. A few hours probably wouldn't matter all that much. Besides, Miranda had a point; she was in a bad mood this morning, and it wasn't fair to take it out on Miranda.

As for why Kylie was in a bad mood, well, she figured her bad mood probably hinged on the fact that she was running on only a few hours' sleep. She and Holiday had spent almost an hour on the phone talking last night. They'd discussed everything from Holiday's aunt's passing to Kylie's vision and what it could and couldn't mean. When Kylie asked her about the healing powers and the whole "giving up a piece of her soul" issue, Holiday suggested they wait until they could talk about it when she got back today.

Kylie had almost told Holiday about her misgivings with Burnett over the FRU library card issue but decided to wait and discuss that in person, too.

Miranda did one more wave over the door, pulling Kylie back to the present.

"Do you mind if I tell Burnett?" Kylie asked Miranda.

Miranda made a face but then said, "Fine. But I'm telling you, it's just a feeling. It's not nearly as strong as the last time I had one. It might not be anything."

"Or it could be something," Kylie said. And since that something probably had to do with her, it made her a wee bit nervous. And face it, she had enough to be nervous about.

* * *

Kylie stood in front of the heavy, creaky-looking rusted gates of the Fallen Cemetery. Burnett stood to her right—and Della held her spot to her left. Neither vampire looked especially happy to be there.

She couldn't blame them. She wasn't all that thrilled about it herself. But after experiencing the vision sent by Jane Doe, Kylie was more eager than ever to get this spirit sent on her way.

"You sure you want to do this?" Della asked, her voice laced with fear.

Kylie nodded, but in truth she wasn't sure about anything anymore. She

took a look around. If Hollywood ever needed a set for a horror film, this was it. As if to prove her point, a gust of wind picked up and the gate swayed and creaked. The eerie sound filled the air.

Air that should have brought with it a sunny mood to match the morning. Above them, blue, cloudless skies promised a picture-perfect day filled with cheer. A vibrant sun beamed down and set the last of the night's dew in a sparkle. And yet nothing felt sunny, vibrant, or cheery.

To the contrary, it felt cold—so cold that Kylie's skin crawled with goose bumps. Della let go of a deep breath and steam billowed from her lips.

"I used to hang out in cemeteries sometimes," Della said. "They never felt like this." She hugged herself against the chill.

"The dead don't disturb humans nearly as much as they do supernaturals," Burnett said. Even his voice sounded hesitant. He looked at Kylie. "If you're at all worried about doing this, just say the word and wait until Holiday is here."

Kylie considered it and then remembered the pain, grief, and confusion the ghost had felt. Jane Doe needed answers as much as Kylie did.

"No. I'm fine."

"You're lying," Della said.

"I know." Kylie looked at her and then over to Burnett. "You guys don't have to come inside."

"We don't?" Hope filled Della's voice.

"The hell we don't," Burnett snapped, and took a step forward. "If you're determined to do this, let's get it over with."

Chapter Nineteen

As soon as they crossed into the grounds of the Fallen Cemetery, a big gust of wind slammed the gate shut behind them.

Kylie started. Della jumped and growled, exposing her elongated canines. Burnett didn't move, but his eyes glowed a bright yellow.

"Don't worry," he muttered. "I can knock the gate down if I have to."

Della looked at Kylie. "I do not see why you feel compelled to do this."

Kylie looked from Della to Burnett. "Can I have some space? I need it to communicate with them."

She hated having to lie, but she hoped the offer of space would alleviate the hardship of their having to accompany her into the graveyard. She knew they didn't want to be here. It seemed crazy, but supernaturals hated all things related to ghosts. At least maybe the coldness she always felt when a ghost was present wouldn't bite into them the way she knew it would take a chomp out of her.

"Yes, go ahead, but don't go so far that we can't see you," said Burnett.

Considering that Kylie had yet to tell Burnett about Miranda's "little feeling," she didn't mind him keeping a close visual on her. Not that right now she worried about Mario and his grandson. Right now, it was the whispered voices Kylie heard that concerned her.

Looking at the graveled paths between row after row of graves, she let her eyes shift from tombstone to tombstone, hoping one of them would call out to her. Some graves had small concrete or marble markers with just names and dates inscribed on them. Others were ornate statues. Some looked new; others

were painted with mold and time. Some had vines clinging to the arms and legs of angel and saintlike figures, as if trying to claim them from deep beneath the earth where only the dead lived.

She couldn't see any of the ghosts yet, but she could hear them. They all talked at once. Chattering. Like two or three radios left on at the same time, but with tons of static. If they were speaking to one another or to her, she wasn't sure.

Some of the voices felt as if they were a block away, others felt as if their owners stood so close that Kylie could touch them if she moved her hand. Not that she wanted to touch them. Their cold already surrounded her, reaching for her like hands trying to warm themselves against a fire.

Kylie realized in a way that was what she was to them. She was like a fire, something that drew them. She was life. Probably the only life that they had been able to feel in a long time. Or maybe the only life that could feel them.

Footsteps sounded and Kylie looked to her right down the opposite path. An old man, his cane in his hand, shuffled between the row of grave sites. For a second, Kylie didn't know to which world he belonged.

But then she noticed Burnett and Della twitching their brows at him. Kylie did the same and was not surprised when his brain pattern revealed he was human. All of a sudden, an elderly woman of the same age appeared behind him. Her gray hair was long and thin and hung without luster at her shoulders. She wore one of those housedresses Kylie's grandmother had always worn. This one was a blue paisley print. On her feet were a pair of baby blue slippers.

It took only a second for Kylie to realize that she was not of this world.

"You're not taking your meds like you should be, are you?" she said to the old man. *"I can tell because your ankles are swollen. You're supposed to take the little red pills twice a day, not the blue ones. What are you trying to do? Kill yourself? You promised me you'd take care of yourself. Why won't you ever listen to me?"*

Then the woman shifted her gaze and stared right at Kylie. Her aged gray eyes widened, then she vanished. Kylie hadn't taken her next breath when the

woman materialized inches from her. Her skin was a dead gray color that matched her eyes. Her hair, only a slightly different shade of gray, got caught in the wind, and it swept up and floated almost motionlessly in the air around her head.

“Mother of God, you can see me,” the elderly woman said.

The spirit’s nearness brought more chills running down Kylie’s spine. But the drop in temperature wasn’t nearly as disturbing as the sudden silence.

The chattering of spirits had stopped. The only noise in the cemetery was the sound of the old man’s footsteps. His shoes scrubbed against the gravel with his faltered steps while his cane tapped down on the earth, searching for a steady spot to rest his thick stick to support himself.

Tap, tap. Shuffle. Tap, tap. Shuffle. Tap. Shuffle.

Kylie sensed more than heard Burnett and Della move back. She’d asked for this space, but now she regretted it. Maybe she didn’t want to be alone. But did she regret it enough to admit her fear? She knew someone like Burnett respected courage, and Kylie didn’t want to come up short.

“Answer me, girl! You can see me, right?” The old woman waved a hand in front of Kylie’s face.

She held her breath. The silence seemed to grow louder. The lack of chatter meant something. It meant the spirits were listening. Waiting for her to answer. Waiting to see if she admitted to being able to see one of their own.

Suddenly the air she pulled into her lungs grew so cold that it hurt. They, the silent spirits, were moving in. She couldn’t see them, couldn’t even hear them, but she could feel them. The cold increased tenfold.

Fear turned her stomach hard. She felt the thinnest layer of ice form on her lips. For a second, she questioned the wisdom of being here. Could she pretend she hadn’t heard the woman? Was it too late to look away from the desperation of the elderly spirit?

“Tell him he needs to take two of the little red pills.”

Kylie still didn’t speak. Frost formed on the tips of her eyelashes, blurring her vision.

“He’s going to get to meet our first great-grandchild. For years, all he’s

talked about was living until he saw his third generation make it into the world. But if he doesn't start taking his pills right, he'll never make it."

Suddenly, the other spirits started materializing around her. Ten, then twenty. Then more. And when they slowly inched closer, Kylie's heart raced with panic. She considered running, but could she outrun them?

"Can she hear us?" asked an older-sounding male spirit.

"Can she see us?" added a younger female spirit, crowding closer.

"Y'all are being silly," came another male spirit's voice. *"The living can't see us no more."*

"But this one can," argued the younger female spirit. *"Look at her."*

The spirits started to move closer.

"Do you think she can help us?" a female asked.

"Maybe," someone else said.

The older male spirit peered into Kylie's face. *"What is she?"*

The spirits crushed closer. A barrage of new questions started spilling out of their mouths, each talking so rapidly that it was hard to distinguish one voice from the other. The sound was so loud, Kylie fought the need to cover her ears. She couldn't remember what Holiday had said about the rules of shutting out the voices. Was it too late to attempt to shut them out?

"You looking for a particular plot?" The words seeped into Kylie's hearing and bounced around her panicked brain. It took a minute to realize that this male voice was different from the rest. The words were not from the dead, but from the living.

Kylie managed to look over and saw the old man walking toward her between two large tombstones. His cane pushed holes through the green grass into the moist dirt. Each time he pulled the tip of the walking stick from the ground, it created a squishing sound that seemed too loud.

Remembering she wasn't completely alone, Kylie glanced around and spotted Burnett standing at the end of the row, watching, ready to pounce in case the elderly gentleman posed any danger.

Little did Burnett know it wasn't him she feared, but all the others he could not see. The old man continued toward her. His presence brought a wave of calm that lessened the chaos sizzling in her blood. The closer he

came, the farther back the spirits moved.

Kylie touched the tip of her tongue to the melting frost across her bottom lip and blinked away the shiny crystals of ice from her lashes.

“You look lost,” he said again, coming to a stop a few feet away from her.

Thankful his presence had brought her some reprieve, she tried to smile, but the gesture seemed to fail.

“Cat got your tongue, child?” he asked.

“No,” Kylie answered. Realizing she hadn’t answered his initial question, she searched for a believable-sounding lie. “Yes, I’m looking ... for my aunt’s grave.”

“What’s her name? I should be able to point you in the right direction. Lord knows I’ve walked these grounds enough. I’m here daily, visiting my Ima.”

“*I’m Ima,*” said the man’s dead wife, and she came closer and peered into Kylie’s face.

Kylie hesitated and then glanced to her right and read the tombstone. “Lolita Cannon. That’s my aunt’s name.” She still didn’t know if she should acknowledge the dead man’s wife or not. Kylie’s heart beat around in her chest with indecision. But if she didn’t tell the man about his medicine, he could—

“Why, I think that grave is right around here somewhere.” He turned and started looking, pointing his cane at the markers as he read.

“*Are you sure she can see and hear us?*” Another spirit appeared. Kylie glanced at the newcomer briefly, trying not to give away that she could see anyone. This spirit was another woman, younger, late twenties, wearing a dress that looked like something popular in the 1970s.

“*I’m pretty sure,*” answered Ima, and then she leaned so close that her icy presence burned Kylie’s arm. “*Tell him about his medicines,*” she pleaded. “*If not, he’s gonna pass without ever seeing his third generation.*”

“Here, right here.” The old man pointed with his cane and waved for Kylie to follow him.

“Thank you,” Kylie said, stopping at his side and still wavering on what to do.

“It’s a nice marker,” the old man said, and had to use his cane to get his balance. “Well, I should be going. Enjoy your time with her.” He started to take a step and then paused. “You know, I somehow feel my Ima can hear me, so go ahead and talk to your aunt if you have anything you want to say to her.”

The man’s wife held up her hands as if frustrated. *“I can hear ya, old man. But it’s you that don’t listen to a word I say. Don’t know why it surprises me.”* The woman looked back at Kylie again. *“The ol’ fart never listened to me when I was alive. And he’s talked to me more since I’ve been dead than when I was alive. But I love the ol’ coot. And you gotta help me help him. Please, missy. I don’t know what you are, or how come you can see me, but I’m begging ya.”*

Kylie watched the old man take a few steps away from her. If she told him, she knew the barrage of spirits would return, but if she didn’t ... Kylie wouldn’t be able to live with herself if something happened to the old guy. “Wait, sir. I...”

He turned around.

Crap! How was she going to tell him? “I ... I couldn’t help but notice you’re a little shaky. You know, this happened to my aunt and it was caused by a mix-up in her meds. She was taking the wrong pills twice a day. The blue ones instead of the red ones.”

The man’s dead wife let out a victory yelp. The younger woman beside her stared at Kylie with complete awe. *“She can hear us. Jiminy Cricket. She can. My name’s Catherine. What’s your name?”*

The same look of amazement flooding across the younger ghost’s face now filled the old man’s expression. “Why, child, I ... I swear you might have ... I mean, Ima was always telling me to be careful. And I have been feeling not so good lately. I think I’ll go home and check my prescription.” Then he turned and headed toward the gate.

Kylie forced a smile, even though the chatter was now louder than ever since all the spirits knew the truth. Knew she could hear them. Knew she could help them. But could she? So far all the spirits came to her for help, but could she help those she accidentally came into contact with?

Just as the old man turned to leave, another wave of cold landed beside her. Jane Doe's ghost materialized. She looked at Kylie as if confused. "*What are you doing here?*"

"Isn't this where you are buried?" Kylie asked, struggling to ignore the cold and the noise.

"You say something?" The old man turned back around. His words were almost lost in the loud chattering again.

"Just to myself," Kylie answered, and prayed he'd turn around before she ... A wave of dizziness almost overtook her. She struggled to remain standing.

The spirits had moved in again, surrounded her, all talking at once. Wanting her to do something for them. Asking her questions. Her gaze flipped from one dead face to another. Her heart felt heavy with sadness for them. It made her realize how insignificant she was—one person and so many souls needing something.

The wave of dizziness crashed over her again, only harder this time. Her head started pounding—pain exploded behind her eyes. Hugging herself against the cold, she lowered herself onto the green grass, wrapped her arms around her shins, and dropped her forehead on top of her knees.

"I can't do this," she muttered.

"*Move back,*" Jane Doe said. "*You are hurting her.*"

Kylie felt some of the cold begin to ebb, the pain behind her eyelids lessened, and she could only assume the ghost had been talking to the other spirits. The noise level lowered almost to the point where it didn't hurt to listen anymore.

"Are you okay?" Burnett's deep, concerned voice came at her ear.

Kylie raised her head and saw the only spirits remaining were Jane Doe, the old man's wife, and the other younger spirit.

Kylie looked at Burnett. "Yeah. I'm fine. Or getting better," she said.

Burnett nodded and then backed away. Kylie stared at Jane Doe and waited a few more seconds before she asked, "Isn't this where you're buried?"

Jane's brow wrinkled in that confused way of hers. "*I ... don't know.*"

“Oh, phooey!” said the younger woman who’d said her name was Catherine. *“Of course you’re buried here. Your grave and marker are right over there. You were put in the ground by the Texas prison system. You’d been given life for killing your own baby.”*

Chapter Twenty

Shock filled Kylie's chest. Jane had killed her baby? Was that why Jane had amnesia? The horror of what she'd done had been too much for her to bear?

Jane swerved toward Catherine and held both her fists up in front of her face, her body tight with fury. *"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not Berta! I did not kill my own child. I would never kill my baby. I loved my baby."*

Catherine looked at Kylie. *"She's confused. I think they gave her a lobotomy. Probably trying to fix her."*

"I'm not Berta!" Jane Doe's scream rang so loud, Kylie flinched. *"And I'm sick to death of hearing you call me that."*

"Then what's your name?" Catherine spouted back.

Jane got tears in her eyes. *"I don't know. I don't know who I am, I don't know what I am, but I know who I'm not. And I'm not Berta Littlemon. I think my baby died, but I didn't kill it. I was somebody's wife. Now I'm just lost. And empty. And dead."* She turned and looked at Kylie as if remembering the vision. *"Somebody killed me."* Tears slipped down the woman's cheek and then she disappeared.

Kylie's chest filled with empathy. She got back to her feet, and while she felt inclined to believe Jane Doe, she'd come here to find answers. And to find them, she had to ask questions. "Why do you think she's Berta Littlemon?"

"I don't think, I know," Catherine said. Then she smiled. *"And I'll tell you all I know if you'll do me a favor."*

* * *

Kylie still stood by the grave of Berta Littlemon when Burnett walked over to join her about thirty minutes later. This time, he didn't inquire if she was okay. But then, he didn't have to ask. Kylie sensed he could guess she wasn't okay by the look of dismay on her face. Placing his hand lightly on her shoulder, he asked, "Was this ... helpful?"

"I don't know," Kylie said, confused and disturbed by what she'd learned from Catherine O'Connell. Sure, she'd gotten some information, but mostly all the trip to the Fallen Cemetery had accomplished was to underscore how little she knew about Jane Doe and how impossible it would be to help her.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded and they started walking toward the gate where Della stood, looking as ill at ease as she had the moment they'd first arrived. The crowd of spirits followed them, moving close but not crowding her.

"Will you come back?" whispered an older-sounding male spirit.

"Please, say you'll come," begged a younger female spirit.

"It's not fair," wailed another female. *"Why does she have to leave now? I didn't get a chance to talk to her!"*

Then all of the spirits began to talk at once, making it hard to understand them and bringing Kylie's headache back in full force. Through the crowd of voices, she was dimly aware of Ima, the old man's wife, walking from one small group of spirits to another and whispering something to them.

Kylie stopped and massaged her temples. "I'm sorry," she said, and she truly was.

Right now, all she wanted to do was run from them, run into the sunlight, ignore the shadows and pretend that they didn't exist. But even as she wanted to run away, she knew she couldn't. How could she when she felt their pain, their heartbreak, as intensely as she did her own? How could she when she knew they all had some kind of unfinished business they wanted resolved and she was their only chance to make that happen?

Still, she had to establish some boundaries or else she'd likely lose her mind the way Jane Doe obviously had.

And then Kylie wouldn't be able to help any of them.

"I have to leave now," she said. "You can't come with me. You need to stay here. But ... I will come back. I promise." It was a promise she intended to keep, but not one she looked forward to.

"I'm not coming back," Della said, and walked toward the car.

Burnett shot Kylie a worried look and she shook her head, indicating that she was fine. When they stepped out of the cemetery property and the spirits didn't follow, Kylie sighed with relief. She'd never appreciated the blast of Texas heat that swamped her as much as she did right now.

She glanced behind her at the cemetery. The spirits were still there, staring at her wordlessly. She wondered if her promise had been enough to convince them to stay behind, rather than follow her. Or if it had more to do with whatever message Ima had been whispering to them. Kylie felt a shiver move down her spine. She ignored it and walked with Burnett and Della to the car.

The drive back to Shadow Falls was short. They didn't speak. After Burnett parked, Kylie and Della crawled out of his black Mustang. Kylie locked her gaze with Burnett and asked if she could be relieved from camp activities for the rest of the day.

He hesitated and she was frightened he was going to say no, but then he frowned and asked, "Would Holiday say yes?"

Kylie nodded. "Yes," she answered with honesty. Helping ghosts was part of her job as a supernatural. Holiday would understand that, and the toll it took on her. The camp leader was probably the only one who would understand.

Burnett still paused. "Are you okay? Do you need to talk or anything?"

"No," Kylie said.

The relief showing in his face was almost comical. Obviously the idea of having to offer advice or commiserate about spirits didn't appeal to him. Kylie might have teased him about it if she weren't so wrapped up in what she'd learned. "I just want to do some stuff on my computer and check some of the facts I learned."

"Okay," he said, and motioned Della to follow her.

“Please don’t ever ask me to go back there again,” Della said as they walked away. “That was super weird.”

“I’m sorry,” Kylie said.

“Did you learn what you needed to know?”

“Not really.”

“Didn’t they answer your questions? I heard you talking to them.”

“It’s not that easy.”

For a second, Della looked ready to ask more questions; then she lapsed into silence.

Good thing, too. Kylie wasn’t feeling up to explaining how communicating with the dead worked. Right now, she needed to focus on what she’d learned from her trip. She hadn’t even begun to mull everything over and decide what she believed and didn’t believe.

Was Jane, or was she not, a child murderer and all-around evil person? Anxious to prove Catherine O’Connell wrong, Kylie hurried her steps.

She cut through the first bend in the path, where the trees hung over, creating shade. She breathed in the scents of summer, the greenness of the forest, the heady aroma of dry earth. She had almost managed to calm her chaotic mind when the blue bird swooped down and landed right in her path. The blue jay cocked its head and chirped cheerfully as if performing just for her.

“Shoo!” Della said. But the bird, intent on watching Kylie, ignored Della.

“Shit!” Della belted out. “Is that the evil shifter?” When she started to bolt forward—to do God only knew what to the bird—Kylie caught her by her arm.

“Stop. It’s just a bird.”

Della’s eyes widened. “Is that the same bird you ... brought back to life?”

“I don’t know,” Kylie said, but she knew it was a lie.

Della waved her arms, trying to scare the bird away. “This is freaky.” The bird continued to sing.

“Get out of here before I break your neck!” Della bellowed.

“Just leave it alone.” Truth was, the bird scared the crap out of Kylie, too, but it didn’t deserve to die. Or to die again.

Besides, Kylie wasn't up to giving it another piece of her soul by bringing it back to life.

The bird finally finished its song, then flapped its wings and rose to hover in front of Kylie's face. A spray of sunshine came through the trees and made the creature's royal blue feathers glow. Then, letting out one more bit of song, it flew away. Kylie took off in a run and didn't slow down until she got to her cabin. Della followed at the same pace. Maybe after Kylie researched Berta Littlemon, she'd research blue jay stalking. Though she doubted Google would have anything on that.

* * *

"So you actually spoke to the spirits?" Jonathon asked. The vamp had taken over shadow duty for Della right after they'd arrived back at the cabin. Of course, first Della had given him the blow-by-blow account of what had happened at the cemetery. Kylie looked back at Jonathon, reclining on her sofa.

"Can I do this computer stuff right now, instead of chatting about the ghosts?" She'd been proud of herself. Instead of giving in to the desire to go straight to bed, pull the covers over her head, and have a good long cry, she'd booted up her computer.

Her screen brought up Google, and she typed in the name "Berta Littlemon." As the computer chewed on that information, Kylie looked back at Jonathon again. "I just need to get this done."

"Whatever." His tone told her he thought she was rude.

And maybe she was, but with a possible child-murdering ghost on her hands and a blue jay stalking her, she didn't have time to be polite. "Sorry," she still muttered.

Kylie read the list of Web sites that Google spilled onto her screen: *Famous female murderers in Texas, Mamas who murder, Mean women in the past.* Kylie's heart started to ache. She clicked on the first Web site and prepared herself to be disgusted.

She wasn't disappointed. The only thing she didn't find was a decent picture of Berta Littlemon that was clear enough to identify her.

“Some shadow you are, vampire.”

Kylie swung around and found Lucas standing in the doorway, staring at Jonathon sleeping on the sofa.

Jonathon didn't move. He didn't even open his eyes when he spoke. “I heard you a block away. Smelled your wolf ass two blocks away.”

Lucas growled.

Kylie rolled her eyes. Ah, the love between vamps and weres was never lost. For a crazy moment, she recalled Lucas's desire that she turn out to be a were. And she wondered what would happen if and when he discovered he was wrong. What would happen if she discovered she was vampire? Would Lucas still care about her? She so wanted to believe that it wouldn't matter to him, that he was above that type of prejudice.

But the truth was, she knew it probably would matter.

And that scared her more than stalking blue jays and amnesiac ghosts who possibly killed their own babies.

Lucas shifted his focus from Jonathon to her. “Are you okay?”

Kylie took a deep breath. She'd felt that hiding her weakness from Burnett had been a necessity. Nor had she felt comfortable sharing anything with Della or Jonathon, but one look at Lucas's caring blue eyes and she felt her throat tighten with the need for a little TLC.

He must have sensed her stress, or maybe it was the tears prickling her eyes, because he moved to her, grabbed her hand, and started walking her into her bedroom.

“I'm supposed to keep an eye on her,” Jonathon called out from his still reclined position on the sofa.

“Why don't you just check out the back of your eyelids like you were doing when I came in,” Lucas countered, and slammed her bedroom door shut. The cabin shook from the force.

Once they were alone, Lucas's gaze went back to her. “What happened?” He moved in, cupped his hand around her neck, and pulled her against him.

She rested her forehead on his warm chest and fought the need to cry. The need for TLC was one thing, but tears were too much.

“It was awful,” she said, and swallowed hard.

“What was awful?” he asked.

“They were everywhere. And then—”

“Who were everywhere?” His hand moved to her back, consoling and offering just the comforting touch she needed.

Her heart hurt with the need to have someone help her understand the experience. She lifted her head and looked at him, but she didn’t pull away. “The spirits. But that wasn’t the worst part. I—”

He let go of another frustrated growl, cutting her off. Then he studied her for a second as if weighing his words with care. “Didn’t you expect them to be everywhere at a cemetery, Kylie? After what happened in that vision, why you would even go there is beyond me.”

Okay, so Lucas was like the others; he didn’t understand what she did. She couldn’t really blame him, though. Just as Della had pointed out this morning, ghost whispering pretty much made her a freak. Still, it hurt.

She wanted him to understand, to be able to sense how important this was to her. But he couldn’t. He wasn’t ... fae. He wasn’t Derek. Not wanting to go there, she pushed that thought away, far away.

“I had to,” she said, though she didn’t think it would make a difference to Lucas. “That’s what I’m supposed to do. That’s why they come to me for help.”

He frowned. “But at what cost? I don’t like seeing you upset like this. I sure as hell don’t like thinking you’re putting yourself in danger to help someone who’s already dead. For all we know, they’re dead because they did something stupid and now they’re gonna try to make you do something stupid and you could end up getting hurt as a result.”

His tone, his expression, and even his body posture told Kylie that telling him that her ghost very well may be a murderer of small children might not be a brilliant idea. So she resigned herself to her current reality. She’d just have to bundle up the rest of the story until Holiday arrived. Which Kylie hoped would be soon.

“Damn, I hate seeing you upset,” he muttered through gritted teeth, and then tugged her closer.

She bit down on her lip, remembering how it had felt when it had been

coated with ice. “It was a little scary, but nothing happened.”

He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. “You sure?”

Not wanting to lie to him, she rose up on tiptoes and kissed him. He tasted so good—a little like toothpaste and a bit like chocolate. She’d always been fond of chocolate mint, so she opened her mouth wider and he accepted the invitation and the kiss went from sweet to passionate in a heartbeat.

When his tongue slipped inside her mouth, she melted against him even closer, and any remnants of worry in her heart faded. All Kylie could think about was the wonder of this moment. The wonder of passion.

She loved having him this close to her. The silky feel of his mouth against hers was so perfect. The slight stubble on his cheeks tickled her, and his hard chest pressed against hers as though it were made to fit. She savored the tight feel of his strong hands on her waist. A voice deep within said she could deal with anything, stalking blue jays, a barrage of ghosts, even the amnesiac spirit of a child murderer. She could take it all on as long as she had Lucas’s arms and kisses waiting for her when it was over. She could survive as long as she had the wonderment of his closeness to help her cope.

“Someone lives and someone dies.”

The voice came at the same time as the chill crawling up and then down her spine. Kylie pulled away from the hot kiss and buried her face on Lucas’s warm chest, not wanting to feel this cold. Not now. Not so soon after the visit to the cemetery and the haunting memory of all those lost souls who needed her help. Not when she’d just read the terrible things this woman had done.

“They keep insisting that I tell you,” Jane, aka Berta, said.

Who dies? Kylie asked the question in her mind.

“Maybe they meant me,” the spirit said, sounding confused again.

Somehow Kylie knew that wasn’t right. *Someone lives and someone dies.* The words flowed again through her head. Perhaps there was one thing Lucas’s kisses couldn’t fix. The idea of losing someone she cared about was too much to bear.

Lifting her cheek from Lucas’s warm chest, she opened her eyes and tried to focus on Jane Doe.

Staring at the spirit’s face, Kylie recalled bits of the story she’d read about

Berta Littlemon. She hadn't killed just her own child, but that of a neighbor, too.

The spirit gazed back at Kylie without reservation. No worries. No shame. Had the woman forgotten about what happened at the cemetery, that Catherine had ratted her out—that Kylie now knew everything?

But even now, as Kylie looked deep into the spirit's eyes, she didn't see the soul of a killer. She saw the soul of a woman who was lost, forgotten, and needed her help.

What, if anything, did this mean? Kylie wondered.

Chapter Twenty-one

An hour later, Lucas left to go to a hiking class and Kylie continued her online research. She'd read most of the articles on the Web sites containing information about Berta Littlemon. She'd also done a quick search on Catherine O'Connell, the woman who'd ratted on Jane. Not just because Kylie intended to keep her promise to her—a deal was a deal—but because she wanted to know if the woman was honest.

Kylie's quick search on the information Catherine had given her proved to be true. But did that also mean she was right about Jane Doe?

So far, she'd found one other site that had a picture of Berta Littlemon, but it too had been so fuzzy that Kylie couldn't swear it was her Jane Doe. Sure, she had brown hair and it appeared to have been long at one time, and the facial features were similar, but ... there was still hope.

A lot more hope when Kylie vaguely remembered something that Holiday had told her about spirits who were overall bad.

Almost as if thinking the woman's name had worked magic, Kylie heard Holiday's voice.

"Can I come in?"

Kylie saw Jonathon jerk from a dead sleep, then she bolted from her chair, ran across the living room, and threw her arms around Holiday.

"I'm so glad you're home," Kylie said, releasing the camp leader only after a good long hug. She'd missed talking with Holiday, missed having her around. But Kylie probably missed Holiday's hugs most of all. "I have so many things to ask you, to tell you." She was about to dump her emotional

trauma on the woman when Kylie suddenly remembered the reason Holiday had been away. Her aunt had died. And the death had rocked Holiday's world to its core.

Maybe, Kylie realized, Holiday already had enough on her plate and didn't need Kylie to add more.

Kylie paused a moment to catch her breath. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry about your aunt. Did you get things settled?"

"I'm fine." Holiday gripped Kylie's shoulders as if she understood Kylie's thoughts. "And yes, I think I managed to get everything in order. The important question is if you're okay. Are you?"

Jonathon sat up on the sofa, looking half-asleep. Holiday must not have seen him earlier because she jumped a little at the sound of him shifting.

"Oh, Jonathon. You startled me." Holiday stared at the sleepy vampire.

"Do I need to stay here now that you're here?" he asked.

Holiday looked at her watch. "I should be here for an hour, and Della will be back before that, so if you want to go, you can." They watched Jonathon leave, then Holiday draped an arm around Kylie's shoulder. "Now, tell me what's going on with you."

Kylie met her gaze. "Are you sure you can handle this?"

"Is it that bad?" Holiday's brows creased with worry.

"No. Well, yeah, it is, but I mean, can you handle my problems right now with your own?" Kylie looked at Holiday with empathy. "I know what it feels like to lose someone. When my grandmother died, I could hardly breathe."

Holiday smiled. "I'm fine. I'm still grieving a bit," she added honestly. "But let's just say I'm using the Kylie Galen method of dealing with my problems."

"Which is what?" Kylie asked, puzzled.

Holiday grinned. "Concentrating on everyone else's problems, so I don't have time to think about mine." She looked Kylie right in the eye. "Seriously, I'm fine. Now, tell me what you learned at the cemetery. And then we have a lot of things to discuss."

Kylie started walking over to the kitchen table and then remembered the

imminent question she'd wanted to ask Holiday. She swung back around.

"One thing first. Didn't you tell me one time that really bad souls don't hang around, that hell claims them pretty quickly?"

"In most cases, that's right. But there are some that..." Worry pinched Holiday's brows together. "Why?"

Kylie frowned, and just like that, all the frustration from earlier landed on her shoulders with a big thump. "Why does everything have to have exceptions? It would be so nice to ask a question and get a definite yes or no. It's either black or white." She dropped into a kitchen chair. "Life would be so much easier."

"Easier, yes. But realistic ... no. Few things are ever black or white." Holiday tilted her head to one side and studied Kylie for a moment, then frowned. "Please tell me you haven't gotten mixed up with a hell-bound spirit."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Kylie sat beside Holiday as she read the different articles about Berta Littlemon on the computer screen.

"That's it. I can't read any more!" Holiday reached over and turned off the computer. "You shouldn't even be reading this. You are not to deal with this spirit anymore." Something about Holiday's tone, so maternal, so un-negotiating, sent up warning flags all over the place.

"We don't know it's even her," Kylie said. "I can't just assume she—"

"Yes, you can! You said the other ghost told you that your Jane Doe rose from the grave of Berta Littlemon. That's good enough for me."

Kylie frowned. "Yeah, but maybe she's lying. And you saw the pictures of Berta. They are fuzzy. I mean, yes, they sort of resemble my Jane Doe, but they're not clear enough for me to be sure."

"Okay, but why would the ghost lie?"

Kylie shrugged. "Because if she didn't have information that sounded useful, she might have been afraid I wouldn't have agreed to help her."

"Wait—help who? The old man's wife?"

Kylie realized she'd obviously left out that part of the story when she'd

explained everything to Holiday. “No, the other ghost. Catherine O’Connell. I agreed to help her if she’d tell me what she knows about Jane Doe.”

“No,” Holiday said, and put her palms over her face.

“No, what?”

Holiday moved her hands. “You never make a deal with a spirit, Kylie. Never!”

“Why?” Kylie asked.

“Because it can be as bad as making a deal with the devil. What they want is sometimes impossible, and they can be relentless about making us pay up. If they think you haven’t delivered on your promise, things can get ugly.”

Kylie felt her throat tighten. She had looked forward to Holiday’s return so much, and now it seemed all Kylie was going to get were reprimands. “I didn’t know,” she muttered.

Holiday released a deep sigh. “I’m sorry,” she said, and dropped her hands on top of Kylie’s. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. This is my fault. All of it. I knew that your going to the cemetery was a bad idea. I should have vetoed it right off the bat.”

Kylie swallowed the tightness down her throat, which had seemed to lessen somewhat with Holiday’s touch. “It wasn’t a bad idea. And maybe I shouldn’t have made a deal with Catherine, but even that doesn’t seem so bad. I mean, what she wants is doable and for a good cause.”

Holiday shook her head, still looking too unrelenting. “It’s still not a good idea to make a deal with a spirit.”

“Yeah, but all she wants is for me to send some family history stuff to her kids. She’s Jewish and she lied to them and her own husband all her life because back then, being a Jew wasn’t so cool. Her parents died in the concentration camps and her grandparents managed to bring her to the U.S. She changed her name. And now, it feels like a lie.”

Holiday shook her head. “Kylie, I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do this.”

“No.” Kylie stood up, and although she kept her voice low, even she heard the determination in her tone. “I’m sorry, but I’m not going to stop any of this because you’re afraid I’m in over my head. Because you don’t think I can handle it. I’m helping Jane Doe, and I’m sorry, but I don’t believe she’s

this murderer, and I'm also going to help Catherine O'Connell. It's the right thing to do."

Holiday closed her eyes in frustration. "Kylie, you don't understand how dangerous this could be for you. There are things about dealing with evil spirits that ... that will put you at risk. There is so much you still don't know."

Kylie shook her head. "Then explain it to me. But I'm telling you, Holiday, I don't think she's evil. How many times have you told me to follow my heart—that if I do that, I'll figure out the right thing to do? Well, my heart is telling me to do this, and I'm doing it."

When Holiday opened her mouth, presumably to argue again, Kylie added, "Besides, I wasn't asking you for permission. I was asking for advice."

Chapter Twenty-two

As soon as she'd let the words out of her mouth, Kylie wished she could get them back. Not because she hadn't meant them. She did. She just regretted the way she'd said them.

Holiday sat there for a long moment, staring at Kylie as if she were thinking about what to say. Kylie returned her gaze with an equal amount of vigor. Regretting her tone didn't mean she was going to back down on this. She couldn't. Maybe it was because she empathized with Jane Doe and her identity crisis, but it felt like more. Kylie knew she had to help the amnesiac ghost. And she would help her, with or without Holiday's blessing.

"Good Lord, when did I become my mom and you become a younger version of myself?" Holiday asked, and smiled.

Kylie saw and heard the lessening of resolve in the camp leader's voice and posture. Then the tension in Kylie's shoulders dissolved and a wave of relief filled her chest. Tears stung her eyes. "I don't know."

"Okay," Holiday said. "Sit down and let's figure out how we're going to work this so I can live with it and you can, too."

Kylie gave Holiday a quick hug of thanks and then settled in to talk. They discussed how Kylie was to go to the library to e-mail the family of Catherine O'Connell. Then Holiday went over and over and over how Kylie could shut out an unwanted ghost ... or unwanted groups of ghosts. And then she made Kylie promise that if she did discover that Jane Doe was a child murderer, she would immediately pull back.

Kylie hesitated to give her word about the last one, but after searching her

heart, she realized she didn't believe Jane was a murderer, and so she promised.

When Kylie asked Holiday for an explanation of how evil spirits could hurt her, the camp leader hesitated. Kylie quickly added, "It's not for Jane Doe, but in case I ever run into any." When Holiday still didn't start talking, Kylie added, "Keeping me ignorant is not a good way of protecting me. Don't you think I need to know?"

Holiday released a deep breath and nodded. "It's as much about protecting you as it is about ... It's about knowing you're capable of handling this."

"I'm capable," Kylie said. "It can't be much worse than..." She pointed to the computer, where the story of Berta Littlemon had been posted a short time ago.

Holiday nodded. "You're right about that. But before I tell you, let me say again that most evil spirits don't hang around. They are yanked away quickly, but it has and it will happen."

"What do they do?" Kylie asked.

"You've had visions from the other ghosts, so you know how real they feel. Well, these evil spirits can make you relive some of their lives, and believe me, it can rip your heart out. Being that close to evil isn't something you can forget easily."

The way Holiday said it, Kylie knew the camp leader had suffered through it herself. The thought that Kylie, too, might have to deal with it one day sent a sharp shiver racing down her spine.

"They mess with your head, Kylie. They..." She inhaled again. "To put it bluntly, they mentally rape you, try to break your spirit, and if you show the least bit of weakness, they can possess you. It's also believed, mostly with bad supernatural spirits, that they can take you with them to hell when they go. Legend says that they think if they can bring something good with them, they stand a chance of alleviating their own punishment."

"So how do I avoid meeting one?" Kylie asked, certain only that she didn't want to experience any of the things Holliday had just described.

"That's the thing. They are just like other ghosts. Some you might just

stumble across, shortly after their demise. Others, if their powers are strong enough, will seek you out for a purpose.”

Holiday must have sensed Kylie’s fear, because she dropped her hand on top of Kylie’s again. “If you ever find yourself in their presence, you have to remain strong.”

“How?” Kylie asked, feeling her fear ebb with Holiday’s calming touch.

“It’s the same as shutting out the ghosts. Mentally, you need to put yourself in a different place, a place where you feel love and good things, where you experience life at its best. And hold tight to your faith, because they will try to convince you that all things good are frivolous, that they don’t matter.”

“Oh my gosh, you’re back!” Miranda screamed at the doorway, and came rushing inside the cabin. The moment her vibrant spirit entered the room, it chased away the dismal cloud of emotion hovering over Kylie.

Miranda embraced Holiday, nearly turning over the chair in the process. “I’m so glad you’re back. We need you here. I mean ... Burnett’s okay, but ... he’s not you.”

Holiday arched a brow. “I hear he wasn’t even himself for a while there.”

Miranda frowned. “He told you about the whole kangaroo thing, didn’t he.”

“Yeah,” Holiday said, and her brows tightened. “And I must say, I’m very disappointed with you, Miranda.” She reached out and gripped Miranda’s hand. “The next time you turn him into anything, do it when I’m here to enjoy it.”

They all started laughing.

* * *

It was thirty minutes before Kylie and Holiday were able to pull away from Miranda to continue their private conversation. Especially when Miranda told Holiday about her sort of/kind of feeling that they had another mystical stalker in the camp. Kylie wondered if the stalker wasn’t her little blue jay friend.

Now, Kylie and Holiday sat out on the front porch. The five o’clock sun,

touched with a bit more golden hue, brushed against their faces. Kylie dangled her legs off its edge. Holiday did the same.

Kylie, barefoot, swayed her feet back and forth, and the longer blades of grass tickled the bottoms of her feet. Her mind went to the things she needed to talk to Holiday about.

“Did Burnett tell you about my asking about the FRU library?”

Holiday frowned.

Not a good sign.

“Yeah, he mentioned it.”

“Why would they not let me see information about other supernaturals like myself if they had that information on file?” Frustration sounded in Kylie’s tone. She hoped Holiday knew it wasn’t targeted at her.

“I don’t know,” Holiday said, and Kylie believed her. “But I do know that the FRU is like any other government organization: they have skeletons in their own closet. Why, years ago, before I was born, most supernaturals considered all werewolves basically animals. They used to hurt them.”

“Why?” Kylie asked, completely insulted on behalf of Lucas and the rest of his kind.

“Ignorance. Stupidity. Take your pick. It’s the same thing that happened to a lot of minority groups. Supernaturals can act a lot more like humans than you’d think.”

Holiday reached for Kylie’s right hand and opened her palm. “I heard you caught a fireball that would have hit Miranda.”

Kylie nodded and then asked the question she’d been wanting to ask since the night of the party. “Do you think this proves I’m a protector?”

Holiday shrugged as if she didn’t think Kylie would like the answer. “Probably.”

Holiday was right. She didn’t like the answer. Especially when it just brought on more questions. “What does it really mean to be a protector? I’ve heard some of it. But ... okay, here’s the thing. Miranda said that every protector she’s ever heard of had been a full-blooded paranormal. And I’m not.”

“I know.” Holiday looked as confused as Kylie felt.

“What could that mean?”

“I don’t know, but I could guess it means what I’ve known all along. Kylie Galen is special.” She held up her hand. “I know you don’t like hearing that, Kylie, but I think you better start getting used to the idea.”

Fear, insecurity, and probably a dozen other negative emotions all washed over her. “What if I don’t measure up?” she asked in a low whisper. “What if I’m too afraid to do what I have to do and I turn out to be one lousy protector?”

Holiday pulled one leg up on the porch, rested her chin on her knee, and gazed at Kylie as if she’d said something really stupid, like calling the earth square. “Were you scared when you caught that fireball?”

“No, but I didn’t have time to be scared. If I’d known I was going to catch the fireball and had time to think about it, I’d probably have needed to carry an extra pair of panties with me, because I’d have probably pissed myself.”

Holiday smiled. “Maybe, but you’d have still done it.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Kylie said.

“Please. Look at this whole Berta Littlemon/Catherine O’Connell issue. I’m scared for you to continue investigating this. I told you it’s dangerous, but you refuse to drop it. You put the welfare of others before yourself.”

Kylie hadn’t looked at it like that, and she guessed Holiday had a point, but ... “I’m not a saint,” she insisted. “I sin all the time.”

Holiday lifted one eyebrow. “Say what?”

Kylie stared down at her toes for a second. Her pink nail polish was chipping, and so was her courage. Then she looked back up at Holiday’s eyes and decided to confess. “Miranda said that protectors are like saints. Not only am I not a saint, I don’t even want to be a saint. I want to live a normal life. I want to have fun.” She thought of how it felt to kiss Lucas and blushed. “Maybe even sin a little.”

Holiday started to grin.

Kylie frowned. “You know what I mean. I want to live my life like every other sixteen-year-old girl. I want to tell dirty jokes with my friends, maybe drink some cool alcohol drink every now and then—that doesn’t taste like dog piss—and get tipsy. Not that I’ll drive afterward or anything.”

Holiday chuckled and Kylie expected the fae had probably picked up on Kylie's emotions and knew what else she wanted to do.

And with whom she wanted to do it.

"Being a protector doesn't make you a saint," Holiday said. "It makes you a caring person. You don't have to give up boys."

Kylie felt her face burn a little hotter. She put her palms down behind her and leaned back. "Well, that's the best news I've had all day."

Holiday laughed again. "How are things going in the 'boy' department?"

"Better. Not perfect," Kylie answered, and she thought about Lucas's reaction to the ghosts and the whole issue with his pack.

"Better is good," Holiday said. "Derek has already called me since I've been back, asking me how you were. He said he heard about what happened at the cemetery. Have you seen him?"

"Not much." Kylie swallowed. She didn't want to talk about him, because then she'd be tempted to ask about the reason for Derek's sudden overcharged reaction to her emotions. If anyone would know that answer, it would be Holiday. But frankly, Kylie didn't think she should care. Not when Derek didn't care enough to put his pride aside and ask for the guidance himself.

* * *

The next hour rolled past and they just sat there on the porch, enjoying the breeze that wasn't exactly cool, but not terribly hot either, and they talked about everything but Lucas and Derek. Kylie asked if Burnett had told her anything about the Brightens that he hadn't shared with her.

Holiday assured her that Burnett wasn't keeping anything from her.

"Have you spoken with your stepdad?" Holiday asked a few minutes later.

"Not since I've been back," Kylie confessed. "But I have an e-mail from him and I'll bet he's planning on coming for Parents Day."

"But you don't want him to come?"

"I don't know," Kylie admitted. "I was almost ready to forgive him. But when he tried to use me to get to my mom by saying, 'Kylie would love for

us all to go out for lunch,' that's when I remembered how mad I still was at him for leaving us."

"So you haven't forgiven him yet?"

"Maybe I've forgiven him, but I just haven't forgotten."

"Thing is, those two sort of go hand in hand. Not that you'll ever really forget, but you accept that it happened and move on. You accept that all people make mistakes. No one is perfect."

"And what if you can't?" Kylie watched a bee buzz past her. "What if I can't ever really forgive him?"

"Then you let go," she said.

Kylie remembered how she'd hugged her father when he'd come to see her and told her he was sorry. While it had been hard, even painful, hugging him had felt right. She wasn't ready to let go of what they'd had. It would hurt too much.

Even more than accepting the truth.

She couldn't help wondering if that was how one made the decision to forgive or not. If letting go hurt more than accepting someone's mistakes. She could only hope that in time, accepting would come easier for her.

"Are you going to e-mail and tell him to come up for Parents Day?"

"Probably. But he and Mom will have to take shifts again. I don't think they can be in the same room together. Maybe not even on the same block."

"That could change," Holiday said, and brushed an insect away.

Kylie decided to tell Holiday her fear about her mom. "I think my mom is ready to start dating."

"Yikes! I remember when my parents did that. Talk about awkward."

"Yeah. She's ready, but I'm not sure I am." Kylie bit down on her lip. "I guess down deep I was always hoping they would get back together. And I could have one thing that was like it used to be. A little bit of normal would be good, ya know?"

"Yeah, but normal is overrated, too." She grinned. "So tell me about this blue jay."

Kylie wrapped her arms around her legs tight and told her the story. Then she decided to ask the big question. "How much of my soul did I give away?"

“If you gave any of it away, it was very, very little. You won’t even miss it.”

“But what happens when I give it away? Do I die earlier? Am I more likely to go to hell? What’s the price of a piece of my soul?”

Holiday shrugged. “Well, if you do indeed have the ability to raise the dead, the price varies. If it’s ordained by the gods, then its cost to you is nothing. It even adds to your soul.”

“How do you know if it’s ordained?” Kylie asked.

“You’ll just know. The powers that be will make it very clear.”

Kylie shivered a bit at the mention of the powers that be. She hesitated to ask her next question, but as she’d told Holiday earlier, ignorance was a lousy form of protection. “And if it’s not ordained?”

“Then the price is based on the quality of life that the person goes on to live. If they live a good life, the price is very low. Practically moot. If they abuse life, or the lives of others, then it can nip at your soul. Their sins, in a small way, become your sins. I’m not sure how accountable one is held for these sins, but I’ve heard emotionally it can leave you feeling empty. And yes, the less soul you have, the shorter the life you usually live.”

Kylie frowned. “Kind of makes you not want to bring anyone back.”

“Well, I’m sure it was designed that way so it gives people pause. As hard as it is, death is a part of life. But we’re probably discussing this for nothing, Kylie. Just because you think you might have brought a bird back to life doesn’t mean you have this gift.”

Kylie wanted to believe what Holiday was saying was true, but she wasn’t sure she did. “Does healing someone take a part of my soul? I mean, if bringing someone to life does, it makes sense that healing them might, too.”

“Not like it does raising the dead,” Holiday said. “It does drain you, though.”

Kylie remembered how tired she’d felt after healing Sara and then Lucas.

“I’d like for you and Helen to work together on this,” Holiday said. “Maybe even meet regularly like a species group.”

Kylie raised an eyebrow and suspected she knew what Holiday was up to. “Because I don’t belong to a group, right? That’s why you’re doing this?”

Holiday rolled her eyes. "You belong here at Shadow Falls. Just because you don't belong to a certain group doesn't mean anything."

Kylie nodded. "I like Helen."

After a few minutes of just listening to nature, she told Holiday all about the blue jay's little dog-and-pony shows. Holiday didn't have an explanation for the bird's pop-in visits, except to say that maybe the bird was only a fledgling and it sort of imprinted on her, meaning it thought Kylie was his mother.

"God, I hope not. Because I'm not chewing up worms and barfing into its mouth. I mean, I know that's what mama birds do."

Holiday laughed.

Kylie looked at her friend and counselor, and the most important question of all popped out. "Does any of this give you any clue as to what I am?"

Holiday frowned. "I wish it did."

"What if I never find out? What if I go through my life never knowing?"

"That's not likely," Holiday said. "Almost every week, we discover something else about you. Sooner or later, something is going to point you in the right direction."

Kylie looked down and watched an ant move across the porch. "I think Lucas wants me to be werewolf."

"Yes, but what Lucas wants isn't important."

Something told Kylie that Holiday understood the reason Lucas wanted this. She almost asked, but she wasn't sure she was ready to talk about it.

"You will be what you are, and whatever it is, you will be fine. Everyone has to accept that and love you for who you are; it doesn't really matter where your heritage comes from."

For some reason, Kylie remembered Derek saying pretty much the same thing.

Holiday's phone rang. She looked at the number and then glanced at Kylie.

"Who is it?" Kylie asked, sensing it was about her.

"Derek again."

Kylie sighed. Why did just hearing his name still sting?

Chapter Twenty-three

Kylie nibbled, without appetite, at her hamburger and fries at dinner that night while sitting between Della and Miranda at the dining hall. When asked, Miranda confessed she hadn't yet spoken to Perry about the dance/dragon thing from last night.

Miranda said that she'd gotten another phone call from the cute warlock back home and he'd arranged to pick her up Friday evening and take her out to dinner. "What am I going to say to Perry?" she asked. "'Hey, I'd like to just talk to you to see if we might have a chance, but first I'd like to go out on a date with another guy and see if I like him better?'"

Both Kylie and Della agreed it would be a difficult conversation. But they suggested Miranda at least thank Perry for standing up for her against Clark.

In truth, Kylie hoped Miranda would talk to Perry and cancel her date with the cute warlock. Kylie had nothing against cute warlocks, but Perry was one of their own.

Kylie placed a greasy fry in her mouth and tried to pretend she was hungry. When she glanced up, she noticed Lucas sitting with his pack of weres; their eyes met across the rows of hungry teens munching on burgers. He smiled, and Kylie returned the smile. He'd asked her to sit with him at the weres' table. She would have, even knowing it would be uncomfortable sitting with a group of his friends who didn't want him to see her. She would have done it because if Lucas could stand up to them, then so would she. But Della was her shadow, and Kylie knew the little vamp would have had a fit if she'd asked her to sit with the were group. So Kylie had refrained.

Lucas picked up a fry, and as he popped it into his mouth, he winked at her. The small gesture might not have meant anything coming from a different guy, but for Lucas to show anything in the way of public affection was a big deal. She grinned big and winked back. She did it even when she noticed Fredericka sitting two people away from Lucas and snarling as though she wanted to rip out Kylie's throat.

The she-wolf could probably do it, too.

Somebody must have said something funny a few tables over because laughter filled the large room. The smell of burgers mingled with the faint smell of singed wood. Thanks to Burnett, the physical reminders of the big fight were all gone, but the memory still lingered. Everyone at the camp seemed extra cheery tonight, no doubt celebrating Holiday's return. If the camp leader doubted how appreciated she was, the number of squeals, accompanied by "You're back!" and unexpected hugs (even from a few vamps and weres, which were not common) should have done her ego good.

For a moment, Kylie worried it might make Burnett feel like a second fiddle. But more than once Kylie caught the vampire watching the emotional greetings with so much pride in his eyes that it was like watching a romance movie. Kylie could almost hear the sappy music playing in the background. She wished she had a camera so she could show Holiday how Burnett looked at her when she wasn't aware.

The door to the dining room swished open. Derek and Ellie walked in side by side, though they weren't holding hands. Derek immediately started moving his gaze around the room, and Kylie knew he'd been looking for her when his gaze landed on hers. She couldn't help but wonder what he'd wanted to talk to Holiday about. Was it her again? And why? Shouldn't he be giving Ellie his attention?

He nodded slightly. She nodded back and forced herself to eat another bite of her hamburger. It tasted like dead meat. Which it was, but the thought made it even more unappetizing.

When the lump of food took two swallows to get down her throat, she pushed her plate aside. She was so done.

Staring at her glass of tea, she wiped away a trail of condensation and

searched for a plausible excuse to escape from the dining hall. Escape before she had to watch Derek and Ellie whispering back and forth and sharing fries or something—not that she cared, of course. At least that’s what she told herself. And she would continue to tell herself that until it was true. It would happen, too. How could it not when she enjoyed Lucas’s company so much? Enjoyed his kisses. Enjoyed being the girl he would actually wink at with dozens of people around to witness.

Kylie’s phone rang, giving her the excuse she needed to skip out. Not even checking to see who it was, she leaned over and whispered to Della that she had to take the call. Della, who’d been interested only in the rare meat on her bun and had already wolfed that down, grabbed her real meal—a tall glass of B positive blood—and followed her out.

Kylie hadn’t cleared the dining room door when she looked to see the name on her phone. Oh, crappers! It was Sara, her friend from home.

Sara, whose previous call and texts Kylie hadn’t answered.

For a damn good reason, too. Kylie knew Sara wanted to talk about her suspicion that Kylie had done something to make her cancer jump ship.

Problem was, Sara’s suspicion was right on target.

A targeted subject that Kylie had neglected to discuss with Holiday.

So what had compelled Kylie to answer this call without checking her caller ID first?

Oh yeah, so she’d have a reason to escape from the dining hall. Putting the phone to her ear, she hit the answer button.

“Hey, Sara,” Kylie said, and decided to wing it. Not that it was altogether a good idea. She’d never been a good winger.

“Hi,” Sara said.

“What’s up?” Kylie asked.

“I’ll tell you what’s up. I’ve just managed to baffle every cancer specialist in Texas. I still have to finish my chemo, and do one bout of radiation, but they did tons of CT scans and there’s not one tumor in this body! Can you believe it? I’m not gonna die, Kylie!”

There was so much excitement, bounciness, and pure hope in Sara’s voice that Kylie’s breath caught in her throat and tears filled her eyes. It reminded

Kylie of the old Sara. Not the sex-crazed, alcohol-loving party girl who'd replaced her, but the one Kylie had been best friends with since elementary school.

And until this second, Kylie hadn't realized how much she'd missed the old Sara, either. "That's friggin' fabulous, girl!"

"Like you didn't know already," she said.

Think. Think. Think. "I don't know what you mean," Kylie said, deciding to play ignorant. What was the saying? Ignorance is bliss? She could really use a little bliss right now.

Della looked at Kylie and rolled her eyes. Kylie frowned, not so much because Della was listening in—she would have told Della about it anyway—but because Della then mouthed the word *liar*.

"Right," Sara said. "But that's not important. We can talk about that Sunday." She let a long pause linger on the phone, as if it were supposed to mean something. "Come on. Don't you wanna know why we can talk about it on Sunday?" Sara finally asked.

"Because you're not going to church and are going to call me?" Kylie answered, throwing out the first thing that came to her mind, but her gut knotted with a strange suspicion. But a suspicion of what? How bad could it be?

"Because I'm coming to see you on Sunday," Sara said, sounding really happy about it, too.

Okay, having Sara visit Shadow Falls could be phenomenally bad. But maybe that wasn't even what she meant. "Uh, I'm not at home, Sara. I'm at camp," Kylie said. "Remember?" *Please let it be that simple.*

"Of course I remember, silly! I'm coming up there with your mom. I just got off the phone with her."

Kylie's heart, poised to make the leap, did a nosedive right into her stomach. The thought of Sara coming to Shadow Falls sent a wave of shock to her brain.

Sara was from Kylie's old life.

Everything at Shadow Falls was part of her new life.

Old life and new life didn't go together. They were like peanut butter and

hot dogs. The two were fine separately, but they should never meet.

Never.

Ever.

“Uh, Sara. You ... you...” She swallowed hard. “You can’t just visit Shadow Falls. I mean, you have to ... have to get permission from the camp leaders, and they are very funny about—”

“Duh, your mom told me that. So I took the bull by the horns and called and spoke with a Mr. Burnett James about twenty minutes ago. He said it would be fine for me to ride up with your mom. I can’t wait to see you, Kylie. And I can’t wait to meet all those hot guys you told me about. We’re going to have such fun. Oh, and what was the name of that really bitchy girl you told me about? DeAnn, no, wait, it was Della. We can tag team her ass.”

Della’s eyes widened. *Bitchy*, she mouthed.

Kylie’s hand wrapped around the phone and started to shake. “Ugh. I never said she was bitchy, I said she was blunt.”

“Same thing,” Sara said. “And the other one with the weird hair? Tell me, are they the ones who taught you how to heal people?”

“I’m sorry.” Kylie’s heart started to jump beats. “I have to go. Someone just ... someone just called me.” She punched Della in the arm.

“Hey, Kylie!” Della yelled out, and grinned as if she enjoyed playing a part in the shenanigans. Or not. “Oh, you’re on the phone. We can talk later. I wouldn’t want to be a bitch or anything,” she said in her snarkiest voice.

“I’ll call you later,” Kylie told Sara. “Yeah ... later. Sorry.” She started to hang up and then said, “But I’m happy about you being okay, Sara. Really happy.”

Kylie snapped her phone closed and then looked at Della. Della, who seemed to be immensely enjoying Kylie’s discomfort. Della, who looked part pissed off and part amused.

“So,” Della said. “We finally get to meet Miss Sara, huh? Your oldest and best friend, who has always sounded like a self-centered bitch, if you ask me. You totally upgraded when you came here. Personally, I’d have let her die. But on second thought...” Della flashed her fangs. “Hmm, what type of blood does she have? Think I could talk her into donating a pint or two,

maybe more? Tag team my ass!”

“Kill me,” Kylie said, and brushed her hair back to expose her neck vein. “Just kill me now and get it over with!”

* * *

“So we get to meet Sara. Cool,” Miranda said later that night as they sat around the kitchen table.

“Not cool,” Kylie said, seriously unhappy about it, and gave a demanding Socks a scratch behind his ear.

“Why not cool?” Miranda asked.

“She doesn’t want us to meet her,” Della said. “We might find out what the real Kylie Galen is like.”

Kylie scowled at Della, and yeah, she could pull off a pretty mean scowl, thanks to living with Della. “It’s not that at all. If anything, you guys know the real me. It’s just ... over-the-top weird to have her coming here.”

“Why?” Miranda asked. “We’ve met your mom.”

“And your philandering dad,” Della added.

“That’s different,” Kylie said, and frowned at the philandering comment. Though she didn’t know why she was offended, because it was true.

“How’s it different?” Miranda asked. Before Kylie could answer, Miranda added, “Hey, I hope you two get a chance to meet Todd on Friday night. Will you guys wait with me in the parking lot when he comes to pick me up?”

Both Della and Kylie frowned, but they nodded.

“It’s different for you,” Kylie said to Miranda, still stuck on Sara coming to visit on Parents Day. “You’ve known you were supernatural all your life. You don’t have a presupernatural life.” Socks, still on the tabletop, jumped down to the floor with a catlike elegance. “It’s like I was a different person back then. And yeah, you met my parents, but it’s almost as if they don’t count—not the way your friends count.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand,” Miranda said.

“I do,” said Della. And she said it as though she hated to admit it. “Kylie’s right. It’s different when you had a different life. I tried to imagine how it would be for you guys to meet Lee, or one of my old girlfriends. It

would be freaky.” She met Kylie’s eyes. “I’m sorry I gave you a hard time about this.”

“Wow,” Miranda said. “You’d better be careful, Della. In the last few days, I think you’ve used up your vampire quota of apologies for the next ten years.”

“Kiss my apologetic ass!” Della snapped.

* * *

Later that night, Kylie woke up to the mist forming around her. She didn’t know where she was, but for some reason she wasn’t afraid. Her gaze stayed on the soft, moist mist. She looked at the trees; the leaves, even in the dark, were a perfect shade of verdant green. Beautiful sprays of moonlight spilled through limbs that seemed to reach up into the heavens with pride. Perfect. Fairy-tale perfect. Even the sounds of the forest at night were like a symphony. She heard the water, like a babbling brook, a peaceful, beautiful sound playing in the background.

She immediately thought of Derek and that crazy thing he did when he was really close to her. How he made everything look like a fairy-tale picture, one meant to capture your imagination—one meant to fill you with awe, like the pages of a children’s book.

“Hey...” His voice pulled her away from the few stars she saw twinkling above the trees.

He sat beside her on a large rock. Not so close that she would have felt awkward, but near enough that the moonlight allowed her to see him. Then she realized this wasn’t just any rock; it was their rock. The spot he’d taken her to after she’d first arrived at Shadow Falls.

She’d done it again.

She’d brought him here through the dreamscape, and that was so wrong.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I didn’t mean to do this.” She closed her eyes and concentrated on moving back, away from the dream. She concentrated really hard, waited for the floating-flying sensation, but it didn’t happen. At least she didn’t think it did.

She opened her eyes just a crack. Enough to see if she’d moved. Nope,

she was still sitting on the rock. Derek was still looking at her. Why couldn't she fly away from the dream? She jerked her eyes open all the way.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean to do this. Just a minute and you can go right back to sleep."

She slammed her eyes shut again and tried really, really hard to concentrate. *Back. Go back to sleep. Now!*

"Kylie?" His voice tickled her ears as she tried to fix what she'd done. "Kylie."

She tried to ignore him and concentrate.

"Kylie, you're not doing this. I am. I'm the one dreamscaping."

Kylie jerked open her eyes and her vision filled with him sitting there, looking so real. She recalled how the dreamscape had felt different when Red had come into her dreams. She hadn't been able to fly away, she'd had to wake herself up. So that's what she needed to do. Just wake herself up. She didn't do it.

"You can dreamscape?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

The first thing she did was make sure she had clothes on. Hey ... she knew her own tendencies with dreams, and from what she'd heard, boys were even worse.

She had on her pink nightshirt. Nothing sexy or showy. Good thing. A fluttering of relief waved through her that he didn't intend for this to be that kind of dream. Then she couldn't help but wonder if it was because he didn't feel that way about her anymore. He had Ellie.

"Why didn't you tell me you could dreamscape?" she asked, not wanting to think too much about him and Ellie.

He hesitated. "I sort of figured out how to turn it off before I ever got to Shadow Falls. I was constantly trying to visit my dad to communicate with him, even when I didn't want to have anything more to do with him."

Kylie knew all about unwanted dreamscapes. Then she remembered Derek's pain at dealing with his dad, the man who had abandoned him when he was really young. "Do you communicate with him now?" she asked, remembering he'd said he was going to look for his dad when he'd left

Shadow Falls. When he'd come back with Ellie, she hadn't thought about Derek's problems, only about feeling betrayed by him. A touch of shame filtered into her chest at her selfishness.

"Not really. But I now know how to work the dreamscape, so I..."

"You what?" Kylie asked.

"Started using it again. But that's not important. Look, the other night when you came to me in the dream."

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "I'm just now learning how to control them. But as soon as I realized what I had done, that I had gone to your bedroom, I left."

His frown tightened. "I know. But before you took off, in that second that I saw you, it dawned on me that I didn't feel it here."

"Didn't feel what?" she asked, obviously still half-asleep.

"I didn't feel the surge of your emotions." He smiled. "When we dreamscape, I can talk to you, be this close to you without it making me crazy."

Kylie felt so many mixed emotions sitting on the rock, staring at his smile. She took a deep breath. "I'm not sure this is a good thing."

"Why not? I just want to talk. To see how you're doing. Is that a crime? I thought you said you cared about me? That you wanted to be my friend?"

"Okay, let me put it another way. I don't think Ellie will think this is such a good idea."

He frowned. "I keep telling you that it's not like that with us now. Ellie and I are just friends."

"Really?" Kylie let sarcasm leak into her tone. "Because it's hard to believe after the picture I saw of you two making out."

He hesitated and then said, "Fine, you're right. When I first ran into Ellie, she was so happy to see me and I was hurting. Lucas was back and you cared about him. I was just as confused as Ellie was. We kissed and ... Look, the important thing is that we both realized it was wrong."

It was that little pause that caught her attention the most. "You kissed and then did what?" Kylie asked.

Obviously in the dream world, she felt braver, able to ask questions she

might not ask in real life. “Just exactly what happened between you and Ellie in Pennsylvania?”

Chapter Twenty-four

“Is it important?” Derek asked.

“You had sex with her, didn’t you.” Somehow Kylie had known this all along. It sucked being right, too.

Guilt filled his eyes. “It didn’t mean anything.”

She shook her head. “How can it not have meant anything? It’s the ultimate form of intimacy between two people.”

“Not always,” he said. “Sometimes it’s just two people searching for something. And a lot of times, they don’t find it. We didn’t find it, Kylie. Ellie knew it. I knew it. And the romantic relationship is completely over. It was a mistake and we both knew it.”

“But you brought her back with you.”

He flinched. “She’s not a bad person, I couldn’t leave her there at the commune. It was awful. She’d have been in a gang in a matter of weeks.”

Kylie pulled her legs closer to her chest and tried to sort through the emotions bouncing through her. She felt hurt. She felt justified in her feelings of jealousy. And she felt ... relieved. The last one didn’t make sense, though. Why would she feel relieved that Derek and Ellie had sex?

Then the truth hit. She felt relieved because now there was no reason for her to experience guilt over being with Lucas. Not that the truth still didn’t hurt. And if she was completely honest with herself, she still felt a tiny wave of jealousy. But she pushed it away, because now, more than ever, she could accept it. She was Derek’s friend. Just his friend.

“We’re just friends,” she said.

He looked at her. "Yeah," he said, but something about that one word didn't seem as honest as his earlier words.

"All I want to do is talk. To make sure you're okay. Give me ten minutes." He studied her frown. "Five. Hell, give me three minutes, Kylie. Is that too much for a friend to ask?"

She looked at the stream and then up at him. "Three minutes. Then this ends."

"Deal." He looked at his watch, and then, as if competing with the clock, he started talking. "How are you? What happened at the cemetery? I heard about it."

She gave him the really short version. Namely, that she thought the ghost was buried there. And she'd discovered her spirit might be a child killer.

He didn't flinch like the rest of them. "What are you going to do?" he asked instead. "How are you going to get to the truth?"

"I'm waiting for the ghost to come back. She hasn't visited me since then."

"She will," he said. "And don't worry too much. I'm sure you'll figure everything out. You always do."

Kylie gazed up into his gold-flecked green eyes. "How do you know I'm worried?"

"Duh, I can feel it."

"I thought you couldn't feel my emotions here?"

"I can feel them, but they're just at a lower voltage. Normal range."

Normal. That word seemed to be popping into Kylie's mind a lot.

She nodded. "Did you ever find your dad?" When he looked upset by her question, she added, "You told me when you left that you were going to try to find him."

He nodded and then swallowed. "I found him."

She felt his mixed emotions as if they were her own. "It didn't go well?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd see him and it would make it right. It's still not right. I still don't know if I want anything to do with him. I'm pretty sure I don't."

"Why? What happened?" Kylie asked.

“He offered me a hundred different reasons why he had to leave me and Mom. His life was a lie trying to live in the human world with my mom. He told me it hurt too much trying to stay in touch. He said he’d like to get to know me again. He said a lot of things. And not one of them meant a hill of beans to me. Maybe it will in time. I don’t know. But right now, it just feels totally awkward.”

“I understand awkward,” she said, and offered him a bit of a smile. “Sara is supposed to be coming with my mom on Parents Day.”

He reached for her and then pulled back. “I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

There was a moment of silence, then Derek started talking. “So, with your ghost ... have you figured out what to do? I mean, how can you find out who she is?”

“I don’t know for sure. But my gut says that she’s remembering more and more each time I see her.”

He pondered her words and then said, “You know, I remember reading something years ago about how an old state cemetery was dug up and they found that about five percent of all the caskets had two bodies in them.”

“Two bodies?”

“Yeah. The state was burying some of the really poor, homeless folks in with other caskets. Just slipping them in so they didn’t have to pay for their own burial.”

Kylie thought about it for a second, and it made perfect sense. Catherine O’Connell said she saw Jane Doe rise from the grave of Berta Littlemon. However, if Berta Littlemon was in there, too—and the legends about such things were correct—she would have already been snatched into hell. That meant only one spirit would have risen from the grave.

“I think you might have just solved my problem,” she told Derek. “Thank you!” If things had been different between them, she would have hugged him.

He grinned. “You’re welcome.”

She suddenly realized that they had probably been talking way longer than his negotiated three minutes. She glanced down at his watch.

“Oh, one more thing,” he said. “After we talked the other day about Red

being strange, I did some checking. You know, just to see what I could find out. Contrary to the weird vibe we both got, he is vampire, or at least that's what everyone thinks. The only other thing I found was ... about his parents."

"What about them?" she asked.

"Supposedly, his mom was murdered in front of him when he was like seven. The case never was solved. It looked as if even the FRU looked into the case, but never found who did it. Then his dad disappeared less than a year later. That's when he went to live with his grandfather."

Kylie frowned. "Damn, I could almost feel sorry for him."

Derek shrugged. "Unfortunately, most people who commit violent crimes were at one time victims themselves. But one wrong doesn't make a right. And we know he killed those two girls."

"I know." When she looked up and found herself gazing into Derek's eyes again, she said, "I guess I should—"

"Go. I know," he said, and his expression turned sad. "I miss you, Kylie. Can we ... do this again?"

She almost said yes but realized it probably wasn't a good idea for either one of them. "I don't know," she said. "I've got a lot to figure out."

"Between you and Lucas?" he asked.

"Yes," she said honestly. She wouldn't feel guilty about her feelings anymore. She didn't know what she might have with Lucas. But for the first time since she'd recognized those growing feelings, she didn't feel at fault about them. And there was something between them. But with his pack trying to break them up, and his dislike of her involvement with the ghosts, she just wasn't sure where it was going to lead.

"Okay," he said. "But if you need me ... or just want to talk ... you know where I am."

Kylie nodded, and then the next thing she knew, she was awake, staring at her bedroom ceiling. "I miss you, too," she whispered, and then rolled over and hugged her pillow.

* * *

Perry met Kylie at the front door the next morning when she stepped out of

the cabin.

“Hey,” she said, and forced a smile. She wasn’t exactly depressed about knowing the truth about Derek and Ellie, but there was an underlying sadness to her mood today.

It reminded Kylie of how she always felt the last day of school before summer vacation. She wanted summer to be here, knew there was no changing it, but a part of her wanted to hold on to life the way it was. She supposed she just wasn’t a big fan of change.

Perry, his eyes a bright blue, grinned. “Hey.” He looked back at the door, and Kylie knew why.

“Miranda already left,” she told him.

“Why?”

Because she didn’t want to see you because she’s afraid of what you’ll say when she tells you she’s got a date Friday night with a hot warlock.

“I don’t have a clue.” And I’m really glad you’re not a vampire who can read my heartbeat and tell when I’m flat-out lying.

His eyes went from blue to a sad brown. “I thought ... I guess I just hoped that...”

“I know,” Kylie said, and bumped him with her shoulder. “And while I can’t say anything, all I can tell you is that hope is eternal.”

“So I still have a chance?” he asked.

“A little one,” she said, not wanting to give him false hope.

They started heading down the trail. “I want to see if Holiday and Burnett are in the office. I need to talk with them before breakfast.”

“Just lead the way,” Perry said, bowing at the waist. “I’m your personal shadow servant.”

Kylie grinned. As they walked, she wondered if someday she could hang out with Derek like this and it would feel this right. Feel completely platonic, with no hint of regret about what could have been. She really hoped so. Although her heart said he would have made an awesome boyfriend, he would also make a hell of a good friend. And she hoped they could get there.

* * *

Holiday and Burnett weren't in the office, so Kylie couldn't tell them about Derek's theory that there could have been two bodies in Berta Littlemon's grave.

Or ask Burnett what he'd been smoking when he'd given Sara permission to visit Shadow Falls.

At breakfast, Lucas joined her and Perry at their table. Kylie spotted Miranda eating with the witches, and Della had a vampire thing that morning. So Kylie sat between Lucas and Perry, and much to her surprise, they both behaved. Well, Perry behaved.

Lucas slipped his hand under the table and touched the side of her leg. Then he leaned in and whispered, "Want to go dancing in the moonlight again tonight?"

She couldn't be sure, but she could swear the brush of his lips against her temple had almost been a kiss. She nudged him with her elbow, and as she forked a mouthful of eggs on her utensil, she whispered back, "Careful. People are going to actually know you have a thing for me."

"Good," he said. "Maybe it's time we make it official."

Her heart stopped. The eggs dropped from the prongs of her fork and landed with a splat on her plate.

She turned and looked into his blue eyes. "Are you asking me to go out with you?"

"Are you saying yes?" Hope danced in his eyes.

"What about your pack?"

"I told you I don't care what they say."

Joy danced in her heart. "Well, I think I should hear the question first."

"Okay ... Will you, Kylie Galen, go out with me?"

Yes. Yes. Yes. The word sat on the tip of her tongue, waiting to be released. She smiled, poised to say it, and—

"Can I borrow Lucas for a minute?" Burnett's deep voice shattered the moment. He stood behind them, six feet plus of solid vampire.

Lucas looked up at Burnett. "Is something wrong?"

"I need a word with you."

Lucas got up and left. Kylie watched them leave, so in shock from Lucas

asking her to go out that she completely forgot to give Burnett a large ration of shit for agreeing to let Sara come to the camp.

* * *

A bit later, Kylie stood beside Perry while Chris announced names for the Meet Your Campmates hour. Lucas still hadn't come back from his talk with Burnett, and that worried her.

Looking up at Perry, Kylie asked, "How are we going to do this?"

He stared over at Miranda. "I pulled my name from the list."

"So we don't have to stay?" Kylie asked.

"I pulled my name. Not yours. I figured I could just tag along with you on your hour."

"Isn't that against the rules?"

"I'm sure Burnett wouldn't mind."

"Speaking of Burnett," Kylie said. "I didn't know you two knew each other."

"He told you?" Perry seemed surprised.

"No. Well, he sort of did when I asked him about it. But during the whole dragon thing, you said something about him telling you something when you were six."

"Oh," Perry said. "And what did Burnett say?"

"Just that he knew you from before. Was he like your foster contact person or something?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"And Kylie Galen..." Chris's voice rose, and so did Kylie's attention. She glanced to the front where Chris stood pulling names out of a hat. Yes, a real-life magician type of hat, too.

Obviously, Chris had decided to jazz up his few minutes in the limelight. "You are spending an hour with ... Ellie Mason."

"Oh, hell!" All her unresolved feeling about Derek and Ellie came bubbling to the surface.

"Oh, boy," Perry countered. "This should be loads of fun!"

Which only went to show how she and Perry had different definitions of

fun.

* * *

A minute later, Kylie, Ellie, and Perry took off walking along one of the trails. For the longest time, none of them spoke.

“Where are we going?” Ellie broke the unspoken code of silence.

“Down by the creek bed,” Kylie said.

“Okay,” Ellie said.

They continued for another ten minutes, walking fast, supernatural fast. No one complained. At least not about the speed.

Ellie piped up again. “I’m new here, but I thought the objective of campmate hour was to talk—to get to know each other.”

“So talk,” Kylie snapped, and dodged a few limbs that seemed to try to reach out and grab her. She also dodged logic that said she should fake a huge migraine and send the little sex kitten on her way back to camp.

“Okay ... My name is Ellie Mason and I have a feeling you don’t like me.”

Kylie stopped and swerved around—she had the script down in her head for faking a sick headache. She wouldn’t even have to fake it because now her head was actually throbbing. But when she opened her mouth, her words had nothing to do with migraines.

“Okay, let’s get something out in the open. I know you had sex with Derek.” Her voice seemed to bounce from tree to tree.

“Damn!” Perry said, and grinned. “This is gonna be better than I thought.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Kylie glared at the shape-shifter.

Perry's smile vanished.

Kylie arched a brow. "Do it."

He frowned. "Not the deaf cat again," he pleaded. "I can't hear. My equilibrium is thrown off. It's like I'm in a vacuum."

She didn't look away until the sparkles started popping off like fireworks. Then she turned and faced Ellie, who stared wide-eyed at the cascading sparkles around Perry.

"Holy shit! I've never seen a shape-shifter transform before. I mean, I heard about what happens when they shift, but that is so cool."

"Did you hear what I said?" Kylie crossed her arms over her chest as fury built in the pit of her stomach.

"Did you see him change?" Ellie asked.

Kylie tapped her tennis shoe in the moist, rocky soil. "I said I know you had sex with Derek."

Ellie continued to stare at Perry, who was now a white, blue-eyed feline. There was a sudden silence in the woods. Kylie ignored it and focused on Ellie.

"Yeah, I heard you," Ellie said, still not looking at her. "And I'm purposely stalling, so I can figure out how to answer you." The dark-haired vamp released a deep breath and looked at Kylie. "Derek told you?"

Kylie nodded.

Ellie shook her head. "Just like Derek. He's one of those nice guys who

think the truth is the best policy.”

“You would have lied to me?” Kylie asked, searching for a reason to really dislike the girl. As if having sex with Derek weren’t enough of a reason. But then again, Kylie and Derek hadn’t had a commitment; they hadn’t even gone out on an official date. And Derek and Ellie shared a past.

“Yup. I’d have lied,” Ellie said. “Not for spite or anything. Just because ... well, what happened between me and Derek didn’t mean crap, so what would be the point of letting that cause a bunch of shit?”

Kylie frowned. “If it didn’t mean crap, then why did you do it?”

She shrugged. “Because I wanted it to mean something.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kylie accused.

Ellie frowned. “Okay, look. I like Derek. A lot. I mean, he’s hot, he’s sweet, and so damn great. But ... there are just no sparks. Like before when we were dating. We had a lot of sparkless sex. I’m sure you’ve dealt with that, right?”

Kylie didn’t correct her. Admitting she was a virgin to a stranger didn’t sit well with her.

“So when he appears at this party, I’m feeling a tiny bit scared, slightly vulnerable, and he shows up like a knight in shining armor. And he looks hot, and I think maybe this time there’d be sparks.” She shook her head. “But no sparks.”

Kylie felt the air grow cold around them. Dead cold. *Please not now*, she said in her head.

“If he told you about the sex,” Ellie continued, “then he also told you that as soon as it was over, we both were like ... ‘God, that was a mistake.’ And five minutes later, he’s telling me about some girl he met named Kylie.”

Kylie stared down at the ground, and she could swear it had just shifted beneath her feet. She glanced over at Perry, who sat on a tree limb, swatting at a butterfly.

“You do know he really cares about you, right?” Ellie asked.

The ghost materialized right in front of Kylie, and she looked panicked, scared.

Please ... not now!

Kylie ignored the spirit and studied Ellie. Suddenly the whole conversation seemed silly and totally unnecessary. She had no right to be upset that Derek and Ellie had sex. None. Zilch. Zero.

"I'm sorry," Kylie said. "I shouldn't have—"

"Yeah, you should have. If some chick had sex with a guy I liked, I'd be pissed, too. It's cool that you just spoke your mind. I respect that."

"No," Kylie said. "I mean, it's not like ... that with me and Derek. Yeah, Derek and I were almost something, but then..." *He just ended it.* She stopped herself. She didn't want to go into that. "It's over."

"Right. Over." Ellie rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Every time we walk into a crowd of people, do you know what he does? He looks for you." She chuckled. "Which is silly. And so I asked him about it. I go, 'You say you can feel her a mile away, so you know she's not here, so why do you look for her if you already know?'" Ellie grinned. "You know what he said to me? He said, 'Hope lives eternal.'"

Kylie recognized the words she'd offered Perry a little while ago.

"The guy's got it bad for you," Ellie said.

Kylie shook her head again. "No, it's over. He ended it. I'm going out with someone else now."

"You are?" Shock widened Ellie's blue eyes. "Does Derek know?"

"No. I mean, I'm going to be going out with someone else." Feeling like a dork, she added, "Lucas asked me to go out at breakfast. But I didn't get a chance to say yes."

Ellie raised her eyebrows in suspicion. "So, you didn't say yes."

Kylie frowned, and the dead cold seemed to crawl against her skin. "We were interrupted."

"How long does it take to say yes?" Ellie wrapped her arms around herself as if to fight off the cold and looked around as if confused by the sudden change in temperature.

"What's your point?" Kylie asked, feeling frustrated but not sure if it stemmed from the ghost or from Ellie. Then Kylie saw the ghost pacing back and forth, staring at her as if she needed to tell her something. Something urgent.

Ellie did her shrug thing again. “I’m just saying it sounds like you hesitated. And maybe there’s a reason for that. Maybe the reason is—”

“There’s no reason. I didn’t hesitate.”

Jane Doe stopped pacing and stared Kylie dead in the eyes. “*You should run!*”

“You sure?” Ellie asked.

“I’m sure,” Kylie said, and she was. Wasn’t she? She’d been going to tell him yes before Burnett came over. She would tell Lucas yes the next time she saw him.

“*Run!*” the ghost screamed.

“Why?” Kylie asked the spirit, and glanced at Perry still in the tree, slowly sneaking up on the butterfly.

“Why what?” Ellie asked.

“*Run!*” The spirit screamed the word so loud, Kylie thought her eardrums would rupture. She looked up and saw the eagle coming at her full blast with his talons out.

She ducked, barely dodging the bird’s sharp claws. Right then, the ground under her feet started moving. Seriously moving. A loud rumble seemed to explode from below her.

“Run!” Kylie screamed at Ellie.

The vamp, her eyes glowing a bright yellow, stared at the ground. “What the hell?”

“Run!” Kylie screamed, and grabbed Ellie’s arm and took off, dragging her with her. They had gotten less than a foot when the earth where they’d just stood dropped into a big, dark hole. A hole that kept growing wider, moving closer. Kylie got about another ten feet when she remembered.

Perry. He was stuck in a tree and wouldn’t be able to hear what was happening below him.

She swung around. Just as she suspected, he was still in the tree.

Still staring at the butterfly.

“We should keep going!” yelled Ellie.

The hole in the ground kept expanding as if someone sucked the earth from below. It got almost to the tree. Almost to Perry. He still hadn’t seen it.

And it was her fault. All her fault.

“Perry, run!” she screamed with everything she had.

But Perry couldn’t hear.

My equilibrium is thrown off. It’s like I’m in a vacuum. His words raked across her mind like cut glass.

She saw the hole begin to pull on the roots of the tree.

She saw Perry the feline lose his footing.

He fought to stay in the tree. She watched in horror as he wrapped his feline limbs around the branch, his claws digging into the bark as he clung for life. But the dark hole, like a monster who didn’t give up, sucked the tree down, taking the small, blue-eyed kitten into the dark oblivion.

Someone lives and someone dies.

“No!” Kylie screamed, and bolted forward, taking a flying leap into the dark hole.

Chapter Twenty-six

The darkness surrounded Kylie the second her foot left solid earth, and she tumbled down the pit. She heard screams, tortured screams, coming from below. Or were they just inside her head? It was hard to tell. Then she was struck by a cold so intense that it almost stole her breath. She instantly knew the sounds were coming from hell. Was Holiday right? Had she spent too much time with pure evil and now she was paying the price?

And because of her, so was Perry?

Suddenly, painful little sparks hit her body from beneath her, jolts of what felt like electricity. It took two or three strikes before she realized what it meant.

Perry. Perry was shifting.

Then she slammed against ... something half-soft, half-prickly.

With a lot of feathers.

She bounced off it, flipped over, and screamed as she continued her descent, falling faster now into oblivion and going headfirst.

Huge, leathery-feeling handcuffs latched on to her right arm and yanked her upward. Her arm felt pulled out of its socket. She muttered a curse at the sharp pain.

"I got you..." Perry's voice reverberated through the hole.

It was meant to reassure her, but it didn't. What if he lost his grip on her arm? What if whatever it was that waited for them below suddenly decided to come up for a visit?

"Kylie!"

She jerked her head up to the entrance to the large sinkhole. Bright light spilled in from the opening, making it hard to see. Then she saw a body falling.

No, not just a body. It was Ellie.

“Shit!” Perry screamed, flapping his large bird wings as fast as he could. “I can’t catch her. I can’t.”

An eerie sense of calm settled over Kylie. She reached out with her free hand just as gravity brought Ellie’s body past them and latched on to the vampire’s forearm. Kylie’s hold was weak, though, and her palm started to slip. She tried to tighten her grip, lost it, and finally caught the girl by her wrist.

Ellie screamed and started to fight. Her eyes glowed a bright red in the darkness.

“It’s me,” Kylie said.

“Everyone, hang on!” Perry’s voice bounced off the earthen walls of the pit.

Ellie struggled again, and Kylie pulled her closer. “I’ve got you.”

And she did. Kylie put every ounce of thought and strength into not letting go of Ellie’s wrist.

The sound of air *whooshing* and huge bird wings flapping filled the darkness, and in a few seconds, Perry lifted all three of them out of the hole. Once they were back in the light, he flew them about a hundred feet up the path before he descended and dropped them carefully on the solid earth.

He landed beside them, talons hitting the earth with a thud. As Kylie suspected, he’d shifted into a prehistoric-looking bird with dark gray feathers. He was about the size of a small plane. Then the rumble beneath the ground started again.

“Run!” he ordered.

He didn’t have to tell them twice. Kylie and Ellie took off, flying through the woods, dodging trees, ducking under limbs, and leaping over thick bunches of thornbushes.

Kylie kept glancing up to make sure Perry was okay. He was still following them, gliding easily over the tips of the trees, making sure they

were safe.

Once they were out of the trees, Kylie dropped to the ground and gasped for air, her pulse racing. She could hear her blood gushing in her veins. Ellie dropped down beside her, breathing not quite as hard, but still a little shaky.

Perry landed beside them and transformed himself back into human form.

“What the freaking hell were you doing?” he screamed at Kylie, his eyes blood red with fury.

She swallowed another gulp of air. “Trying to save you.”

“I didn’t need saving!” He flapped his arms up and down almost as if he’d forgotten he was no longer a bird. He turned his anger on Ellie. “And you? What the hell is your excuse?”

She coughed and then said, “I ... figured if I came back alive and you two didn’t, the rest of your group would probably kill me. I didn’t have a choice but to go in after you.”

Suddenly Burnett, eyes in full protective mode and his fangs exposed, flashed onto the scene. “What happened?” he asked, his voice little more than a deep growl. “It sounded like an explosion.”

“Earthquake, maybe,” Perry said. “The ground just sank below us.”

“But that’s—” Burnett shook his head. “Is everyone okay?”

They all nodded. Burnett’s gaze locked on Kylie. “You’re bleeding. Go to the office and let Holiday check you all out.” Kylie looked down at her arm. Ellie’s nails must have scratched her when she caught her.

Burnett continued, “I’ll check to see how bad the, uh, earthquake is.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” Kylie called out, and Burnett returned in a blur of motion.

“What?” he asked, impatience clear in his voice.

“It wasn’t an earthquake,” she said. With clarity, she recalled seeing the eagle coming straight at her in full-scale attack mode. Now she understood his intention had been to make her run, but it didn’t change the fact that it had been evil. She’d seen the darkness in his eyes. “The eagle was there.”

And so was Jane Doe, although Kylie saw no reason to mention that.

At least not yet.

Burnett let loose another growl. “Go to the office. I’ll see if I can get to

the bottom of this.”

As Kylie, Ellie, and Perry moved toward the office, Kylie looked at Ellie. “Thanks for going in to try and save us.”

Ellie shrugged. “Don’t give me too much credit. I really didn’t know what would happen to me if I was the only one to survive.” She chuckled. “Now that it’s over with, that was fun.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Kylie said, remembering how she felt when she saw Perry fall into the hole.

They took a few more steps, and Ellie’s gaze, bright probably because of the blood, shot to Kylie’s arm where the scratches ran down her arm, and she added, “I’m sorry. I’ll bet I did that when I was fighting you. Thanks for saving me. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t caught me. I couldn’t seem to get into flying mode. I owe you. You name it and I’ll do it, no questions asked.”

“No need. You’re welcome,” Kylie said.

“And what about me?” Perry asked.

Kylie and Ellie looked at Perry and spoke at the same time. “Thanks.”

“Can I name it and you’ll do it?” Perry wiggled his brows, his tone filled with humor once again.

“No,” Ellie and Kylie said at the same time.

“I know, how about instead you two just tell Miranda how I was your hero.”

“I can do that,” Ellie said. “Who’s Miranda?”

“My girlfriend,” Perry said, and he looked at Kylie. “Well, she will be as soon as I convince her.”

They took a few more steps and Ellie said, “I’m sorry I slept with Derek.”

“Forget it,” Kylie said, because she planned on forgetting it herself.

* * *

The next couple of hours were a blur of interrogations by Burnett, who questioned all three of them, separately, several times. Kylie realized he wasn’t doing it because he thought anyone would lie about what happened. He just didn’t want something one person said to influence the memory of the

other. Kylie didn't care about that. What she wanted to know was what had happened. Had they really gotten sucked down into a pit that led straight to hell? If so, why? Was it because of Jane Doe? Or was this something conjured up by Mario and his pals to torment her?

More important, would it happen again?

Unfortunately, Burnett had questions of his own and no answers. Holiday was just as clueless. But the look of fear on the camp leaders' faces scared Kylie more than anything else.

The moment the interview was over and Kylie stepped out of Burnett's office, Lucas met her at the door and pulled her into another room. He didn't say a word; he just pulled her against his warm—so warm—chest and held her.

"I was running errands for Burnett." His cheek pressed against the top of her head. "I just got back."

After a good long hug, he set her back and asked, "What happened *this time*?"

It was the last two words that hinted at Lucas's true feelings. Kylie frowned. "You sound like you think this was all my fault."

He shook his head. "I don't think that. But damn it, I'd like to go at least a couple of days where I didn't think I almost lost you."

She smiled. "You didn't almost lose me." And then she gave him the quick version about the sinkhole opening up and their mad tumble down it.

He stared into her eyes. "Were there spirits involved?"

"No. Well, one was there, but..."

"But what?" he snapped. He shook his head and growled. "You've got to stop letting them hurt you, Kylie."

"They don't hurt me."

"Bullshit!" His blue eyes turned an anger-filled orange. "I saw part of your vision, remember? I had to stand there and feel completely helpless while those people dragged you away. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

Kylie knew Lucas's emotion stemmed partly from his werewolf instincts. Weres were known to have an intense need to protect those they cared about.

And she liked knowing he cared about her.

But she had to make him understand that dealing with ghosts was as important to her as shifting into a wolf was to him. It was her destiny, her path.

Kylie put her hand on his chest. “The spirit didn’t do this,” she said. “It was probably Mario and his grandson again and their shape-shifter buddy. If anything, the spirit probably saved my life.”

Okay, so she was guessing that was what had happened. But it made more sense to her than it did that Jane was somehow evil.

He inhaled. “Damn it. What’s with that guy? Doesn’t he know when to quit?”

“Obviously not.”

Lucas pulled her against him again. “The timing of this sucks.”

“What timing?” Kylie asked.

“I have to go away for a few days.” He touched her face. “If it wasn’t an emergency, I wouldn’t go.”

“What happened?” Even as she asked the question, Kylie worried he wouldn’t tell her. Werewolves were also known to keep things to themselves.

“I told you about my half-sister. She was supposed to come here for school when the summer camp ended.”

“Yeah?” Kylie said, thrilled he trusted her enough to share.

“Well, now my dad has her with his pack and is refusing to let her come. I’m going to have to go there and change his mind.”

“I thought you didn’t get along with your dad.”

“I don’t. But I don’t have a choice. I shouldn’t be gone more than a few days at most, though. I’m going to have Will keep an eye on you.”

Kylie remembered Lucas introducing her to Will, another werewolf, a while back. But as with most of the weres, she hardly knew him and didn’t particularly like the idea of having a stranger “keep an eye on her.”

“I’ll be fine,” she told him. “Burnett has assigned me shadows. I don’t need—”

“It’ll make me feel better. Knowing one of my own kind has your back.”

Kylie didn’t like being reminded that Lucas trusted his own kind more

than he did the others. But she had too much stuff to worry about without taking on another problem to chew on her sanity.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Now. I should be back by Saturday, or Sunday at the latest.” He kissed her again. The kiss went on longer than a typical good-bye kiss, and it involved a lot of passion.

When he pulled away, she heard the slight humming sound rumbling from his chest.

She grinned with a hint of warning. “You’re humming again.”

He arched a brow. “You bring out the wolf in me.” Leaning down, he gave her another quick kiss.

Seconds after he’d left, Kylie realized he hadn’t said anything about asking her out this morning.

Was he having second thoughts? Closing her eyes, she pushed that worry into the mental closet with all her other worries.

Holiday walked into the room and hugged her. “I think we need a trip to the falls, don’t you? How about I set it up with Burnett and tomorrow we make it a date?”

“That would be good,” Kylie said. “Really good.”

* * *

The next day, Kylie and Holiday ran through the cascading water of the falls and dropped down on the rocky bank. Tiny pinpoints of water spilled over from the rush of the falls and splattered against Kylie’s face. Her hair, already soaked from the walk through the sheet of water, hung around her shoulders and dripped down onto her legs.

She didn’t care. The serene atmosphere seeped into her pores, and for the first time in over a week, she felt at peace. She knew this didn’t mean her problems were solved. They were far from it. But for right now, for this moment in time, she felt everything in her world was going to be okay.

Burnett, unhappy about their being here, stood guard outside. He’d been extra concerned about them coming out here because of yesterday’s incident. That’s how they were referring to the giant hole that nearly swallowed up

Perry, Kylie, and Ellie: as the “incident.”

The geologist they’d called in to look at the pit was calling it a freak of nature, a sinkhole. Kylie knew better, as did most of the campers at Shadow Falls. Amazingly, the size of the hole had shrunk before the scientist arrived. Magic, bad magic, was involved. This much Kylie knew, and Miranda had confirmed it, too.

Because of the weather and the thicket of trees, the security alarm hadn’t picked up on any intruders. Burnett had been over-the-top pissed about that, too. Not at anyone in particular, but at the situation in general. She’d heard him on the phone with the FRU, telling them he needed a better security system ASAP.

But since whatever happened apparently came from underground, Kylie didn’t know if a system existed that would detect underground intruders.

Powerful underground intruders who, for reasons Kylie didn’t understand, wanted her dead.

Kylie breathed in the serenity of the falls. Amazing. Even the thought of being on someone’s hit list couldn’t ruin her peaceful mood.

Leaning back on her hands, she studied Holiday, who was doing the same. “You know, we should bring all the campers up here.”

Holiday opened her eyes. “I wish it was that easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t bring someone to the falls, Kylie. They have to be called. Remember?”

Kylie did remember and was suddenly curious. “So why does the falls call some people and not others?”

“Don’t know,” Holiday said. “But it’s said that they call less than half of one percent of all supernaturals.”

“Are all of the ones called ghost whisperers?”

“All of the ones that I know of are. There are legends of the falls that go back thousands of years. The Native Americans called it sacred grounds and decreed that only the chosen could enter.”

“Burnett entered,” Kylie said.

“I know, and that shocks me.”

“Because you don’t think he’s chosen?” Kylie asked.

“No, because he can’t see spirits.”

“You should have seen him watching you when everyone was greeting you at dinner the other night,” Kylie said, acting on impulse. “I think he loves you, Holiday.”

Holiday arched a brow. “Still trying to play matchmaker, huh?”

“Maybe I’m just trying to help out a couple of friends.”

“Or maybe you’re concentrating on someone else’s problems so you don’t have to think about your own.”

“Perhaps,” Kylie said with a shrug, “but right now my problems don’t seem very bad.” She gazed at the rock ceiling, marveling at the beauty of the rock’s patterns.

Holiday chuckled. “It’s amazing what happens in here, isn’t it?” She inhaled. “I wish I could bottle it up and keep it in my purse to take a shot of when I needed it.”

“Too bad we can’t live in here,” Kylie said.

“Have you seen the ghost since the incident?” Holiday stretched out her feet.

Kylie nodded. “She woke me up last night. I did what you said and asked if there was another body in the casket with her.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. But she got that look again.”

“What look?” Holiday asked.

“Like I’d jogged her memory or something. Whenever that happens, she disappears on me.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to remember,” Holiday said. Kylie heard the implication in the camp leader’s voice: that Jane Doe didn’t want to remember because she’d murdered innocent children.

“I think she’s scared to remember,” Kylie said, “but not for the reasons you believe.”

“Then why is she so scared?”

Kylie hesitated. “Maybe it’s the same reason I’m scared.”

Holiday glanced over at her. “What are you scared of?”

“Of discovering the truth. Discovering what I am.”

“Why?” Holiday asked as if confused.

“Because it’s the unknown. Because it’s been kept a secret from me all this time. Because it will probably change my life forever.” Kylie sat up straighter. “It’s not that I don’t want to know the truth. I do. I want to know it so bad I can taste it. Sometimes it’s all I can think about. But I’m still scared. The day the Brightens, or the people we thought were the Brightens, came here, I was so scared my insides shook. I almost ran away. If Lucas hadn’t come along, I probably would have.”

Kylie swallowed hard. And that’s when she decided to ask the question she’d longed to ask Holiday and hadn’t had a chance to. “Have you seen any new spirits? Do you know if the elderly couple that came here that day died?”

“Their spirits haven’t come to me, if that’s what you’re asking,” Holiday answered.

Kylie bit down on her lip. “I can still remember how the old lady’s hand felt on mine. For some reason, I don’t think they were here to hurt me.”

“Why else would they have been here, then?”

“I don’t know.” Kylie closed her eyes. “But just like I know that Jane Doe isn’t a murderer, I kind of know that they weren’t bad.”

Holiday sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. “Maybe this is just your way of refusing to see the bad in people.”

Kylie considered the theory for a second. Then she recalled the two times she’d seen the eagle and then the deer. She wasn’t blind to evil. She could recognize it when she saw it, and it wasn’t there with the faux Brightens. “Nope,” she said. “That’s not it.”

Kylie’s mind went back to Jane Doe. “Last night I remembered parts of the vision, and I recalled what the nurse told the doctor. That her husband—Jane Doe’s husband—had just woken up and was asking about her.”

“And you think that means something?” Holiday asked.

“Berta Littlemon was never married. And the vision makes me believe Jane Doe’s husband had the same type of operation she had.”

Holiday hesitated and then said, “Sometimes visions are hard to decipher.”

“But all the other times I’ve had this type of vision, where I’m actually the person, they weren’t puzzles that I had to piece together in order to figure out what they meant. They were scenes that actually took place.”

“But the visions are from their perspective. And if Jane Doe is crazy, then...”

Kylie shook her head. “I don’t think she’s crazy. Or evil.”

“I hope you’re right,” Holiday said.

“Me too.”

They sat in silence for a long moment or two, just listening to the rush of water and the sound of calm. Kylie looked at Holiday again and felt the slightest bit of worry whisper across her mind. “What am I going to say to Sara when she comes here on Sunday?”

“You don’t tell her anything, except how happy you are that she’s well.”

“It’s going to be so weird having her here. She’s from my old world, and my old world shouldn’t be in my new world. It’s like running into your Sunday school teacher at a kegger.”

Holiday chuckled. “Or your gynecologist at the grocery store. I did that once. It was so weird.” She reached over and rested her hand on Kylie’s.

Normally, Holiday’s touch brought nothing but calm, but not this time. This time, everything went black.

Chapter Twenty-seven

For a second, it felt as if someone had turned the lights off. Kylie could feel Holiday's hand on hers, but the cave was pitch black.

Then the lights came back on. Kylie looked around, feeling confused. They were no longer in the falls. Instead, she sat in an uncomfortable folding metal chair outside in a clearing under some kind of dark-colored awning. The wind smelled like rain. It was a cloudy day, and she felt sad. So much sadness.

What happened to the serenity of the falls? What the heck had just happened?

It took her a second to realize this was a vision. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to see this time, but she didn't care. She didn't want to see it.

Kylie tried to pull herself out of it. She wanted to be back, back where everything felt right, where calm was all around her, where the sound of water soothed her mind.

When that didn't work, she tried to figure out where she was. Her breath caught when she saw a casket sitting in front of the enclosure. Quiet tears filled her eyes, and she knew someone she cared about lay in that box.

"No," she whispered. "Please, no."

Someone touched her hand. Kylie recognized Holiday's touch before she looked over to see the camp leader sitting next to her. She wore somber black clothes, no makeup, and unshed tears made her sad green eyes look brighter than usual.

Then someone started talking from up near the casket. Kylie looked up,

and Chris, the lead vampire, the one who did the Meet Your Campmates hour, stood beside the coffin. “We lost one of our own today. It’s our custom when a vampire dies that...”

“No,” Kylie whispered again, and suddenly she realized she was standing up, back in the falls. The sadness filling her chest now came with a less painful emotion, one that made it easier to breathe, but it still hurt.

She looked at Holiday, who sat on the rock, her arms holding her knees tight to her chest. The tears in her eyes told Kylie that Holiday hadn’t just been in Kylie’s vision. She’d actually experienced it herself.

Someone lives and someone dies. The words seemed to flow from the rock themselves and bounce around the stone walls.

Kylie looked at Holiday. “What does this mean?”

Holiday blinked and Kylie saw her attempt to put on a brave face. “Whatever happens, we’ll be okay.”

“We will,” Kylie said, fighting the calmer feeling and letting the feeling of grief take the lead. “But someone here isn’t going to be okay. We have to do something to save her. Or him.”

It’s our custom when a vampire dies that ...

Chris’s words tore at her heart. *When a vampire dies ...* Oh, God. Please say it’s not Della, or Burnett.

Holiday shook her head. “There’s nothing to be done, Kylie.” She inhaled. “Can’t you feel it? Acceptance.” Tears filled her eyes again. “It breaks my heart, but that’s what they are telling us. Someone we love will die, and we have to accept it.”

“But I don’t want to accept it.” Kylie turned and walked through the wall of water to the sunlight.

The instant her gaze landed on Burnett, all the calm from the falls shattered around her. The acceptance she’d felt earlier was little more than a vague memory.

Please not Burnett. Please not Della. Please not Burnett.

She repeated the mantra over and over in her mind, as though wishing would make it so. She wanted to run to him, to grab him by his hands and make him swear to her that he would be careful, that he wouldn’t take any

unnecessary risks.

But even as she thought those thoughts, she knew in her heart that nothing, and no one, would stop Burnett from being himself. And that meant him taking risks.

Kylie felt Holiday come to a stop beside her. Kylie glanced at the camp leader. Her gaze was locked on Burnett, and Kylie knew she'd been having the same thoughts about his safety that Kylie had.

Someone lives and someone dies. The words repeated themselves in her head.

* * *

"Are you guys ready?" Miranda called out on Friday evening from the living room.

Kylie sighed. Miranda was nervous. Tonight was her big date with Todd, the cute warlock, and Kylie and Della were going to go wait with her at the main gate.

"Just about." Kylie grabbed her hairbrush and gave her hair a few strokes, not really caring if her hair looked as though a bird had taken up residence there.

The last few days had passed by her in a haze. Accepting that someone was trying to kill her was bad, but trying to accept that someone she cared about, a vampire, was about to die was impossible.

She and Holiday had butted heads about trying to stop the vision they'd shared from becoming a reality. What if it was Della? Didn't Holiday care that it could be Burnett? Kylie had mentally gone through a list of all the vampires at camp. Some of them she didn't know all that well, but they didn't deserve to die. Kylie had come within a breath of telling Della about the vision, but just as she was about to say it, a wave of knowing passed over her. She couldn't tell.

For reasons Kylie didn't understand, she simply knew it would be wrong.

Holiday kept pointing out that Kylie was forgetting the message came with two parts. Someone lives. But what about the someone who dies? "You can't change Fate," Holiday had insisted.

Kylie still wanted to kick Fate's ass. The acceptance that had filled Kylie at the falls occasionally returned and tried to numb the ache. It helped, but not completely.

"I'm waiting," yelled Miranda again.

So am I. Kylie looked at the ghost sitting on the edge of the bed.

"One more minute," Kylie answered Miranda. The ghost was pregnant again, and she just sat there, holding her round belly as if to protect it.

"We have to talk, you know," Kylie whispered.

The spirit didn't answer.

"If you want me to help you, we have to talk."

She still didn't speak.

"I know the other ghosts think you did horrible things, but I don't really believe it. I'm trying to prove it, but I don't know if I can do it alone. I need your help."

More silence met Kylie's pleas. Then she heard Miranda calling again.

Kylie looked at the ghost. "I have to go now." She reached for her door and inhaled, knowing she needed to put on a front for Miranda, who was excited about her date with Todd. Never mind that the girl had asked Kylie at least ten times to tell her the story about how Perry had saved both her and Ellie from the sinkhole.

Miranda needed to make up her mind. But people who lived in glass houses shouldn't throw rocks. And she'd spent a lot of time in that particular glass house herself, trying to decide between Derek and Lucas.

Not anymore.

And she meant it, too. She did.

She missed Lucas. And when he came back, she was telling him straight out that she wanted to go out with him.

Last night, she'd even tried to find him in her dreams. Had Lucas been awake at the time, or could the pack somehow stop her from reaching him? She didn't know. So this morning, she'd found another way to contact him. Through that all-powerful thing called a cell phone.

He couldn't talk about what was happening there. She couldn't tell him about the issues with Fate. And telling him yes to going out with him just

seemed like something she wanted to do in person. But they talked for about twenty minute about other things, like the vacations they'd had as children.

He'd visited about every foreign country Kylie had ever heard of and some that she hadn't. But he hadn't ever been to Disney World or to a real amusement park, for that matter, and she'd told him all about them. They'd decided to make that their first real date.

Just as soon as Kylie was removed from someone's hit list and free of her mandatory shadow.

Walking out of her bedroom, Kylie found Miranda pacing by the door. She looked pretty; she wore her hair swept up, with only a few soft blond strands falling around her neck. The different colors in her hair hardly showed when she wore it up.

She wore a sleeveless yellow sundress that had a few ruffles around the bottom and a pair of matching yellow sandals. The outfit was very feminine without looking too cute, sexy without looking slutty, and dressy without looking overdressed. For just a second, Kylie envied Miranda and her evening out. She wished Lucas were here and they could go somewhere away from the camp.

Somewhere she could forget about Fate snatching away one of her own.

Della stood up from the computer desk. Kylie's heart knotted at the mere possibility that it was her in that casket, and then she remembered bits and pieces of the conversation she'd had with Holiday this morning.

"Everyone is going to die sometime, Kylie."

Kylie could tell that Holiday tried to be brave for her. But if the camp leader's eyes were any indication, she'd cried as much as Kylie had and hadn't slept any more than Kylie, either.

"Fine," Kylie had retaliated. "But why tell us this? Why, if we can't prevent it, just to torture us with knowing it beforehand?"

"For some reason, they thought we needed to be warned."

"Well, they thought wrong!"

"They are seldom wrong, Kylie."

"Well, there's always a first time, isn't there!"

"Earth to Kylie!" Della yelled, bringing Kylie back to the present. "What

is it with you? Did your little trip to hell mess up your mind?" Della grinned.

"What are you talking about?" Kylie asked.

"You keep staring at me and going blank. You've done it for almost two days now, and it's freaking me out a bit."

"I'm sorry."

"It's probably because she misses her hunky werewolf." Miranda placed a hand over her heart. "She's heartsick. Her aura is all grayish. She's gone without his kisses for almost two days." Then Miranda opened the front door and waved them out.

"Poor little thing," Della said.

Kylie rolled her eyes and followed them out. Good thing she liked her roommates, or she might really be pissed.

They hadn't stepped off the porch when Ellie, with a couple of other vampires, walked past.

Ellie shot over to Kylie. "How are your scratches?"

"Gone." Kylie held out her arm.

"Good." Just a bit of awkwardness moved in, and Ellie apparently noticed. "I'll see you."

"Yeah," Kylie said, and Ellie turned to go. It dawned on Kylie that in the vision, the person in the casket could have been Ellie. "Ellie?"

She swung around, and Kylie didn't know what she wanted to say; she just didn't want Ellie to leave thinking she'd been rude. "Thanks," Kylie blurted out.

Ellie looked puzzled. "For what?"

"For ... being considerate enough to ask about my arm." *Okay, that sounded so lame.*

"Oh. You're welcome." Ellie walked backward, waved, then swung around and ran to catch up with her group.

"What was that all about?" Della asked when Ellie was out of hearing range and they were down the porch steps.

"Yeah," Miranda said. "I mean, if I'd found out someone had boinked my boyfriend, I wouldn't be so nice."

"Derek wasn't my boyfriend," Kylie said.

“Yeah, and bears don’t do it in the woods, either,” Della said.

Kylie held up her hands. “Stop it, okay? I don’t care what happened between Ellie and Derek.”

Della mouthed the word *liar* and then said, “Truth is, I don’t like the chick. I hate the way she’s so friendly and nice. Gives my kind a bad name.”

Kylie frowned at Della. “Don’t mistreat her because of this. I’m serious, Della. She didn’t know about me when it happened.”

“Okay,” Della said. “That means she’s not devious. But it still makes her a slut.”

Miranda laughed and Kylie moaned. “I don’t think she’s like that.” Kylie hesitated and then added, “She jumped in the sinkhole, willing to risk her life to save Perry and me.”

“Yeah, she did do that,” Miranda said. “But it doesn’t change the fact that —”

“Damn it! Can we just *not* talk about it,” Kylie said.

“Man,” Miranda said. “It must be time for your lunar PMS, because Della’s right. You haven’t been yourself lately. You’re like majorly grumpy.”

Kylie wished Miranda were right. That her mood hinged on nothing more than her being a werewolf, instead of her other long list of problems.

And if she ended up being a were, Lucas would be happy. Really happy.

* * *

“Shit!” Miranda muttered thirty minutes later.

They were still waiting for Todd, who’d gotten lost and had called Miranda and told her he was three minutes away.

“Shit what?” Della asked, but then said, “Oh, shit.”

“What?” Kylie asked, obviously the only one in the dark.

Then she saw it, or rather him, and she completely agreed with the assessment. “Oh, shit.”

“Hey,” Perry said as he moved in. Kylie couldn’t help noticing that he’d gotten his hair cut and wore a tighter-fitting shirt and jeans. Something about his haircut made him appear older, more of a man than a young teen. The way his shirt hugged his upper torso accented his broad shoulders. His eyes

were blue, and the way they twinkled when he looked at Miranda had Kylie's heart melting. Confidence seemed to ooze from his smile. Even his body posture spoke of a coolness she'd never seen him exude. For the first time, Kylie spotted what it was that Miranda found so attractive about Perry.

"Looking hot," Della said, obviously noticing the same thing.

"Why, thank you." His blue eyes sparkled as he shifted his gaze back to Miranda. "But I'm not the only one looking good tonight. Really good."

"Thanks." Miranda looked at Kylie as if begging her to do something.

Kylie glanced at Della, who just grinned.

"Uh, Perry..." Kylie started talking, not sure how she would fix this. "We were just sort of talking, privately, about—"

"About Miranda's date," Perry said.

"Oh, shit," Della said again.

Ditto, Kylie wanted to say.

Perry focused on Miranda. "I know about your date."

Miranda shot Kylie a look as if accusing her of spilling the beans.

Kylie shook her head no and refocused on Perry. His eyes changed from blue to bright green, but if Perry was about to wig out on them and change into some kind of warlock-eating monster, he gave no other indication. "I just wanted to tell you that while I don't like it, I'm hoping you'll give me the same chance you're giving this asswad ... I mean, this guy."

Della chuckled.

"Go out with me tomorrow night," Perry went on. "Let me prove to you that I'm the guy you want."

Miranda opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Kylie couldn't talk either, because she felt a lump in her throat—a lump of emotion and pride for Perry.

"I ... I guess I could go out tomorrow night." Miranda sounded shocked and a little swept off her feet.

Then, from the corner of her eyes, Kylie saw something move at the office window. When she looked back, she spotted Burnett and Holiday standing there high-fiving each other. No doubt Burnett was listening to the conversation and sharing the details with Holiday.

Kylie should have guessed someone had helped out Perry. She was a little embarrassed she hadn't tried this herself. He so deserved his shot with Miranda.

Perry nodded, stepped closer, and then pressed a quick kiss on Miranda's cheek. It had to be the most romantic thing Kylie had ever seen.

If only the tan truck, with a personalized license plate that read TODD, hadn't pulled up right then.

"Oh, shit," Della said again.

Ditto.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Todd, a fairly hot-looking guy with sandy-colored hair, jumped out of his truck and frowned. He obviously didn't miss that Perry stood touch-me close to Miranda. From the look on Todd's face, he hadn't missed the kiss, either.

"Someone trying to steal my date?" Todd's words could have been meant in humor, but his tone told another story. He strode forward and dropped a possessive arm around Miranda's shoulders.

Kylie saw Perry's entire body stiffen. His eyes turned a bright red.

Todd, still studying Perry, tightened his brows to check out Perry's pattern.

The teen's jaw dropped a little when he realized exactly what Perry was. Kylie waited for the puddle to appear around the guy's feet.

The office door opened and shut behind them.

"Uh, Perry? Can I see you a minute?" Burnett called.

Kylie moved in close to Perry. "Don't screw it up, now," she whispered.

Perry, anger oozing from his pores, continued to stare at Todd. Kylie could feel the electricity start to buzz and hum around the shape-shifter.

"Don't do it," Kylie repeated in a whisper.

Perry looked back at Burnett, then at Kylie, and then back at Miranda. "I'll see you tomorrow night," he said, but his tone was so tight, Kylie knew what it cost him to keep his composure.

Then he turned around, transformed himself into his favorite bird, and flew up, making tight circles around them.

Della leaned over to Kylie. "He's going to crap on Todd's car, just

watch!”

Kylie did watch and hoped Della was wrong. Okay, it would have been really funny, because as big of a bird as Perry was, that would have been a lot of crap, but Kylie didn’t think it would impress Miranda. And that, she realized, was what this had been all about.

Still, Kylie didn’t relax until Perry changed directions and flew back toward the woods.

* * *

“Hey, I know. Why don’t we go to the swimming hole tonight?” Della suggested fifteen minutes later on the walk back to their cabin. “A bunch of campers have attached a swing to one of the higher cliffs so we can jump into the water. I’m dying to try it.”

It was the word *dying* that had Kylie catching her breath. She’d mostly blocked Jane Doe’s warning from her mind and had no idea why she suddenly felt so overwhelmed by emotion. “No.” She blurted out the answer so fast that Della made a face.

“Why?”

Because you could die. “Because...” Kylie struggled to explain the situation until she remembered she had a real reason. “Because Holiday is bringing Burnett’s computer over for me to use.”

“Why would you need his computer when we have one?”

“To send an e-mail to ... It’s a ghost thing. I’m sending an e-mail to a deceased woman’s family, trying to clear up their heritage, and Burnett has an untraceable e-mail address,” Kylie said.

“Oh.” Della fell silent. Funny how mentioning the word *ghost* was a conversation killer.

“So, what time is she showing up?” she asked finally. “I might run to the swimming hole while she’s with you.”

And you could get killed. Nope. Not happening. “But you’re my shadow.”

“Holiday let Jonathon leave early when she was there.”

“But that was before the sinkhole.” Her explanation sounded convincing, and the knot in Kylie’s stomach relaxed. She might not be able to tell Della

about Fate's premonition or whatever it was Holiday called it, but it wouldn't stop her from watching out for Della.

"Okay," Della said, but she didn't look happy about it. Which was fine with Kylie. An unhappy but alive Della was better than the alternative.

A group of campers rounded the corner and walked past them. Kylie felt the cold stare practically slap her, and when she recognized one of the girls as a werewolf, she figured she knew whose cold stare gave her shivers.

Another glance at the group confirmed her suspicions.

Fredericka.

Kylie kept walking past them, hoping to ignore—

"Hey, blondie," Fredericka called out.

Closing her eyes for a second, Kylie willed herself patience. When she turned, she found herself staring Fredericka right in the eyes. The were had silently moved in and stood so close that Kylie could count Fredericka's eyelashes. The were smirked in an unappealing way. And that's when Kylie had an epiphany.

She wasn't afraid.

Fredericka with her I'll-rip-you-to-shreds attitude didn't scare her anymore. She annoyed Kylie to no end, made her feel something akin to jealousy—although she trusted Lucas not to cheat—but nope, there wasn't an ounce of fear.

"What do you need?" Kylie put her hand out to stop Della from getting between them. Della, probably livid at being held back, growled and exposed her canines. Fredericka's eyes turned a bright pissed-off orange.

"I thought you'd like to know that Lucas phoned me and told me he's not returning until late tomorrow night," the were said in a sickly sweet voice. "He's having issues with his dad. Sad stuff. Poor guy. He needed someone to talk to."

Kylie knew the only reason Fredericka told her this was to annoy her.

And it worked.

But Kylie's pride had her smiling and pretending everything was great. But darn if there wasn't a part of her that didn't want to kick Fredericka's ass and worry about the consequences later.

“Thanks for letting me know. I’ll look for his call in a bit.” She smiled extra sweetly right back at Fredericka and walked away.

Fredericka caught her by the arm. Her fingers dug into Kylie’s elbow. Kylie almost attempted to pull away. Then she remembered that if everyone was right about her being a protector, she wouldn’t have the power to take on the were.

The only way Kylie could take on Fredericka was if she tried to hurt someone Kylie cared about.

And considering that other person was Della, and there might be a death cloud hanging around her and every other vampire at Shadow Falls, Kylie wasn’t about to let Della get involved.

Kylie would have to use her wits to get out of this. Did she have enough?

“Do you want to let go of my arm?” Kylie pretended like it didn’t feel as if her bones were about to be crushed under the were’s grasp.

“Not really,” Fredericka growled.

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. Because I’ve got this spirit hanging around and she’s been in a piss-poor mood for about thirty years.” It was a lie. Pure lie. But Kylie wasn’t above using what she could. “Ever since she was killed by a rogue werewolf, she’s been aching—”

Fredericka’s hand dropped. “Go to hell.”

Kylie smiled. “Thanks for the invite, but I almost went there yesterday and didn’t like it all that much.” Kylie then wrinkled her nose. “Is that skunk I smell?”

Fredericka’s eyes turned burnt orange and Kylie knew she’d pushed too far. The were’s hand clamped down on Kylie’s elbow and tightened. Someone darted out of the woods. From the corner of Kylie’s eyes, she saw it was Will, Lucas’s friend.

He cleared his throat, and the she-wolf didn’t even look at him. She just dropped her hold on Kylie and took off with a tail-tucked-between-her-legs kind of look.

Kylie didn’t like realizing that Will had been hounding her footsteps, unseen. The fact that neither Kylie nor Della had sensed he’d been hounding them told her he was good at it, too.

Della glared at him, but Kylie did the right thing. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He disappeared back into the woods.

“What the hell did you say ‘thank you’? We didn’t need him intervening. I could have opened a can of whoop ass on that she-wolf and she’d have been whimpering like a hungry pup.”

And she might have killed you.

They had gotten only a few feet away when Kylie remembered what Fredericka said about Lucas calling her. Pausing, she pulled out her phone to see if she’d missed his call.

Nope.

The were could have been lying. How could Kylie ever know? Then ... duh, the obvious hit. Della, like the rest of her kind, was a walking, talking lie detector. She could hear heartbeats and pulse rates and knew when someone was telling a lie.

Kylie looked at Della. “Was Fredericka telling the truth about Lucas calling her?”

Della made a face. “Is lying wrong if you know it’s what the person wants to hear?”

“Just tell me!”

Della mouthed the word *sorry*. “She was telling the truth.”

* * *

After Kylie arrived back at the cabin, Holiday came over with Burnett’s laptop and they sent an e-mail to Catherine O’Connell’s family. They’d concocted a story about being an old friend of Catherine’s and thought her family should know that she had wanted to tell them something right before she’d passed away. It sounded good. Convincing, even. And then they did a cut and paste of all the family tree information that came with photos.

Hopefully, it would do the trick. Not that Kylie suspected she’d ever know for sure. But she felt good about keeping her part of the bargain. Never mind that the information Kylie got from her about Berta Littlemon had yet to give her any answers. And Kylie hoped it didn’t. The last thing she wanted to discover was that she was wrong about Jane Doe.

While Holiday and Della chatted at the table, Kylie sent her stepfather an e-mail and told him the shift schedule if he wanted to come on Sunday to Parents Day. She hoped he'd e-mail back and say he couldn't make it so she wouldn't have to deal with Sara and her stepdad on the same day. His e-mail came back superfast. He said he looked forward to seeing her on Sunday.

"Crap," Kylie muttered.

Holiday glanced over at her. "Bad news?"

"No, everything is just friggin' fabulous," Kylie said, and dropped her head on the desk. She didn't know if she would survive.

"Are you okay?" Holiday asked when Kylie walked her outside a few minutes later.

"As good as can be expected, I guess," Kylie lied. Holiday nodded and they said their good-nights.

When Kylie got back inside the cabin, Della was answering e-mails and Kylie sat at the kitchen table. She longed to call it a night, but she wanted to be here when Miranda got back from her date with Todd.

Kylie looked at the clock on the wall. That could be several more hours from now, though. Hours that Kylie had to fret over her own problems.

Della swung around. "That's not good. Or maybe it is."

"What?" Kylie asked.

Della pointed to the door and Miranda walked in. Her face was unreadable. She moved over to the table and dropped into a chair with as much drama as she could muster.

"And?" Kylie asked, and spotted hope in Della's eyes. Kylie knew that Della hoped the same thing Kylie did.

Hoped that the date was a complete bust and Perry still had a shot.

Miranda merely shrugged.

"Don't do this!" Della snapped. "Spill it or I'll reach down your throat for the answer myself."

Miranda spoke up. "He was ... nice. Dinner was nice. Holding his hand was nice."

"Did he kiss you?" Kylie asked, unsure how Miranda defined "nice." If Kylie worked hard enough, she could believe "nice" meant it wasn't anything

special.

Miranda nodded. "The kiss was..."

"Let me guess," Della said. "It was nice."

"Right," Miranda said.

Della slapped her hand on the table. "'Nice' is just another way of saying 'friggin' boring'!"

Miranda frowned. "That's exactly what I thought."

Kylie and Della both squealed with excitement.

"What?" Miranda asked. "You're happy my date wasn't exciting?"

"No," Kylie said. "Let's just say we're more excited about tomorrow night's date."

A bright smile lit up Miranda's face. "Me too. Can you believe Perry did that? I mean, he was so..."

"Romantic," Kylie said.

"Hot," Della added.

"Sweet," Miranda whispered. "I couldn't stop thinking about him all night."

And that was the best news Kylie had gotten all day.

* * *

That night, Kylie stared at the ceiling forever, craving sleep that didn't come. One hour passed. Then two.

Her mind started naming off her problems. She still didn't know what she was. She couldn't stop Fate from taking someone she cared about. She had someone wanting her dead, probably the rogue underground paranormal gang headed by Mario, who still hadn't forgiven her for not wanting to marry his murdering grandson. Lucas was calling and chatting with Fredericka. Sara was coming to visit on Sunday with Kylie's mom. And her stepdad was going to drop by, too. Kylie still hadn't solved her amnesia spirit's issues, and she wasn't even a hundred percent sure the woman wasn't a killer.

Kylie's sleep-deprived brain chewed on each and every issue and didn't spit out any answers. She'd just fallen asleep when she heard a light *tap-tap* on her bedroom window.

At first, she thought she'd imagined it. Then she thought it was the blue jay again. "I'm not your mama," Kylie muttered.

The tapping stopped.

Kylie lay there, listening. The silence suddenly seemed ominous. She took in a shallow breath, and the sound seemed abnormally loud. The window was locked, right?

She recalled opening it the day before, hoping to invite in a breeze. And no, she couldn't recall locking it afterward.

But hey ... considering the types of intruders Kylie feared the most, the kind that could create sinkholes and materialize out of thin air, what was the chance a locked window would stop them?

So why, Kylie wondered, did the distinct sound of someone lifting her window send sharp jolts of fear straight to her heart?

Chapter Twenty-nine

Kylie bounced out of bed, and her heart leapt with her. Her gaze shot to the window, where she saw two hands gripping the windowsill.

A scream rose in her throat, but then Della's voice echoed outside the window. "Try to crawl in the window and I'm gonna crawl up your ass! And the position is just about right for me to do it."

The hands disappeared. Someone hit the ground.

Kylie ran to the window to make sure Della didn't engage in a fatal fight. Della, in her loose-fitting blue cotton Mickey Mouse pajamas, had her hands on her hips, standing over someone laid out on the lawn. Her eyes were a bright green.

"Shit!" Ellie said, her own eyes glowing. "I just wanted to talk to Kylie." She looked over at the window to Kylie and grabbed her baseball hat that read, *LITTLE VAMP*.

"See that?" Della pointed toward the front porch. "It's called a door. And most people use them."

"I didn't want to wake anyone else."

"Then you wait until a decent hour!" Della countered.

Kylie didn't know what Ellie wanted to discuss, but if it had anything to do with Derek, Kylie was willing to hear her out.

"It's okay," Kylie said. "Come on in."

"Oh, right. Reward bad behavior!" Della looked disgusted, but Kylie couldn't help it.

Ellie smirked at Della, then stood and started to climb in the window

again.

Della yanked her back. "Use the freaking door!"

When Kylie walked out of her bedroom, Della was gone and Ellie sat on the sofa.

"What's up?" She went over and sat in the chair next to her.

She looked up. "I don't know, I just wanted to talk."

"About what?" Kylie asked.

Ellie pulled one leg up to her chest. "A couple of things. Derek said you might be a good person to talk to about my issues."

Kylie chest tightened. "If this is about you and Derek—"

"No." She rolled her eyes. "I wasn't lying when I said there was nothing between us ... romantically. I like Derek as a friend. A good friend, but that's all. And that's some of what I wanted to talk about."

"I'm not following you," Kylie said.

"I'm worried about Derek. He's really upset about you two, and I sort of feel it's my fault. And when something's your fault, you feel responsible for fixing it."

Kylie frowned. "It's not your fault. Things weren't going right when he left."

"Yeah, he said that ... but still..."

"It's not your fault." Kylie cupped her knees in her palms. Did Derek really regret everything? The question hung somewhere between her head and her heart. "What's the other thing you needed to talk about?" she asked, not wanting to discuss Derek. She wasn't ready to delve into that Pandora box of emotions. The past was the past.

Ellie shrugged and adjusted her cap again. "I just don't think I belong here. I feel bad that Holiday worked so hard to get me accepted, but ... I think it's best I go."

Kylie leaned forward. "You want to leave Shadow Falls?"

"Yeah." She frowned. "All of it just doesn't feel right."

Her words didn't make sense, so Kylie just shook her head. "All of what?"

She glanced at Della's bedroom door and scooted over to the end of the

sofa, closer to Kylie, and lowered her voice. “The whole supernatural world. Derek said you would probably understand because you felt the same way for a while. I mean, don’t you miss it? Don’t you miss being normal? Just hanging with your old friends? I want that back. I miss ... Before I worried about what I wanted to take in college. Now I worry about where I’m going to get my next pint of blood.”

“You can’t leave, Ellie. I’m not mad at you, if that’s what this is about. I mean, at first I was hurt, but...”

“It’s not that. Really,” Ellie said. “Even my own kind here aren’t exactly welcoming,” she whispered. “But that’s not even it. Nothing about being this”—she waved a hand up and down her body—“feels right. I miss ... being human. I miss my mom, who died a couple of years ago.” Her voice shook with emotion. “Maybe if I just lived among humans, I would feel better.”

A wave of empathy for Ellie washed over Kylie. Damn if she didn’t know exactly how the girl felt. “It’s hard,” Kylie said. “But you can’t leave here. Holiday says that most of the young vampires end up joining gangs just to survive.” A question slammed into Kylie’s mind. Was Ellie the vampire who was going to die? Was she going to leave Shadow Falls and get mixed up in something terrible?

The question caused Kylie to catch her breath.

Della’s bedroom door opened and she flashed across the room and stopped right in front of them, her hair a little in disarray. Kylie got an image of her burying her head under a pillow, trying not to listen. Not that her plan worked.

Both Kylie and Ellie looked at Della.

Ellie scowled. “You’ve been listening, haven’t you? Can’t a person have —”

“Yeah, nitwit. I tried not to, but I’ve been listening,” she said in her best smartass tone. “But Kylie’s right. You can’t leave. Nothing is easy about being us, or trying to fit into a new family of vampires, but it gets easier.”

“How?” Ellie asked.

Miranda’s door swung open. “You make friends,” she said, and stumbled

into the room, looking half-asleep.

“Does everyone listen in to everyone else’s conversations in this cabin?” Ellie asked, sounding annoyed.

“Pretty much.” Miranda came over and dropped on the sofa beside Ellie. “Friends don’t keep very many secrets.”

“But you guys aren’t my friends.”

“We could be,” Kylie said, and Della and Miranda nodded.

Ellie’s gaze widened and she looked away, but not before Kylie saw emotion in her eyes. The warm sensation filling Kylie’s chest reminded her of the feeling she got at the falls, and she knew it had been the right thing to say. Then for some crazy reason, she saw a flash of the funeral vision in her mind.

Was that a sign? Did that mean Ellie really was the person in the casket? And had this changed the outcome?

* * *

Saturday was about two things. Well, three if you counted Miranda’s unending attempt to change Socks back to feline form. The other two things were: emotionally getting ready for Parents Day and getting Miranda ready for her date with Perry.

Holiday had stopped by with a plan for tomorrow. Instead of locking Socks in her closet during Parents Day, she thought it would be a good idea to cart the little stinker over to her cabin for the day. That way, Kylie, Della, and Miranda could bring Kylie’s mom and Sara back to the cabin and hang out, making it hard for Sara to ask too many questions about the whole healing process.

Since Kylie pretty much decided that no amount of effort would prepare her emotionally for seeing Sara here at camp, or for having to face her stepdad again, she put all that out of her mind and focused her energy into getting Miranda ready for her date.

When Miranda, a nervous witch, vetoed everything in her own closet, Della and Kylie gave her carte blanche with their own. Ellie even came over for an hour to help get Miranda ready. It was a little awkward, but ... Derek

was right; Ellie really was a nice person. Besides, Kylie hadn't been able to forget the feeling she'd gotten last night, a sense that Ellie had been the one in the casket in that vision. And maybe, just perhaps, befriending Ellie had saved her life.

After trying on about six outfits, Miranda chose Kylie's LBD, little black dress.

At seven o'clock, Perry showed up on their doorstep, looking as much of a hottie as he had the night before. Burnett had loaned him his Mustang, and supposedly, Perry had a night planned that would knock Miranda's socks off.

When Miranda showed up a little past midnight, she had indeed lost her socks. And her shoes. Of course, she didn't need them because she practically floated through the door.

When Kylie and Della demanded details, Miranda said only, "It was a hell of a lot better than nice." Then she floated into her bedroom and went to bed.

Having done a little celebratory dance with Della, Kylie went to bed and waited to see if Lucas would call her. She almost called him but decided against it. She'd called him last time. It was time he made the next move. As she might have guessed, though, her phone never rang. But the ghost dropped by for another cold, silent visit.

Kylie begged her to talk, and she finally spoke, but not anything helpful. *"It's not your fault. That's what they wanted me to tell you."*

"What's not my fault?" she spouted out. The spirit faded, and the cold ache in the room swelled in Kylie chest and reminded her that she was no closer to solving Jane's problems than she was to solving her own.

* * *

Sunday morning, when Kylie, with Della in tow, got back to her cabin after breakfast, Lucas sat on the front porch. The moment his gaze touched hers, her heart started racing. He looked good. Was it her imagination that he looked more masculine and somehow buffer, or was it because of the approaching full moon?

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, feeling herself melt a little inside. She wanted to run into his arms and kiss him. But she knew he wouldn't like

that in front of Della.

Then all those warm, gooey feelings faded when she wondered if he'd already visited Fredericka. But damn it, jealousy was such an ugly emotion.

"Don't even ask," Della said as she stepped on the porch. "I'll go inside and let you two make out." She opened the door and looked back over her shoulder. "But if you take her off this porch, I'll hunt you down."

"I won't." He nodded his thanks.

The moment the door closed, Lucas pulled Kylie into his arms. "I missed you," he whispered, and his lips melted against hers.

His kiss was light but still passionate. He held her close and she felt the subtle differences in him that she'd noted earlier—all muscle, all male. Hard in all the places she was soft.

When the kiss ended, she ran her fingers over his shoulders. "Do you get ... buffer the closer we get to a full moon?"

He smiled and pressed his forehead against hers. "Yes. It's my body's way of preparing for the shift." He swung around and leaned against the front of the cabin. Then he pulled her against him and slid his hand down to rest on her waist.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

"Of course." She smiled at him, breathing in his scent and loving being close.

"No new ghost disasters since I left?" He arched one dark brow.

"No," she said. "No disasters. Except, I was sort of hoping you'd call me back. It's been two days."

"I'm sorry. My dad was being an ass and I had to stay longer than I'd anticipated. Didn't Fredericka tell you?"

Kylie's annoyance peaked. "Yeah, but it would have been nice if you'd called me yourself."

His gaze tightened as if he were trying to read her. "It's not like ... The only reason I called her was because Clara wanted to talk to her."

"Clara?" Kylie asked.

"My half-sister. She and Fredericka got to know each other when she went back with me before."

Great! Lucas's sister was friends with Fredericka. Kylie's jealousy inched up another notch.

He stared into her eyes. "I heard Will had to calm down Fredericka. I'll talk to her about it."

Kylie instantly realized she didn't want him talking to Fredericka. She bit down on her lip. Could she tell Lucas he couldn't be friends with Fredericka when she wouldn't want him telling her whom she could, and couldn't, be friends with?

No. She couldn't. So she just said, "Don't worry. I handled it." She stared at his chest for a second, trying to get her wayward jealousy under control.

He tilted her chin up and his blue eyes gazed into hers. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she lied. "Just ... a little worried about later. Seeing my stepdad and then Sara showing up."

"Can I do anything to help? All you have to do is ask."

Her heart tightened at his concerned tone. Lucas cared about her. She knew that. She believed it. Which meant she couldn't let Fredericka come between them. She just couldn't.

"You just did by being here." She gave him a long hug.

It wasn't until he left that she realized neither of them had said anything about him asking her out.

* * *

Kylie and Della went to the dining hall a little early to offer Holiday their help. Miranda had stayed behind to get all dolled up, in case Perry saw her.

Miranda and Della—the vamp in full moody mode, probably because she had to see her parents today—had bickered all morning. Kylie reminded them both to be on their best behavior around her mom and Sara. She honestly didn't care if they argued in front of her stepdad.

Well, maybe she cared a little, but Sara and her mom were more important.

They had just about gotten to the end of the path when someone called, "Wait up." Kylie turned, and Ellie, with a bright smile, came running up to join them.

Ellie grinned and reached over as if to hug Della. The fast embrace knocked Ellie's cap off.

Della backed up. "I'm not a hugger, Ellie. Nothing personal. But most vampires aren't huggers either."

"I'll work on that." Ellie grinned and snagged her hat from the ground. "Della voted me into her circle. I'm officially a member of the Shadow Falls vampire family."

"Cool." Kylie was happy for Ellie, but somewhere deep inside, this stood as another reminder that she didn't belong to any group. Odd, how she'd helped Ellie do something that she couldn't seem to do for herself.

Della frowned. "It's nothing. Don't make a big deal of it."

"It is a big deal," Ellie said. "I was leaving today, but you guys changed my mind. Heck, you could have saved my life." She looked ahead and saw a couple of other vamps. "I need to run. But seriously, thank you!"

Della stared after her. "I still think she's way too touchy-feely."

Kylie watched Ellie run up and chat with the others. She wasn't sure why she believed Ellie was the vamp the death angels warned would die, but the tiniest bit of hope that she'd saved Ellie offered Kylie a shimmer of reprieve from her own troubles.

Or it did until about thirty minutes later, when Kylie saw the parents start to pour in. Everyone but her dad. Had he forgotten again?

Chapter Thirty

As the room filled with parents, Kylie really began to worry her dad was a no show. Her throat felt tight, her heart started breaking. Wanting to get away from the crowd, she escaped outside and went to sit on the office porch ... to wait. If he didn't show, it wouldn't matter, she told herself. It wasn't as if he hadn't let her down before.

So why did it hurt so much?

It wasn't until she got settled in her chair that she remembered she was still being shadowed. She wasn't supposed to leave the dining hall without Holiday.

She started to get back up when she heard, "Hello, Miss Galen."

The female voice startled her and she yelped.

She turned in the chair and found herself staring at Lucas's grandmother Mrs. Parker. The fact that Lucas's grandmother knew who she was was a surprise.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you. You startled me," Kylie said, still holding her hand over her heart. "It must run in the family." She smiled. "Lucas is always sneaking up on me."

"It's a werewolf thing." She motioned to the chair. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not." Kylie leaned back in her chair and tried to appear relaxed. But she got the feeling that this wasn't just an accidental encounter. What could Lucas's grandmother want with her?

The woman sauntered across the porch. For someone who moved so slow, it surprised Kylie that she did it so silently and with an amazing amount of

grace. She lowered herself into the chair, and even the wood didn't creak. She folded her aged hands in her lap, looking the epitome of propriety. She stared out for a few minutes, whether looking at the sky or the woods, Kylie didn't know.

The silence seemed awkward, but Kylie got the feeling it would be rude to rush her. For a second, she stared at the woman's hands, remembering the hands of the elderly woman who had come into the camp pretending to be her grandmother.

Mrs. Parker glanced at Kylie. "My grandson is quite smitten with you."

Smitten? Kylie didn't know people still used that word. But since the woman was well over a hundred, Kylie supposed it fit her vocabulary.

"Uh, I ... like Lucas, too."

She nodded and leaned in a bit. "He mentioned that you knew him when you two were young."

"Yes." The concerned look on the woman's face told Kylie what this might be about. Most supernaturals believed that a supernatural raised by rogue parents was unsalvageable—once a rogue, always a rogue. For that reason, Lucas had lied and stated he'd been raised by his grandmother all his life. "But I would never tell anyone that he lived with his parents."

"Good," she said. "He has high hopes of making something of himself. He is being considered in line to be a grand leader of the pack—to sit on the werewolf council—and this news could tarnish his reputation." She tightened her brows and studied Kylie's pattern and frowned.

"I'm sorry," Kylie said, assuming the woman's frown was about Kylie's unwillingness to let her see past her pattern. "I don't mean to be rude. I still don't know how to open up. I'm assuming Lucas explained my situation. That I'm not sure what I am."

"Yes. Lucas enlightened me on the matter." She continued to study Kylie. "Tell me, Miss Galen. Do you think you're werewolf?"

The question hung heavy in the air, reminding Kylie that Lucas had asked much the same question. Kylie's stomach knotted, and instantly she suspected what this conversation was really about. Obviously, his pack weren't the only ones wanting him to stay away from her. "I'm not sure."

Mrs. Parker smiled. "For your sake and my grandson's, I hope so."

"What do you mean?" Kylie asked, even though she suspected.

Leaning forward, she touched Kylie's shoulder. The touch was warm like Lucas's, and while Kylie wanted to pull back, she felt no animosity in the older woman's hand, nor did she see it in her eyes. There was only concern and love for her grandson. "The bloodline running in my grandson's veins is pure. His life mate will have to be one of his own kind."

"And if she's not?" Kylie asked.

"If she is part were, but shows loyalty to her heritage, they may overlook her lacking. But if she is not from our blood, then not only will he be forced to step down from his place, but the pack will no longer accept him as one of them. A were must never put another being who is not of our blood before he puts his own people."

"That sounds like racism," Kylie said.

The woman shrugged. "I cannot speak of what is right or wrong. I only speak of what is. Oddly enough, it is to correct a wrong that Lucas has fueled his long held desire to be a part of the council. Since Lucas was seven and came to live with me, he has been forced to lie to his own people and to the world about his upbringing. His goal has been to make it to that respected place and then change the views of our people about children born to rogues. He aches to show that the mistakes of the parents are not always passed down to the innocent child."

She rose from the chair as silently as she sat.

"Hey, pumpkin! There you are." Tom Galen's voice filled Kylie's ears, but she couldn't look away from Mrs. Parker's face to say hello to her stepdad. Was the woman really telling Kylie that if she wasn't werewolf, then she and Lucas couldn't get married?

Heck, she hadn't even officially agreed to go out with him. Marriage was a long, long way from here.

Footsteps sounded on the porch steps.

"I will go and let you visit with your company," Mrs. Parker said, and she nodded politely at Kylie's stepdad and walked off.

"You okay?" he asked, looking oddly at the elderly woman as he dropped

into the chair she'd just vacated. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Kylie answered, and tried to push away her concern about Lucas's grandma so she could deal with her concern about seeing her stepdad again.

* * *

The visit with her stepdad wasn't as awkward as Kylie had thought. Then again, maybe it was just that after the extremely awkward visit with Lucas's grandmother, Kylie's awkward meter was malfunctioning.

Before Holiday missed her, Kylie moved her dad into the dining hall. Poor Holiday skirted from one group to another, trying to keep the peace.

As Kylie expected, her stepdad asked about her mom. Kylie didn't tell him about the business lunch/date her mom had gone on. He talked about some of the trips they'd taken on their father/daughter outings. Then he asked if she thought maybe they could go on another one soon.

Kylie hadn't said yes, but she hadn't said no. "I'll have to look at my schedule." For once, telling the truth—that some old vampire either wanted her to marry his grandson or planned to kill her—wasn't for the best.

When the time got close for him to leave, Kylie motioned to Holiday that she was going to walk her dad to his car, and Holiday's gaze shifted to Perry, who then followed them out.

When they reached the car, she hugged her dad. It didn't feel as awkward as the hug she'd given him the last time he'd come out for Parents Day, but there were still undercurrents of sadness to it.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Me too," Kylie said, and it was true. She loved him.

Before she released him, she realized he felt thinner. When she pulled away, she asked, "Are you eating okay?"

"Restaurant food isn't as good as your mom's cooking," he said.

"I miss her pancakes," Kylie said.

"I miss her." He gave her hand a tight squeeze. "If she asks about me, tell her I said that."

The loneliness she saw in his eyes gripped Kylie's chest. But he'd brought this pain on himself. None of this would have happened if he hadn't decided

to bang his intern.

Mistakes. People make them. And most of the time, they had to pay for them. Was her stepdad destined to live alone the rest of his life because of his foolish decision to cheat on her mom?

“You okay?” Holiday asked as Kylie walked back inside, followed by Perry. “Did you survive the visit?”

“Yeah. It was sad, but seeing him is getting easier.” Kylie looked around to check on Miranda and Della. Both looked miserable sitting like little soldiers with their respective parents.

Then she found Lucas. He sat attentively, hanging on every word his grandmother said. Evidently, the woman held a big influence over his life. But was it big enough that he wouldn’t marry someone he loved because they weren’t werewolf? Did Lucas even consider that a viable concern? Or was his grandmother just mentally stuck in the 1800s and thought it should be a consideration for Lucas?

Kylie looked at Holiday. It wasn’t the place to ask, but the need to know was strong. “Do you think that supernaturals worry about who they’d marry because of bloodlines?”

Holiday’s brows arched at Kylie’s inquiry. “What brought on that question?”

“Curiosity,” she lied.

Suspicion lurked in Holiday’s eyes. She looked at Lucas and his grandma. The camp leader hesitated before looking back at Kylie. Kylie could tell Holiday searched for the right way to word her answer.

“I think that it might be more of a concern to some species than others,” Holiday finally said.

“Like werewolves?”

She nodded. “They are the ones who have fewer mixed marriages than all the others. But it’s changing. Today there are five times as many were mixed marriages than even ten years ago.”

She tightened her mouth in a disapproving manner. “But those kinds of worries can wait for another ten years, young lady.”

Holiday was right. It was a stupid thing to think about now. Stupid thing

for Mrs. Parker to bring up, too. Kylie wasn't even seventeen. She didn't sit around and fantasize about getting married. Her dream with Lucas was a steamy make-out session, not going to a preacher to exchange vows. But stupid or not, Kylie knew she wasn't finished thinking about it.

"There she is!" a feminine voice called out, and without a doubt Kylie knew it was Sara.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, while her mom grabbed a soda, Kylie sat with Sara, feeling as if everyone in the dining hall watched and listened. Because everyone had been talking about her latest superpower gift of healing her old best friend, Kylie knew all the campers were guessing this was Sara. It wasn't that she was ashamed of healing Sara; Kylie just didn't like being the center of attention.

Sara still looked thin, but everything from the shine of her brown hair to her complexion said she was okay. Sara kept glancing around at everyone and asking who was who.

"Is that your roommate?" She pointed to Miranda, sitting with her family.

"Yes," Kylie said. "I'll introduce you to her later."

"Where's the other one? The grumpy one?"

Della, across the room, shot Kylie a smirk. "She's over there," Kylie said, and pointed.

Because Della was still glancing at them, Sara waved. "She looks like a b with an itch."

Kylie's mouth dropped. "She's not. She's one of my..." Kylie almost said best friends, but she realized how awkward that might be. Sara used to be Kylie's best friend. "She's one of my good friends here."

"I remember you saying—"

"That was a long time ago," Kylie insisted, and hoped Sara shut up before Della got her feelings hurt.

"So, you're feeling better now?" Kylie tossed out the first thing she could think of to change the subject. But from the sparkle in Sara's eyes, Kylie realized it was the wrong question. Obviously, Sara was dying to bring up the

whole “you healed me” topic.

“I think you know the answer to that better than I do,” Sara said.

“Know the answer to what?” Her mom sat down next to Kylie.

“Nothing,” Kylie said.

Sara let her gaze move around the room again. “Who’s the hot black-haired guy who keeps staring at you?”

Kylie looked in the direction that Sara nodded. So did her mom. Lucas was staring at her, and he smiled. His grandmother must have left, because he sat alone. Then, as if he saw their gaze as an invitation to join them, he started over.

No. No. Panic stirred in Kylie’s gut. At first, Kylie didn’t understand why she didn’t want Lucas to meet Sara. Then she remembered that Sara had always been the biggest flirt. Kylie didn’t want Sara making a play for Lucas. Not so much because she worried Lucas would respond to it, but because Kylie didn’t want Lucas thinking Sara was a party girl.

Old life meets new life, and Kylie didn’t want either to look unappealing.

She picked up her glass of water and drank just to have something to do with her hands.

“You must be Sara.” Lucas extended his hand.

Sara slipped her hand into Lucas’s. “That’s me. And you are?”

“Lucas Parker, Kylie’s boyfriend.”

Boyfriend? Kylie’s breath caught. The water slipping down her throat went down the wrong pipe. She started coughing so hard, the sound bounced around the high beams of the dining hall. If that wasn’t bad enough, her mom, who’d been sipping on a diet soda, did the same thing.

Crap! If there was one person in the dining hall who hadn’t already stared at them, they did now.

Holiday walked over, studying Kylie and her mom as they both worked on getting air into their lungs. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Kylie managed to say, and felt some water drip from her nose. Oh, wasn’t that just lovely. She wiped it away.

“How about we get some fresh air?” Holiday asked. “Why don’t we take Sara and your mom to your cabin?”

“Yeah,” Kylie said, and they all stood up.

Lucas seemed to sense he’d done something wrong, and he looked at her in confusion. “Well, I’ll let you four go. I’ll see you later.”

Kylie nodded.

Lucas looked at her mom. “It was a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Galen.”

“You too,” her mom said, and looked at Kylie with all kinds of parental concerns that involved boyfriends and the unspoken word ... sex.

They hadn’t gotten out of the dining hall before her mom leaned in. “Boyfriend? What have you not been telling me?”

Just great, Kylie thought. Now her mom would probably start mailing her the sex pamphlets.

Sara leaned in and whispered in her other ear, “He’s hot.”

“I know,” Kylie whispered back.

“Not hot like good-looking. I mean hot like you were that day you touched me.”

Kylie didn’t know what to say to that. When they got to the door of the dining hall, Kylie reached for the knob, but the door swung open first and nearly knocked her down. She jumped back.

Derek and his mom came inside. Derek’s gaze shot to Kylie and his eyes tightened as if her nearness hurt him. Then a look of concern filled his eyes when he noticed Sara.

“Look, Derek! It’s Kylie!” Mrs. Lakes almost shouted, and again Kylie felt everyone in the room staring at her.

Without any advance warning, Kylie became locked in an embrace with Mrs. Lakes. Thankfully, she was a fast hugger.

Derek looked at Sara. “You must be Sara.”

“That’s me,” Sara answered with her flirty smile. “Who are you?”

“This is Derek,” Kylie said, and made quick introductions, which included her mom.

Mrs. Lakes waved her hand back and forth between Kylie and Derek. “I think they’re sweet on each other. Isn’t it cute?”

Several gasps came from the crowd behind them, probably the vampires

listening in. Kylie felt her cheeks break out in embarrassment.

“Mom!” Derek rolled his eyes.

“I’m just saying the truth, honey. She’s all you talk about.”

Derek’s face turned bright red.

Kylie’s mom arched an eyebrow and eyed Kylie as if to say she would be certain to send those sex pamphlets now.

Sara chuckled.

And Kylie just wanted to die. Right there, right then. Especially when she looked back and saw Lucas taking it all in and frowning.

Chapter Thirty-one

“Why don’t you girls walk ahead?” Kylie’s mom said as soon as they got outside the dining hall. “I know Sara is dying to have some girl talk.”

Kylie wasn’t fooled. Her mom obviously was dying to discuss something privately with Holiday. Probably about Kylie having two boyfriends.

As Sara and Kylie started walking, Sara squeezed Kylie’s arm. “Two guys? You’ve got two guys in love with you? Start talking, girl.”

“Did Kylie’s dad come this morning? I’m so worried about their relationship.” Her mom’s words seemed extra loud.

Kylie stopped and looked back. They were well over a hundred feet away and there was no way she should be hearing this. But she was. The sensitive hearing was back, and this time she was grateful.

“Yes,” Holiday answered. *“He did come. They seemed to have a good visit.”*

“Kylie?” Sara said. “Come on, tell me what’s going on.”

Kylie looked back at Sara and started walking again. “I ... it’s hard to explain.”

“Good,” her mom said. *“I’m a bit concerned about Kylie and, well, the boys. I’ve read when a girl has issues with her father, they find themselves having ... acting out with boys.”*

Well, at least Kylie now knew it wasn’t just her. Her mom couldn’t say the word sex to anyone.

“Do you supervise them and make sure there isn’t anything happening that shouldn’t be happening?”

“Well, try,” Sara insisted. “Talk to me. I’m dying to know.”

“Know what?” Kylie asked, failing miserably at keeping up with two conversations.

“Have you lost it yet?” Sara asked.

“*Your daughter has a good head on her shoulders,*” Holiday answered. “*I don’t think you need to worry about Kylie.*”

“Lost what?” Kylie asked Sara, and then suddenly she knew what Sara was asking.

Apparently, the two conversations going on at once were about the same thing. Sex. “No. I haven’t lost it.” Annoyed at Sara’s question, she remembered how close she and Sara had once been. They had told each other everything—no secrets. Sort of like she now did with Della and Miranda.

The awkwardness of having her old life cross paths with her new hit again. And in about fifteen minutes, Della and Miranda would meet them at the cabin. How awkward was that going to be?

Probably very.

“But they’re so hot,” Sara said.

“Yeah. They are.”

“So which one do you really like?”

Both. The truth echoed in her head. Kylie inhaled. “Lucas,” she said.

“Yum.” Sara grinned, then shrugged. “Now, can you please tell me what you did to heal me?”

Kylie recalled the advice Holiday had given her. Just deny it. “I don’t know what you’re...” She started hearing the conversation between Holiday and her mom heat up again.

“*Can I ask you a strange question?*” Holiday asked her mom.

“*I guess,*” her mom said.

“*Do you have any American Indian blood in your family tree?*”

“Why would Holiday ask that?” Kylie muttered.

“Why would who ask what?” Sara looked at her strangely.

Kylie shook her head. “Nothing.”

“So start talking,” Sara said. “And don’t even try to deny it. I remember clearly how you rubbed my temples and how hot your hands got when you

did it. And I felt it. I felt something happening inside me.”

Sara came to a sudden stop and caught Kylie’s hands in hers. “They’re not hot now. So do you only get hot when you heal people? But why was ... What’s his name—Lucas—why were his hands hot?”

Kylie pulled her hands free, trying to remember what lie she’d given to Sara about her reasons for rubbing her temples.

“That is a strange question,” her mom said. *“Why would you want to know that?”*

Sara let out a frustrated breath. “And don’t tell me it’s because your mom used to do it. Because I asked her about that on the ride up here, and she denied it. Said she couldn’t remember rubbing your temples to help your headaches.”

“Shh,” Kylie said to Sara, not wanting to miss Holiday’s answer.

But Sara didn’t get quiet. Instead she let out a bloodcurdling scream that could have awakened the dead.

And she continued to scream. The sound pierced Kylie’s eardrums. She went on instant alert, but she didn’t know why. Her gaze started flipping from side to side, trying to find the source of danger.

Was it the eagle again? The evil-eyed deer? Was there another sinkhole, or had Perry gone unicorn again? Kylie was prepared for just about anything.

Tense to the max, she didn’t know if she should prepare herself to fight or run. Then something butted up against her jeans-covered calf.

She glanced down.

Okay, she was prepared for about anything but Socks. Her skunk/cat was supposed to be locked up at Holiday’s cabin. And just to make matters worse, her mom and Holiday came running to see what was wrong.

Within two seconds, her mom started screaming with Sara, while Kylie glanced back at Holiday.

“It’s probably rabid,” her mom screeched. “Get away from it, Kylie. Get away!”

“It’s okay,” Holiday spouted, but obviously she wasn’t heard over her mom’s wailing.

Kylie followed her mother’s orders and stepped back. But Socks wasn’t

having it. He followed and pounced at Kylie's tennis shoe.

Sara squealed and darted across the path and hid behind Kylie's mom. Socks, suddenly frightened by the ruckus, shot back across the path and scampered up Kylie's leg. Unsure what to do, she held the scared pet with caution.

"Drop it! Kylie!" her mom screamed. "Drop that vermin this minute!" Then she bolted forward as if to knock the animal from Kylie's arms.

"Mom, it's okay," she said, though it was anything but.

Socks hissed, then swiveled in Kylie's hold and buried his pointed little nose in her armpit. Kylie didn't completely panic until Socks lifted his black-and-white fluffy tail straight up in the air and aimed it at her mom.

"No!" Kylie swung around and started talking sweetly to Socks. "Don't do it. Don't do it," she whispered.

"Everybody, step back," Holiday said, speaking more forcefully this time. "The skunk's not rabid. He's my pet."

Kylie looked back over her shoulder to see her mom gawk at Holiday in sheer horror. "You have a pet skunk?"

"Yes," Holiday lied, and almost sounded honest. "I know, it sounds kind of strange."

"Kind of?" her mom asked, eyes still wide with shock.

Kylie pulled Socks closer and continued to whisper what she hoped were calming words close to his ear. But who, she wondered, was going to whisper calming words to her? This, was exactly why merging her old life with her new was such a bad, bad idea.

* * *

"Well, that went well," Holiday said an hour later as they watched Kylie's mom and Sara drive out of the Shadow Falls parking lot.

Kylie, her chest so tight that she thought a few ribs had cracked, looked at Holiday in shock. "You're kidding me. I'm practically told I'm not good enough for Lucas by his grandma. My dad's miserable. My mom thinks I'm having sex with two boys. And she thinks you're an idiot who keeps a skunk as a pet."

“I had to come up with something,” Holiday said. “He must have snuck out when I left and I didn’t see him.”

“Don’t forget that it couldn’t have gotten any more awkward between Sara and Miranda and Della. They barely spoke to each other. And...” Tears filled Kylie’s eyes. “And if I ever wondered if you really kept things from me, I know the truth now. What’s this crap about you wanting to know if I’m part American Indian?”

Holiday’s face flashed with guilt. “I was going to tell you. Honest. There just hasn’t been time.”

“Yeah, you’re always going to tell me something after the fact.” Kylie batted at the tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m sick and tired of all the secrets around here, Holiday. I’m tired of being kept in the dark. I’m tired of not knowing what I am. It’s not fair, and I’m not going to tolerate it anymore.”

* * *

It was Wednesday night. The last few days had passed by in a blur. Kylie had gone into a frenzy trying to dig up her family tree. Holiday had explained that there was an American Indian legend about certain descendants of an Indian tribe having been touched by the gods. And that these mere humans would carry the gift with them for generations.

If Kylie had that blood running in her veins, it would explain how she could be a protector and still be half human. Kylie didn’t know why it was so important to her to find out her heritage. It wasn’t as if it would get her any closer to discovering what she was. But it might explain why she seemed to have certain gifts. Then again, maybe it was because it was the only lead she could work on right now.

The ghost showed up three or four times a day but still wasn’t talking. Lucas showed up two or three times a day, too. And they weren’t doing much talking, either. But on the plus side, they were doing a lot more kissing.

She hadn’t said anything about what his grandmother told her. Partly because he already seemed so tense—no doubt because of the approaching full moon. And the other part because she was afraid of his answer.

She was afraid he'd tell her his grandmother was right. That he could never consider marrying her if she wasn't a werewolf.

Yeah, it still seemed stupid that she'd worry about it at this point in their relationship. But then, Kylie kept coming back to the fact that being girlfriend and boyfriend was supposed to be all about finding that one person you'd spend your entire life with.

Should she live for the day or plan for the future? And should she start something when she knew it wouldn't and couldn't last? Could she risk giving her heart to someone who could never truly be hers?

Earlier that night, when Lucas came by, they'd sat on the porch, kissed, and stared up at the moon. "You don't feel anything when you look at it?" he'd asked her.

He no longer tried to hide the fact that he wanted her to be were. And it was getting harder for her to pretend that it didn't bother her. Not that it changed how she felt about him. Everything from his smile to his blue eyes to the way he kissed—it all captivated her. The time she was close to him was about the only time she really felt at peace.

Kylie remembered telling Holiday she needed a touchstone, something that felt completely right. Lucas had become her touchstone. In some ways, he was like the falls. When she was close to him, when she felt his warm touch on her, all her problems seemed so much smaller.

But when he wasn't close, those problems came back to sit on her shoulders and eat away at her sanity. Eventually, Kylie knew they needed to talk about the whole bloodline issue. And even his question about her going out. Although she got the feeling he assumed she'd said yes. Looking back, she realized that considering their conversation that day, he might even have reason to believe it. So she'd let that one slide, but the bloodline issue wasn't that easy to drop.

But for now, she decided to just let it be.

"Hey!" Della's voice snapped Kylie back to the present as she walked out of her room. "Is Miranda back yet from her make-out session with Perry?" She plopped down at the kitchen table behind where Kylie sat at the computer desk.

“Not yet.” Kylie glanced back. Della looked bored or depressed. She’d been extra quiet lately. Ever since Parents Day.

“What are you doing?” Della asked.

Worrying. “My mom finally got me my great-grandmother’s maiden name. I thought I’d put it in the database on that genealogy Web site and see if I get anything.”

“Why don’t you just put a feather in your hat and call yourself an Indian?”

Kylie frowned. “That’s not nice.”

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I’m in a pissy mood.”

“Why?” Kylie stood and grabbed two diet sodas from the fridge and then dropped back down in the kitchen chair.

Della took the drink Kylie slid over to her and popped the top. It fizzed and she pressed her lips to the rim of the can to catch the overspill. When she looked up, she had tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Kylie asked.

Della made a little hiccup noise, and Kylie realized that the vamp was crying. She stopped herself from going over there and hugging Della, because she knew Della hated that.

“Della? Tell me what’s wrong.” And instantly, Kylie got tears in her eyes, too.

Della swiped at her cheeks. “I miss it. It’s just like Ellie said. I miss being normal. I miss living with my family. I know I’m lucky to be here. Lucky to have you and Miranda as my best friends. And I’m happy that you’ve got Lucas and Miranda has Perry, but it just makes me miss Lee, and it hurts so bad sometimes. And I know I should try to go for Steve, but I’m not ready.” She hiccuped again and more tears slipped from her dark lashes onto her cheeks. “I miss it. All of it. I miss being human.”

Kylie started crying in earnest now. Not just for Della, but for herself. “I know,” she said. “I miss it, too.”

* * *

The next morning, Kylie woke up staring at the back of Della’s head.

Because Della was the only one with a full-size bed, they had ended up going to Della's bed and talking until they'd fallen asleep. Something moved at Kylie's back and she quickly rolled over and stared at a yawning Miranda.

"What are you doing here?" Kylie asked.

"I thought it was a spend-the-night party and I wanted to come," she said. Then she popped out her bottom lip. "You two didn't even wait up on me."

"You were late," Kylie said, and yawned.

"I know." Miranda grinned. "We had such a good time. We went swimming at the lake. Just the two of us. It's almost a full moon and it was so romantic."

"You went skinny-dipping?" Della asked, and rolled over, sounding half-asleep.

"No. But he did. Only because he thought I was going to." Miranda giggled. "I wore my bathing suit under my clothes, because he said we were going to the lake. And when I started pulling my jeans off, he thought I was taking it all off and he took his off and dove in really fast."

Kylie and Della started laughing.

"But I didn't see anything. Plus, he made me turn around when he got out and pulled his shorts back on."

The three of them stayed in bed, giggling, until they were almost late for breakfast.

It was a good morning. Not quite as mind-easing as being with Lucas, but Kylie had to admit that Della and Miranda were becoming her touchstones as well. Right now, she felt capable of facing another day of problem solving.

But the good mood took a nosedive when they walked into the dining hall and everyone turned and stared at them.

No, not at all of them. Just at Kylie. Or rather, they gaped at her forehead while tightening their brows. Obviously, her pattern was doing something weird again.

"Damn!" someone said. There were several gasps, a couple of whispers, and a few people even dropped their forks. Then came the dead silence—the kind of silence that screamed disbelief.

Della and Miranda both turned toward her and tightened their brows.

Miranda's eyes widened in shock. "Oh, my!"

"Shit," said Della.

"What is it?" Kylie asked.

Della swallowed and leaned in. "You finally opened up. Your ... your pattern is readable."

Chapter Thirty-two

“What am I?” Kylie gripped Della’s arm. “I need to know.” Holy hell, she’d been waiting for the answer to this question for months. “Please, Della!”

“You...” Della shook her head. “You’re human. One hundred percent human.”

“Not funny.” Kylie wanted to believe Della was teasing her, but the look on her roommate’s face said otherwise. But how could she be human after everything that had happened to her? She remembered crying last night and telling Della she missed being human. Missed being normal. Had she willed it to happen?

Kylie darted out the door and ran as fast as she could to the office.

Not even Holiday’s closed office door slowed her down. She barged in. Burnett and Holiday jumped apart as if ... they’d been kissing. Oh, my God. The image of what she’d seen for a flicker of a second played in Kylie’s head.

Burnett and Holiday were kissing. Any other time, Kylie might have yelped with joy.

Not now.

“We were ... we were just...,” Holiday stuttered.

Kylie didn’t care. Her heart pounded. Her mind tried to make sense of the fact that she was fully human. How was that even possible? What did it mean?

Even as she asked herself the questions, she knew the answer to the last one. Being human meant leaving Shadow Falls. Holiday. Burnett. Miranda.

Della. Lucas. Perry. Derek. Jonathon and Helen. All of them. It meant walking away forever from her new life.

Tears filled her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Holiday asked.

It meant never helping another lost soul. It meant going back to her old life, where she never felt as if she belonged.

Okay, she had missed her old life. She had. But right now, she knew with twenty-twenty clarity that she would miss her new life more. These last few months, as hard as they had been, she’d come closer to knowing her true self than she ever had before. Maybe she still didn’t know what she was, but in so many ways, she knew more about *who* she was.

“Kylie? What is it?” Holiday insisted.

“What the hell does this mean?” She pointed to her forehead.

Holiday and Burnett looked at her and their eyebrows twitched. The shock she saw in both their eyes didn’t help Kylie’s confusion. The knot in her throat grew to the size of a large frog.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie still sat on Holiday’s sofa, with her legs pulled up to her chest, her forehead against her knees. She was dry—cried out.

The camp leader sat beside her. Holiday’s hand rested on Kylie’s back and sent waves of calm washing over her, but it didn’t chase away the fear that swelled in her chest. She’d caused this herself. Brought this on herself. She’d somehow tapped into a power she didn’t know she had and turned herself back into a human. Was it irreversible?

Kylie lifted her head. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Do what?” Holiday asked.

Kylie’s throat felt raw. “Della and I were talking about how we wished ... we wished we were human again. That we missed being normal, and—” Her breath caught. “And I do miss it, but right now it’s so clear that I would miss this new life more. I don’t want to be human, Holiday.”

Empathy filled Holiday’s eyes and she smiled. “I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t understand it. But if there is one thing I’m certain about,

it's that you are not human, Kylie. Well, not just human."

"But what if the death angels are trying to teach me a lesson? What if they got pissed at me for being ungrateful and this is my punishment?"

Holiday shook her head. "I've never heard of them turning someone into a human for punishment. And believe me, there isn't a supernatural alive who hasn't had moments of wishing they were human. That's perfectly normal."

"Really?"

"Of course. We live in the human world. The grass always looks greener on the other side. Truth is, sometimes it *is* greener. But we can't change what we are simply by wishing it was so."

Kylie nodded. "So you think this is just a fluke?"

"I don't know. But if I were guessing, I'd say it will change just like it's changed numerous other times."

"Will I not have any powers until it changes back?"

The question seemed to stump Holiday. "I ... Wait. Can you still feel me attempting to alter your emotions?" Holiday rested her hand on Kylie's shoulder.

She felt the warmth leak from Holiday's touch through her shirt and flow into her skin. Then the soft heat seemed to form a bubble that flowed into her chest cavity, where it morphed into a soothing wash of emotion.

"Yes," Kylie said.

"Then I'd say nothing else has changed."

"So humans can't sense your touch?"

"No."

Kylie inhaled and found a little inner peace. Then she looked at Holiday. "Do you think I'll ever figure out what I am?"

"Of course you will." Holiday paused. "I didn't want to mention it because it's not a sure thing, but Burnett told me that the real Brightens, in Ireland, confirmed their plane reservations back to the States for the middle of September."

Kylie's heart skipped a beat. "Do they know about me?"

"Not that we know of. Burnett did some checking on the phone number for the caller the detective spoke to the day he'd thought he'd been talking to

the Brightens. It wasn't their phone. The call was made from a cell phone, a throwaway, they call them. They can't trace it."

"But Burnett knows how to reach the Brightens now? I could call them, couldn't I?"

Holiday frowned. "I don't think this is something you want to talk about over the phone, Kylie."

Holiday was right, but Kylie was just so damn tired of waiting. She reached back and rubbed the tension in her shoulder and wished Burnett were still here. He'd cut out shortly after she'd started to cry. She wasn't sure if he'd been frightened by her tears or frightened by the thought of her asking him about what she'd seen when she'd walked in on them.

Kylie glanced at Holiday. "So ... you and Burnett?"

Holiday rolled her eyes. "It was just a kiss, Kylie. Don't make it out to be something more."

Kylie let a slight smile work its way to her lips. Right now, she could use any good news at all. "Was it a good kiss?"

"Just a kiss and ... a mistake. We were talking about Perry and Miranda, about how sweet it was. The moment got away from us and ... Definitely a mistake."

"Why, Holiday? Why can't you give the guy a chance?"

Holiday frowned. "The only reason I let this happen was ... my guard was down because..." Kylie saw the shadows of pain in Holiday's eyes.

"You're afraid Burnett's the one in the casket?"

She nodded.

"Which means you care about him. Can't you see that?"

"I care, but caring for someone isn't enough. And we work together. Romance and work never go together."

"It could if you wanted it badly enough."

"Then I guess I don't want it that bad," Holiday said sternly. But Kylie knew that it was a lie.

And she suspected Holiday realized it, too.

They sat silently for a few minutes. "About the whole funeral vision thing..." Kylie said.

“Yeah?”

“I think ... I mean, there’s a chance I fixed it.”

Holiday studied her. “Fixed what?”

Kylie didn’t feel right telling Holiday that Ellie had been going to run away. “I might have done something that took someone out of danger. So maybe a vampire won’t die.”

Holiday frowned. “I’d love to think that’s true. But you can’t change Fate.”

Kylie recalled that those had been the words the ghost had whispered, but she refused to believe. “Then maybe it wasn’t really Fate,” she said.

“I wish I could believe that,” Holiday said.

“I do believe it,” Kylie said. But there was a part of her that doubted.

And when she let herself think about it, it tore her apart.

Holiday’s phone rang. The camp leader picked it up, looked at the caller ID oddly, and then took the call.

“What’s up?” Holiday asked, and then glanced over at Kylie. “She’s fine.” Holiday paused. “I’ll tell her.” She hung up and met Kylie’s eyes. “That was Derek. He wanted to tell you that if you needed to talk, he’s here for you. As a friend. He insisted I add that last part.”

Kylie nodded and her chest swelled with emotion.

A knock came at the door. Holiday looked at Kylie. “Are you up to company? Derek’s not the only one worried.”

Kylie nodded.

“Come in,” Holiday said. Della and Miranda popped into the office, their gazes filled with concern. Behind them came Lucas, Perry, Helen, and Jonathon.

“I’m fine,” Kylie told them, but more tears filled her eyes. Tears because she knew that these people weren’t just her friends. They were her family.

“We love you,” Miranda said, her eyes tearing up. “And we want you to know that we don’t care what you are.”

* * *

Later that night, Kylie received another sign that her human brain pattern

hadn't changed things. At first, she thought it was just a dream. She was watching Jane Doe resting in bed, running her hands over her pregnant belly, and staring at the sleeping man beside her. "*I love you,*" she whispered. "*But I have to do this.*"

Then things changed and Kylie was Jane. She slipped quietly out of the bed. Her body felt cumbersome with the round, heavy weight around her middle. Her heart felt broken, heavy. Kylie couldn't ever remember feeling so much sadness, as if she were about to lose something more precious than life.

She moved out of the dark room, looked back one more time at the sleeping man. Whoever he was, Jane loved him.

"*I'm sorry.*" The two little words tumbled out of her mouth. The man rolled over, and Kylie got a quick glimpse of his face. Pale complexion, thick, dark brown—no, not really brown, but auburn hair.

Something about his face made Kylie want to continue to stare at him, but she had no control over what happened in these visions. Reliving Jane Doe's past, she turned and walked out. She moved to a closet, grabbed a long black coat, and slipped it around her body. Then she pulled out a suitcase—an old-fashioned piece of luggage, no wheels. Carrying it made walking while pregnant feel even more awkward.

Why are you leaving if you love him? The question flowed through Kylie's mind, but the vision continued, leaving the question hanging in the air unanswered.

With tears now streaming down her face, she walked out of the small house. A car, with its headlights off, pulled up to the curb. She got inside. Kylie wanted to see who was driving, but Jane was too busy crying, too busy trying to deal with a broken heart, to care about the driver.

"*You're doing the best thing,*" a woman's voice said as the car pulled away. "*He wouldn't understand.*"

The vision went black. Kylie tried to wake up but got pulled back in.

And not to a good place, either.

There was light now, but she didn't care. She was in too much pain. Something was ripping her insides apart. It reminded Kylie of the worst

menstrual cramp she'd ever had. Her body contorted with pain. Her back arched and she screamed.

"It's not coming," someone said. The pain in her abdomen eased and she became aware of the emotional pain in her chest again.

"Don't let my baby die." She raised up on her elbow.

The man standing between her opened knees met Jane Doe's eyes. *"I'd have to take it by C-section."*

"Then do it!" Jane screamed.

"I'm not prepared for that. I don't have any anesthesia."

"I don't care," Jane said. *"Don't let my baby die. I can take it. It's not like I'm human."*

The man looked at the woman sitting beside him. *"Get me a knife."*

Chapter Thirty-three

No! Kylie screamed in her head, even as Jane Doe dropped back on the bed and resigned herself to being cut open with nothing to dull the pain.

“Kylie? Wake up!”

Kylie felt someone shake her. Still screaming, she opened her eyes and saw Della and Miranda standing over her. She managed to stop screaming but couldn’t stop shaking.

“Should we get Holiday?” Miranda asked, looking worried.

Kylie shook her head no. “I’m okay.” She rolled over and dried her tears on the blanket. “Go back to sleep,” she muttered. Her heart still carried the panic from the vision, and she could feel the cold. Jane was here.

Della and Miranda looked at each other as if unsure what to do next.

“Go,” she repeated.

As soon as they left, Kylie sat up. Jane sat on the edge of the bed. Her abdomen gaped open and blood spilled onto the tops of her bare thighs. “*I didn’t kill my baby. I loved him.*”

“I know. I saw.” Kylie hated to ask, but finding answers was why Jane had come to her. “Did the baby die? Is that what happened? Did your baby die during childbirth?”

Jane looked at Kylie again. “No.” She smiled, and instantly the blood on her hands disappeared and she was dressed in a pretty sundress with big yellow sunflowers. “*He lived. My baby lived. I made sure he was okay. And then I went back home.*”

“Where was home?” Kylie asked. “Home to who?”

She blinked and then looked up. *"I don't know. I can't remember."*

"I'm a little confused," Kylie said. "Did you die during the birth?"

"No, I already showed you how I died. They killed me." And then she faded.

It took Kylie forever to fall back to sleep, and when she did, another dream had her in its trap. Immediately, she recognized what was going on. She hadn't moved into the dream, someone had come into hers.

She waited just a fraction of a second to make sure it wasn't Derek, then she saw him. Red. He stood by the lake.

"I'm not trying to fool you this time," he said.

"Leave me alone!" she snapped.

"I need to tell you..."

Kylie woke up in a panic in her bed. Red was gone. "Don't come back!" she said, and hugged herself, proud of how quickly she'd woken herself up.

* * *

The next four or five days at Shadow Falls were all about getting the camp ready to become a full-blown school, and that was fine with Kylie. Holiday was busy interviewing a few more potential teachers while a construction group—all paranormals—built a few large classroom cabins. Another all-paranormal crew put heating units into the cabins.

Kylie was still being shadowed. Because nothing else had happened, she'd started to feel guilty about piling on to everyone's busy schedules. On Friday morning, she took off to Burnett's office to suggest he call a halt to the shadowing. He disagreed.

"If anything, this is the time to be more careful," he insisted.

"Why?" Kylie asked.

He frowned. "For starters, how about because this place is a revolving door right now? I don't like strangers being here."

Kylie felt a shiver run down her spine. "You think someone working here could really be working with Mario?"

If so, that might explain Miranda's growing feeling that someone was lurking around their cabin. She'd started putting protective spells on their

cabin every day now and had even gone to Holiday and Burnett with her concerns. Concerns they'd listened to but didn't feel held a huge threat. Or at least Kylie had assumed until now.

Burnett, all two-hundred-plus pounds of muscle, leaned back in his office chair. "I've checked everyone's credentials a dozen times." He reached for a heart-shaped stress ball with the words *Donate Blood* and squeezed it. "Maybe Holiday's right, and I'm being overly cautious, but I'm not taking chances."

Burnett turned his head to the side as if listening to something from outside the cabin. He frowned. "Another were is at it again. I'll be so friggin' glad when tomorrow's full moon is past. Excuse me." He shot out of the room.

Kylie ran out of the cabin after him, afraid Lucas was involved in whatever was happening. While normally she wouldn't consider Lucas getting into trouble, these last few days, he'd been extra tense. Last night when he'd come by her cabin to say good night, he'd barely kissed her.

When she'd asked if something was wrong, he'd reminded her that the closer he got to the full moon, the more he turned to his instinct instead of logic. Then he'd reached out and passed a single finger over her lips. "You are temptation in its purest form, Kylie Galen."

There was a part of Kylie that wanted to give in to that temptation, but another part of her still resisted. And as much as she wished it weren't true, she knew her reason for holding back had to do with Lucas's grandmother.

The moment Kylie hit the edge of the porch steps, Della showed up. "Ellie and Fredericka are going at it."

"Why?" Kylie asked.

"Supposedly, Ellie overheard the she-wolf talking bad about you and decided to teach Fredericka a lesson. You know, I hate to admit it, but Ellie's growing on me."

"Oh, crap. Where are they?"

"By Ellie's cabin."

Kylie took off. By the time they got there, Burnett had Fredericka, and Lucas was holding Ellie back. Ellie was bleeding, and from the glow in her

eyes, she wasn't finished fighting.

"Let go of me!" she growled at Lucas. "I'll teach that dog—"

"Calm down," Lucas snapped. His own eyes were a bright orange. "She'll tear you apart. You can't win a fight with a were the day before a full moon."

"Watch me!" Ellie tried again to pull away, her fangs showing.

"Stop! Or I'll teach you a lesson myself," Lucas growled, his body growing tenser and his eyes brighter. Obviously, with his own body feeling the effects of the coming full moon, he shouldn't be the one trying to break up a fight.

"Why?" Ellie countered. "Why are you protecting that she-wolf? You should be helping me kick her ass. I thought Kylie was your girlfriend. Where does your loyalty lie? With that she-wolf, or with Kylie?"

Lucas paused; the question seemed to catch him off guard. "I'm trying to save your life, though I'm not sure it's worth much."

"Because I'm not were?" Ellie spit back.

"Enough!" Burnett roared.

Lucas let go of Ellie. The pissed-off vamp stepped back, but her eyes stayed bright. Then her angry gaze found Kylie. "You have definitely chosen the wrong guy. Derek would never defend someone who said those things about you. Never!"

Kylie's gaze locked with Lucas for a moment, and then she turned and walked away.

* * *

That night, Kylie awoke to the smell of roses. Before she opened her eyes, she checked the temperature to make sure it wasn't Jane. Or worse, another vision. But nope. No cold. Just the sweet floral scent.

"Hey, beautiful," said a familiar male voice. She opened her eyes.

Lucas knelt beside her bed, holding a bouquet of roses in his hands. She sat up and saw more roses all around the room. "What did you do, rob a florist?"

He gave her his bad-boy grin, and Kylie felt her heart melt just a little. "No, but let me just say that my grandmother is going to be really pissed

when she sees her garden in the morning.”

She grinned and then remembered she was mad at him. And yeah, it might not have been fair to be mad when all he’d done was do the right thing by breaking up the fight, but Ellie’s words had stung and stung deep. And Kylie had been nursing a bit of a broken heart ever since.

It didn’t help that Kylie knew, once he shifted into wolf form, he would run off into the woods with Fredericka fast behind him. So when he’d dropped by earlier that day to see her, she’d told him she’d had a headache and was going to bed.

But he was back now. And this time, he hadn’t gotten her permission first to come into her room.

“Scoot over,” he said.

Kylie arched a brow, remembering his caution about not getting too close to her before the change. “Is that a good idea?”

“I’ll behave. I’ve made sure of it. I just want to hold you and apologize.”

“For what?”

He took a rose and ran it down her nose and over her lips. It felt soft against her skin—a bit like velvet.

“I’m sorry that Fredericka is being such a bitch. Sorry for how things may have looked. I wasn’t defending Fredericka. I was trying to keep Ellie from getting hurt.”

There it was again. The fact that he’d been doing the right thing. And she knew it was true.

“But...” He set the rose beside her pillow. “I got to thinking about how I’d feel if it were you defending Derek. I really wouldn’t like that.” He scooped her up in his arms and moved her over and then crawled in beside her.

His warmth came against her side, and his lips brushed against her cheek. “You are the most important thing to me, Kylie. There isn’t anything about you that doesn’t fascinate me. The way your eyes light up when you smile. The sound of your laughter.” He picked up the rose and ran it across her mouth again. “The shape of your lips. The way they feel against mine.”

The rose moved up. “Your nose. The way it turns up on the end.”

“It doesn’t turn up that much.” She’d always hated her nose.

“Maybe it does just a little.” He grinned. “But it’s so damn cute. And I love the way you sneeze.”

“Now you’re taking it too far.” She giggled.

“Seriously, I love the sound you make when you sneeze. It sounds more like a puppy than human. A very cute and sexy puppy.”

His smile faded and his blue eyes stared right at her. “For the first time in my entire life, I’m not looking forward to shifting. Because ... then I won’t be able to kiss you like this.” His lips melted against hers, but he ended the kiss too quickly. “I’ll be out there. And you’ll be in here. And instead of enjoying the thrill of being free of this body, I’ll be missing you.”

He kissed her lightly on the lips again. “So, please. Please, don’t be angry at me. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad, or to make you feel as if anyone else is more important to me than you. Because they aren’t. I’d kill for you, Kylie Galen. But more than that, I’d die for you.”

She felt a tear roll down her cheek. “You’d better not die on me, Lucas Parker.”

He caught the tear and wiped it away. “Am I forgiven?”

“Yes. You’re forgiven.” She reached up and wrapped her hand around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue swept across her lips. After several long, delicious moments, he kissed his way down to her neck. It tickled, it tingled, and before long, she heard the soft humming sound emanating from him. She liked hearing it. Liked knowing she made it happen. Liked how her inhibitions faded while listening to it.

His hand slid up under her tank top, touching bare skin. Touching the edges of her breasts, and then his hands moved higher. His warm hands felt like sunshine against her skin. She closed her eyes, loving how it felt. She wanted this.

He broke the kiss and jerked his hand away. “Okay, it’s time for me to go now.”

He jumped out of the bed and frowned down at her. “I’m sorry.”

She bit down on her lip to keep from telling him it was okay. To keep from asking him to get back in bed. Instead, she whispered, “I’m *not* sorry.”

He gazed down at her. “You are so damn beautiful. And if I don’t leave now...” He started out.

“Lucas?”

He turned around. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for the roses.”

“You’re welcome.” He looked back at the door. “I should probably go before I run out of time.”

“Out of time?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I told Della to kick my ass out if I stayed more than twenty minutes.” He looked at his watch. “And knowing her—”

“Time’s up!” Della pounded on the door with so much force, Kylie was amazed the door didn’t break down.

Lucas grinned. “I knew I could count on her.”

Kylie laughed.

Once he’d gone, she leaned back in bed, stared at the ceiling, and just breathed in the scent of roses, trying to remember every word he’d said. She wanted to remember this night forever.

* * *

Several days later, with her stomach gnawing on her backbone and Jonathon, her shadow of the day, in tow, Kylie set out to the dining room to get some breakfast.

Life had calmed down. A little, anyway. With the full moon behind them, Lucas was back to his normal, patient self. And he was being amazingly attentive, too. But if Kylie were honest, she sort of missed hearing his hum.

Not that she didn’t enjoy his sweet side. He’d even brought her more roses last night. If Mrs. Parker didn’t have reason enough to dislike her, Kylie figured the she-wolf’s decimated rose garden would seal the deal.

Even Kylie’s ghost was calmer. Jane Doe still made regular visits, but the ghost was back to giving Kylie the silent treatment. Which was fine for now.

Kylie ducked under a low-hanging branch on the trail and picked up speed.

“No! And I can’t believe you’d even suggest it!”

Holiday's voice rang in Kylie's ear a good three hundred feet from the office. Kylie stopped and looked around to make sure the camp leader wasn't standing nearby.

She wasn't.

It must be the gifted hearing again. It had come and gone several times since her mom and Holiday's little discussion during Parents Day. Curious, Kylie looked at Jonathon to see if he'd heard it, too.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I thought I heard something. Did you hear it?"

"Hear what?" He started looking around. "That damn blue jay isn't back, is it? I'm telling you, it's a sick bird."

The bird had returned three more times. Jonathon had been present for two of them. "No. I thought I heard Holiday."

Jonathon tilted his head to the side as if putting his own sensitive hearing to the test. "I don't hear her."

So, was her hearing stronger than a vampire's? What did that mean? Especially when she still had the brain pattern of a human.

"It's not like I have a choice," Burnett said.

Great. They were fighting again. About what this time? Kylie wondered, and continued on to the dining hall. If she had to guess, Holiday was just finding another excuse to try to put some distance between her and Burnett. Since Kylie had walked in and found them kissing, she hadn't seen the two within fifty feet of each other.

"You have a choice," Holiday said. *"You go back and tell them that I said hell, no."*

"It's a couple of tests. They wouldn't take long and they could clear up everything."

"I said, no!"

"Now I'm hearing Holiday," Jonathon said. "She doesn't sound too happy."

"Don't you think this should be Kylie's decision?"

"What should be my decision?" Kylie muttered, and changed direction and started walking toward the office.

“No!” Holiday said.

“*She wants answers. And this could give them to her.*”

Kylie moved faster. *What answers?* It didn’t matter, she realized. She’d take any answers she could get.

“*I won’t allow it!*”

“Won’t allow what?” Kylie stormed into the office, leaving Jonathon behind.

Holiday and Burnett swung around. Holiday pointed to the door. “Get out!” she told Burnett.

“No!” Kylie stepped in front of him. “He stays. This is about me, and I need to know.”

Holiday looked at Burnett with anger, then she looked at Kylie. “You wouldn’t understand this.”

“Why don’t you try me?” She looked at Burnett. “Start talking.”

He cut his gaze to Holiday.

“The FRU wants to run some tests on you,” Holiday said. “To see if they can figure out what you are.”

Hope rose in Kylie’s chest. “I thought there weren’t any tests that could tell me this?” She remembered asking Holiday that question before.

“There aren’t!” Holiday said. “They just want to play around in your brain to—”

“I’ll do it,” Kylie said.

“No!” Holiday looked horrified. “I refuse to let them use you as some kind of lab rat. There are no guarantees that these tests are safe, and they may not even work.”

Kylie looked at Burnett. “Are they safe?”

Burnett stared at Holiday, his eyes getting a pissed-off amber color. “I wouldn’t let them do anything to her that’s not safe,” he growled. “Do you have that little faith in me?”

“I have that little faith in the FRU. History repeats itself.”

“What kind of tests would they be?” Kylie asked.

“Just some CT scans,” Burnett said.

“No!” Holiday turned back to Kylie. “They’ll use you as a guinea pig.”

“They’re not going to hurt her,” Burnett said.

“I know, because she’s not agreeing to it.”

The cold came into the room so fast that Kylie’s breath sent tiny flakes of ice falling from her lips. Jane materialized, and at the same time, the three light bulbs in the fixture overhead burst. Shards of glass rained through the air.

“What the hell?” Burnett looked up and took a step closer to Kylie.

Holiday’s crystals hanging throughout the room started swaying, sending rainbow colors spiraling around them.

The laptop computer on Holiday’s desk started beeping, making serious malfunctioning noises.

“*You stay away from her!*” Jane shot across the room to stand between her and Burnett.

“*Run, Kylie!*” Jane yelled in the same tone she’d used to warn Kylie about the sinkhole.

“What’s wrong?” Kylie demanded.

“*He’s wrong!*” Jane yelled.

Holiday looked around the room. “What’s happening, Kylie?”

“I think she thinks Burnett is trying to hurt me.”

“Tell her to leave,” Holiday insisted.

“Jane, you’re going to have to go.”

But Jane wasn’t listening.

Burnett took another step closer to Kylie. Jane screamed and then jammed her hand inside his chest. Not only could Kylie see Jane’s hand, she saw the inside of Burnett’s chest. And she watched in horror as Jane’s hand closed around Burnett’s heart.

“No!” Kylie screamed.

Burnett’s gaze shot to Holiday. He reached for his chest.

“Stop it!” Kylie said.

Burnett dropped to the floor in a dead thud.

Chapter Thirty-four

Thirty minutes later, with Jonathon sitting under a tree a few feet away, Kylie sat on Holiday's porch, swatting away bugs and listening to Holiday, the doctor, and Burnett from inside the office.

"He asked you to take your shirt off," Holiday said.

"I don't need to take my shirt off," Burnett snapped. *"I'm fine."*

His voice was loud and clear, and he did indeed sound fine.

Not that it made Kylie feel any better.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Holiday said. *"We'll know as soon as you disrobe and let the doctor examine you."*

In a few minutes, Holiday came out and plopped on the porch beside Kylie. She had tears in her eyes. "I don't know why I'm worried about him. He's too pigheaded and stubborn to die."

Kylie laced her hands together. "I'm so sorry."

Holiday shook her head. "It wasn't your fault."

"You told me to get rid of her when I first told you about her. I refused, and she could have killed Burnett."

"She didn't want to kill him. She just wanted to get him away from you."

"Maybe I've been wrong all along. Maybe she is evil."

Holiday put her arm around Kylie's shoulder. "She wasn't evil. I felt her presence and her emotions. She was concerned about you. She did this to protect you, Kylie."

"Yeah, but, protect me from what? Did she really think Burnett was going hurt me?"

Holiday sighed. “She probably picked up on what I was feeling. I overreacted.” She tightened her arm. “I mean, I refuse to let you be tested by the FRU. But I shouldn’t have wiggled out like that.”

“You don’t trust Burnett?” Kylie asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t trust the FRU.”

“Why? And if you don’t trust them, then why are they involved with the camp? Besides, if they can really do some simple tests and tell me what I am, I want to do it.”

Holiday closed her eyes for a second. “Don’t take this wrong, Kylie. I’m not against the FRU. God knows we need them to keep things right. But they have no business testing people.”

“But if they can really—”

“I can’t let you do it. If they want to tell me the name of the test they want done, I’ll ask our doctor if he can order it. But it will be under his care and his care only.”

Kylie heard so much in the camp leader’s voice. So much she wasn’t saying. “Okay, what is it you’re not telling me?”

It took a minute before Holiday finally sighed and started talking. “It was over forty years ago. It involved only one small branch of the FRU that has been shut down, and charges were brought against a lot of people. They were doing scientific tests on supernaturals. Something about figuring out genetics. The subjects were forced into doing it, and some people never completely recovered from the tests. It’s not as if I think they’re doing it again, but I refuse to have you go there so they can poke and prod you to find answers.”

Kylie looked at Holiday. Bits and pieces of Jane’s vision started replaying in her mind like an old movie. And everything suddenly made sense. “The FRU killed Jane Doe. They killed her and then they buried her with Berta Littlemon in the Fallen Cemetery.”

Holiday’s eyes widened. “You can’t know this for sure.”

“I do,” Kylie said. “In the vision, Jane was called a subject. Her husband was one, too. And the doctor was a vampire. They mentioned her not having a pattern.”

Kylie pulled her knees up and hugged them, trying to wrap her head

around everything as it all came together. She didn't understand how Jane's baby fit in, but on some things she was clear.

"No wonder she went after Burnett," Kylie said. "She thought he was trying to do to me what the FRU had done to her."

* * *

Kylie was disappointed that Jane Doe was a no-show the next morning. Kylie had hoped now that she knew about the FRU, she could help Jane remember other things, like her name. That together they could figure out what it was Jane needed in order to cross over.

But dead people, just like the living, rarely did what Kylie wanted them to do.

A knock sounded at her door. "Come in."

The door opened and Miranda and Della both squeezed through the opening and shut the door extra quickly behind them.

"What is it?" Kylie asked.

"There's three guys here working on putting in the heating unit," Della said.

"And they're yummy," Miranda said. The contractors who worked around Shadow Falls had become a popular subject for all the female campers. Especially when they took their shirts off in the afternoons.

"As yummy as Perry?" Kylie teased. Lately, Miranda had been spending almost every free moment with the shape-shifter.

"Not quite as yummy," Miranda said, and then grinned. "But close."

"Well, thanks for the warning. I'll get ready to be awed."

"Just don't come out wearing nothing but a towel," Della said, also grinning. "Unless you're into that."

A few minutes later, Kylie walked out fully dressed, hair combed, and the only thing she'd added in honor of their company was a touch of lip gloss.

Miranda sat at the table, sipping a glass of orange juice, Della had a glass of blood, and two of the guys were down on the floor on their knees, saws at their sides and some kind of heating vent beside them.

As much as Kylie hated to admit it, Miranda was right. They were

yummy. Both were in their early twenties, had dark hair, and wore tight T-shirts that showed off their dark tans and lots of muscles.

They looked up and met Kylie's eyes. Kylie tensed when they pinched their eyebrows at her, but she did the same thing. They were both werewolves. She saw the shocked look in their eyes when they saw her brain pattern.

"I'm the token human," she said.

Della and Miranda snickered. The two guys smiled and went back to work. No doubt they had orders from Burnett not to flirt with the female campers.

Kylie went to the fridge to get her own glass of juice. She heard Miranda's door open, and the third contractor joined them. Kylie turned around and peered at him under her lashes. This one was equally hot. Black hair. Wide shoulders. Thin waist.

His gaze met Kylie's and her juice slipped from her fingers and shattered at her feet.

His hair had changed. His name, Red, probably a nickname, no longer fit, but his eyes hadn't changed. The image of him appearing in her dreams, and of him staring at her in the mirror with blood dripping down his chin, filled her head. Then the image flashed, and she saw him plastered on her windshield and ramming his hand through her car window. As if that weren't enough, she saw the image of him staring at her while she was chained to the chair when he and his grandfather abducted her.

"Della?" Kylie said in an even voice, hoping she could warn her before the shit hit the fan.

But Della didn't answer. Kylie turned. The vamp still sat at the table, her glass at her lips. A few drops of blood hung in the air between her lips and the edge of the glass. Della didn't breathe. Didn't move. She looked frozen.

The shit had already hit the fan.

Kylie's gaze shot to Miranda, who was also frozen, a finger at her ear as if to brush back a strand of hair.

Ditto for the two guys on the floor.

"It's just you and me, Kylie," the rogue said.

She refocused on Miranda and Della. “Whatever you’ve done to my friends, you’d better undo it,” she growled, and her blood fizzed with fury.

“Don’t get worked up. They are fine. As soon as I release them, they will go back to normal and not remember a thing.” He looked back to the table and then to her.

“So do it!” Kylie said.

He sighed. “I’ve never seen anyone who cared so much about others.”

Though she wasn’t sure why, Kylie checked his brain pattern. He was a werewolf. But how was that possible? He was a vampire. She tried not to show her surprise, but he saw it.

“What are you?” Kylie went ahead and asked.

“I’m the same thing you are. Just born a few minutes later than midnight.” He took a step closer. “That’s why we belong together. We’re soul mates, Kylie. That’s what we are.”

She tightened her brows again, and this time he was human. Her heart thudded in her chest. “I’m not your soul mate. I’ll die first.”

“That’s why I’m here.” He took another step toward her.

She backed up. “You’re here to kill me?”

“No.” He stopped moving. Something about his answer and his tone rang true. “I’m here to protect you. Though you don’t make it easy.”

The sound of thunder rumbled from outside. He glanced out the window, and when his gaze came back to hers, Kylie knew something else.

“You were the eagle,” she said. “And the deer. You’re a shape-shifter?” And if they were the same, as he said, did that make her a shape-shifter, too?

“No. I mean, yes. I was the deer and the eagle, but I’m not a shape-shifter.”

Then another thought hit. “You protected me, but you killed those innocent girls in Fallen. Why?”

He cut his eyes downward. “Would it upset you terribly if I said it was to impress you?”

“Impress me? You’re sick.”

“But they were mean to you and your friends.”

“They didn’t deserve to die.”

“I know you feel that way now. I didn’t really know you then. Now, I do. I wouldn’t have done it if—”

“You don’t know me now.”

He shrugged. “I sometimes don’t understand you. But I have watched you. You are an interesting study. I have always wondered what it would have been like ... to have been born at midnight. Funny how just a few minutes on a clock can make a difference. I sometimes wonder if maybe—” The sound of thunder shook the cabin again.

Kylie could swear she saw regret in his eyes. But maybe not. The light in the cabin had been chased away by dark shadows. Kylie sensed the shadows were there for her.

Lightning flashed from the window. “I don’t have a lot of time,” he said, “but I wanted to tell you—”

“I will not go with you!” She might not win the battle, but she’d go down fighting.

“No, not this time. I’ll come back for you later. Like I said, I’m here to protect you.”

“From what?”

He glanced at the two contractors, frozen, not breathing, the same as Della and Miranda. “They want you dead.”

Did he mean the two guys? “Who wants me dead?”

“The others. My grandfather and his friends. The others like us.”

“Like us how? And why would they want me dead?”

“They are impatient and afraid of what you might be able to accomplish if you don’t join us. But I will hold them off until you come around. But you must change your mind, soon.”

He pointed to the taller of the guys on the floor, still frozen, as if they were working on the vents in the floor. “This guy, he was sent here to kill you. I had a wizard friend of mine peek into the future, and learned that your other friends would have gotten here in time to save you. But”—he pointed to the table—“the little witch wouldn’t have made it. And for some crazy reason, I felt compelled to stop that from happening. I knew how much it would hurt you if she died.” His brows creased as if he were confused. “It

was an odd feeling, wanting to save her, caring if she died, because it's not like me to care. But ... because of you, I did. I cared."

The words *Someone lives and someone dies* whispered in Kylie's head again.

"No!" This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't.

Then the sound of footsteps hitting the front porch vibrated the floor beneath her.

"Until later." He disappeared.

The door swung open and hit the back of the wall with a loud whack. Burnett, Lucas, Perry, and Derek rushed in.

"What the hell?" Della leapt out of her chair. Miranda dropped her juice and it splattered to the floor. Kylie's heart sighed when she saw they were okay. And yet ... somewhere deep down, she'd believed him when he'd said they would be.

But did that mean she also believed him about everything else? Was she like him? She looked at Miranda and considered the possibility that she might have died had the rogue not intervened.

"You two!" Burnett said, pointing to the two men on the floor. "Come with me."

They stood up slowly. Then the taller one, the one the rogue had pointed to, leapt at the closed window. Glass shattered, wood splintered, and then he was outside. Burnett and Lucas went after him.

Chapter Thirty-five

“It doesn’t make sense,” Burnett growled an hour later as he paced back and forth in Holiday’s office. Kylie agreed. Nothing made sense anymore.

They had caught the guy who’d been hired to kill her. But his information offered zero help in finding the person who’d hired him. They were no closer to finding the real culprit now than they’d been before.

Kylie, however, felt closer than ever to finding answers. No, she didn’t know what she was, but at least she knew there were others like her. Question was, were they all evil? Was she the only one who’d been born at midnight?

“If he had wanted to take you, why didn’t he?” Burnett stopped pacing in front of Holiday and Kylie on the sofa.

“He didn’t say ... exactly,” Kylie said. “He said he would eventually convince them that I wasn’t a danger to them. As if he thought he could change my mind about going with him.”

“That’s stupid,” Burnett said.

Kylie decided to ask the question that had been bugging her for a while now. “How did he freeze Miranda and Della and the other two?”

Holiday answered, “There are some wizards and very strong witches and warlocks who can stop time.”

“Do you think that’s what he is? What I am?”

Holiday shrugged. “I’ve never heard of a witch or a wizard being able to change their brain patterns.”

“Because it’s impossible,” Burnett snapped.

“Not really.” Kylie pointed to herself.

Burnett closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "This whole thing is friggin' unbelievable."

Holiday stood up. "Which is why you can't report this to the FRU."

Burnett looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "They have to be told."

"Why? They know someone is trying to kill her. We tell them about that, not about the changing brain patterns."

"Why would we keep it from them?"

Holiday crossed her arms. "Because it will give them more of a reason to take Kylie and use her as some kind of lab rat."

Kylie's gaze shot from Holiday to Burnett. "Did they ever say if they would allow Dr. Pearson to do the tests?"

Burnett's grimace deepened. "They said regular hospitals don't have the necessary equipment."

"Which is exactly what I thought," Holiday blasted. "We have no idea if those tests are safe."

"They said they were." But Burnett's tone had lost its force, and Kylie wondered if he believed it anymore.

"They killed the spirit I'm helping," Kylie said.

"You don't know that for sure."

"Yes, I do. And if you need proof, dig up the grave. Her body is in there."

Burnett swore. "The FRU is not the enemy, Kylie. I admit they've made mistakes in the past, but that was then."

"Right," Holiday said, her tone still sharp. "But they'll sacrifice one if they think it will benefit the whole." She pointed at Kylie. "One of my teens will not be that sacrifice. And if you can't accept that, then walk out of here right now. Because we can't work together."

His gaze shot to Kylie, then back to Holiday. "Do you realize what you're asking me to do? To betray my oath and keep information from the FRU?"

"It's your choice," Holiday said.

Burnett closed his eyes, shook his head, and walked out of the office. Kylie didn't know if that was his answer, but from the sheer pain on Holiday's face, she certainly believed it.

* * *

When Kylie left Holiday's office after their meeting, Lucas was waiting. He'd gotten himself assigned shadow duty. He took her down to the stream and they stretched out on the warm grass and tried to find shapes in the clouds. Between finding everything from George Washington to dinosaurs in the sky, Kylie told him about Burnett and Holiday's argument.

"Burnett wants to tell the FRU, and Holiday thinks that will give them more reason to take me in for tests."

Propping up on his elbow, he stared down at her. "How do you feel about being tested?"

"I don't know. Part of me wants to do it if they really think it would give me answers, but Holiday's adamant that it could be dangerous. And I've always trusted her." And then there was what happened to the ghost.

"More than you trust Burnett?" Lucas asked.

"Maybe a little." Kylie looked into his blue eyes. "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"No. I probably trust Holiday more, too." He traced her lips with his finger.

"I just can't stand the thought of them fighting," she said, loving the feel of his touch, but her heart wouldn't let go of the problems at hand.

"That's between them," Lucas said.

"But it's about me. And I know they care about each other. I don't want to be the reason they gave up."

"You don't know they're giving up. I heard Burnett went back to the FRU offices to interrogate the captured were again. He'll be back."

"I hope so." But her heart wasn't so sure.

He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. It was a soft, warm kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes held touches of amber color and she knew whatever thought had crossed his mind had stirred his anger.

"You know, I won't let that rogue have you. You're mine."

"I know," Kylie told him. What she didn't say was that she was worried no one might be able to prevent the rogue from carrying out his promise. So

far, nothing had stopped him. Sure, if he was telling the truth about them being the same type of supernatural, and she believed him—she didn't understand it, but she believed him—then she was equally powerful. But if Holiday was right and she was a protector, then she would be able to use those powers only to protect others. That meant she was completely vulnerable to his whims.

It wasn't a good feeling. But she refused to cater to defeat. And she meant what she'd told the rogue. She would die before she became a part of some evil gang.

But she wasn't dead right now. And the proof was in how alive Lucas made her feel.

"Kiss me again," she said.

He grinned. "Is that a request or an order?"

"Both."

"Well, in that case..."

* * *

The next day, Burnett still hadn't returned. Holiday was moody, and Kylie had a raging headache. Lucas had found her earlier and told her his grandmother was ill and he was going to check on her. At around four, Kylie gave up and asked for permission to go lie down. Della, on shadowing duty, followed Kylie back to the cabin.

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep when the cold hit. She opened her eyes, feeling the icy mist on her breath. Jane was here.

"Thank God, you're awake," a feminine voice said. But it wasn't Jane's voice.

Kylie shot up. Through a curtain of hair, she saw Ellie standing at the foot of her bed.

"How did you get in here?" she asked.

Elle shrugged. Kylie glanced at the window she'd left open.

Kylie pulled the blanket up closer to her chest and looked around the room for Jane. She hadn't appeared yet, but she was here. Chill bumps climbed up and down her arms. Jane hadn't been here the last few days, and

Kylie hoped she was finally ready to talk. “You know what, Ellie. This really isn’t a good time. I have some business to take care of.”

“But I need you to go to Derek,” Ellie said. “He’s upset. Not right.”

Kylie studied her closer.

Ellie frowned. “You have to go to him.” She shook her head. “I’m afraid he’s hurt.”

Kylie yanked her covers off. “Hurt? Where is he?”

“At the park about a half mile past the stream where the dinosaur tracks are.”

“Why’s he there?” Kylie asked.

“I don’t know, but he needs you.”

“Why does he need me?” Kylie slipped her tennis shoes on. “Has something happened?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said. “I’m confused.”

“Is he hurt?” Kylie’s heart gripped in fear for Derek.

“No. I don’t think so.”

Ellie wasn’t making sense. Kylie worried it might be a ploy to get her and Derek together. But something about the panic in Ellie’s voice said differently.

“Let’s go.” Ellie moved toward the window.

“I have to get Della. She’s my shadow, remember?”

“Hurry.”

Kylie moved to the door and looked back again for Jane. She hadn’t manifested, but her deathly cold still chilled the room. *I’ll be back shortly*, she told the spirit in her head. *Please don’t leave. We need to talk.*

Jane didn’t answer. No surprise. Kylie walked out her bedroom door and Della looked up from the computer.

“You’re slipping,” Kylie said.

“How am I slipping?” Della asked.

“Ellie’s here.”

“Shit! I am slipping.” She stomped into Kylie’s bedroom as if ready to give Ellie hell. Not that Kylie worried too much. Della and Ellie had bonded since Della invited her into her vampire circle.

Della came right back out. "Did she leave?"

"No way!"

Kylie stormed back into the bedroom. But Della was wrong. Ellie stood in the same place she'd been standing when she left. "You have to hurry."

"Maybe you dreamed it," Della said, stepping into the room.

The cold in the room pressed against Kylie's skin again. Kylie stared at Ellie. Her heart rolled over and tears crawled up her throat.

No!

"What happened, Ellie?" Tears slipped onto Kylie's cheeks. "Is Derek okay?"

"I don't remember." Ellie sounded befuddled.

"Kylie? Is this a dream?" Della asked.

More than anything, Kylie wished it were. She looked at Ellie.

"What happened?" she asked again.

"You have to hurry. I'm worried about Derek."

Fear suddenly set in. Fear for Derek. Fear she might be too late to save Ellie and Derek. It didn't matter how much of her soul she'd have to give to save them. She'd give it.

"What's going on?" Miranda walked in.

"She's freaking again," Della snapped.

Kylie, with tears in her eyes, looked at Miranda. "I need you to call Holiday. Tell her Della and I are going up to the park past the dinosaur tracks. Derek's there and he might be hurt. Come on," Kylie said, and started to run.

Della caught Kylie by the arm. "What's going on?"

Kylie drew in a shaky breath. "Ellie's dead at some park close to here. And Derek was with her. We have to go before it's too late!"

Miranda let out a sob.

"How? What happened?" Della's eyes widened with emotion.

Kylie didn't have time to explain. Ellie bolted out the door, and Kylie went after her. Della's footsteps thudded against the earth as she came behind her.

* * *

Kylie never slowed down. Neither did Ellie or Della. When they got to the dinosaur tracks, they crossed the creek and jumped a fence into the park grounds. The path went uphill quickly, but Kylie kept up with no problem. Her blood fizzed with the strange kind of energy she got when she was protecting someone she loved. She just prayed it wasn't too late.

"It's just around the bend," Ellie said. She'd been quiet during the run. Then she suddenly stopped. Panic filled her gaze. *"Oh, my God. I remember."*

"What?" Kylie stopped beside Ellie.

"What? What?" When Della met Kylie's gaze, she must have realized she hadn't been talking to her, and she simply nodded.

"I followed someone here," Ellie said. *"I spotted him running from the camp. I was almost here when I heard someone behind me. It was Derek. That's when the person I'd followed attacked."*

"Who was it?" Kylie's mind went to Red. "Was it a young guy, red or brownish hair?"

"No, it was an old dude. Vampire."

Mario. They never had a chance!

Kylie's chest filled with pain. And guilt. This was all her fault. "Where's Derek? Where's your body?" She had to save them.

Ellie pointed to the side of the mountain. It looked as if it had recently been disturbed. Loose rock lay around the ledge. *"Derek came around the bend and a bolt of lightning struck. He was slammed against the rocks. His head was bleeding, but he was breathing. But then more lightning struck. I picked him up and put him in the small cave and moved the rocks in front of him. I was doing that when ... everything went blank."*

Kylie ran to the edge of the cliff and started moving the loose boulders.

Della moved in. "What are we doing?" Worry filled her expression.

"He's behind here," Kylie said. They moved the rocks to the side. Rocks that weighted well over four and five hundred pounds. Her strength didn't even surprise her; she thought only of Derek and Ellie.

“Oh God!” Della took a step back.

Kylie saw Ellie’s mangled body lying between the rocks. Kylie’s breath caught, and her tears started falling faster. She picked up Ellie and moved her to the side and rested her body on the rocky path.

“She’s dead,” Della said.

“Keep moving the rocks,” Kylie ordered Della, and with everything Kylie had she prayed Derek was still alive. Prayed she could bring Ellie back.

She laid her hands on Ellie’s battered body and sent up prayers that this worked. She closed her eyes, concentrated, and moved her palms over the injuries, as she had with Lucas and with Sara. Blood, Ellie’s blood, coated Kylie’s hands. She cried harder and tried harder, but no matter how hard she concentrated, her hands didn’t heat up.

Suddenly, Ellie was sitting beside her body. *“It’s too late. Look.”* Ellie pointed up at the sky. The sun was a big ball of orange. *“I see my mother up there. She’s waiting for me.”*

“No,” Kylie said. “Don’t go. I’m trying to bring you back.”

“But I want to go with her. I’ve missed her.”

“No!” Kylie screamed again.

Ellie’s spirit stood. *“Derek’s okay.”* She pointed back to Della as she moved the rocks. *“But I have to go. Thank you, Kylie Galen. Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for teaching me to think beyond myself. Thank you for everything.”*

“Please don’t,” Kylie begged. But it was too late. Ellie’s spirit started floating up toward the setting sun and Kylie knew it was hopeless.

“I got him,” Della yelled. “I got Derek.”

Kylie bolted to him. He was unconscious but breathing. She found the wounds on his head and pressed her hand against them. More blood oozed between her fingers, but she didn’t care. Her hands grew hot and she felt the heat of her palms sink into Derek’s scalp.

“Did you save Ellie?” Della asked.

“No, I’m sorry,” Kylie said, and stared at Derek.

“Holiday and the others are coming,” Della said, and when Kylie looked up, Della had tears running down her face.

“I tried to save her,” Kylie said. “I really tried.”

Derek suddenly jolted up. “What happened?”

Kylie stood. Derek looked at her and then pain filled his eyes. “Ellie?”

Kylie put a hand over her mouth and more tears flowed.

Derek ran out and found Ellie’s body. He knelt beside her and Kylie saw his eyes fill with tears of rage. “Who did this?”

Guilt swelled in Kylie. “It was the old vampire, the one after me.”

Holiday and about a dozen of the others came moving around the bend of the ledge. Kylie looked for Lucas, wishing he were here to hold her, but then she remembered he’d gone to see his grandmother.

She turned and faced the cave, her emotions too raw. She heard several of the campers gasp and some cry. No doubt they were seeing Ellie’s body.

Holiday moved in and placed a hand on Kylie’s shoulder.

Tears streamed down her face; she held out her bloody hands and gazed at Holiday. “What good is this gift, if I can’t save those I want to save?”

Holiday didn’t try to answer; she just wrapped Kylie in her arms and held her close.

“We need to go before it gets dark,” Holiday finally said.

Derek picked up Ellie’s body as though she were a rag doll, then Kylie saw him reach back down for her LITTLE VAMP cap. He tucked the cap under his arm and carried Ellie down the steep path.

They walked for about five minutes; no one spoke. Derek dropped Ellie’s cap, and the wind blew it past Kylie. Kylie heard him ask someone to pick it up. At the very back of the single-file line, and feeling numb, Kylie turned to go grab the cap. She saw it only about twenty feet away. She moved in, almost ready to reach for it, when a big gust of wind moved it closer to the edge.

Kylie moved another couple of feet. The wind took the cap to the very edge. It hovered there, half on and half off the ledge.

Only then did Kylie sense the unnaturalness of the breeze.

She wasn’t alone.

The sound of a dry branch snapping had never sounded scarier. Someone stood behind her. And less than two feet in front stood ... death. She had no

idea how deep the cavern went, but she suspected the fall would be fatal.

Breath held, thinking any second she would feel someone give her that fatal push, she turned. The old vampire Mario and two other elderly supernaturals stood there staring at her with cold, calculating gazes. All three were dressed like monks, their dark robes stirring in the wind.

“Kylie Galen,” Mario said. His voice sounded as aged as he looked, but the sense of power could not be overlooked. Was this really what she was? She studied Mario; closer, his eyes were black, coal black. She saw only evil, and the idea that she shared anything in common with these people disgusted her. “So we meet again.”

She took a small step back, closer to the ledge. “Much to my misfortune,” Kylie said, and she felt the heel of her tennis shoe find the edge of the embankment.

“’Tis true, my dear,” he said. “Although, if you are so inclined as to save yourself, join us now. Pledge to us your allegiance and you will live. My grandson will make you a good husband.”

“What are you?” She tightened her brows and saw into their patterns. Mario was vampire, the bearded one was warlock, and the other carried the pattern of a werewolf. But all three patterns were dark and ominous.

“Join us and you will have your answers.”

Kylie swallowed and sent up a little prayer. She prayed for help. Then she prayed for forgiveness for anything and everything she’d ever done wrong. Then she prayed for courage. She took another step back until her feet hit nothing.

Chapter Thirty-six

Gravity grabbed Kylie from below. Her breath caught at the same time a hand caught her arm. Her heart throbbing in her chest, she looked up into the face of her rescuer. Red.

He jerked her back to safety.

She found her footing, beside him. But her mind raced as she realized he'd saved her. "Hello, Kylie," the rogue said.

She just stared at him, not sure what to say.

"She made her choice," said the bearded man standing beside Mario. His dark brown robe fluttered in the wind as he raised his hand and pointed those long, aged fingers at her. She stared in something akin to horror as flames came from the tips of his fingers.

Red jumped in front of her, and the old man's flames stopped. "I told you I would change her mind. Give her time. She's too good to kill."

"She has made her choice," Mario said. "Her time is up. Move out of the way. Let her plummet to her death."

"No," Red said.

Kylie stared at Red, confused by his willingness to protect her. And yet hadn't he been doing it all along?

"You dare to disobey me in front of my peers?" Mario growled.

"I dare," Red said. "I've spent my entire life living by your rules. You murdered my mother. You forced my father to run away. I've accepted that all my life, and I have asked nothing of you but this. Spare her. For me."

"She cannot be spared," said the other old man. "She will bring us down."

“She won’t. I’ll take care of her,” Red said. “I’ll change her mind, I’ll convince her.” There was pleading in his voice.

“The decision is made,” the bearded man said.

The second old man raised his hand, and a surge of wind picked her up from the ground and knocked her back toward the edge.

She felt herself falling. Felt the air part as her body descended. Fear made her tense; grief for everyone she loved chased off the fear. She saw faces in her mind’s eye that she would miss. Things she would never do. She saw Lucas’s face and then Derek’s. She saw her friends—new and old. Then she blinked, unable to breathe. She saw the sun setting and found an odd sort of calm settle within her. The colors in the dusk sky filled her mind with a surge of calm. She’d be able to be with Daniel and Nana.

Something or someone caught her again. Her memory shot back to being caught by Perry. The grips around her wrist were not human. The jolt brought air into her lungs. Had Perry come to save her?

“I have you. Hold on!”

But the voice didn’t belong to Perry. It was Red.

A bolt of lightning shot past them, so close that Kylie felt the sting of it.

In seconds, the huge bird landed back on the ledge and set her gently on her feet. There were no sparkles as he changed back to human form. He was more than just a shape-shifter.

“You okay?” he asked.

Kylie looked at him through the tears in her eyes and nodded. She remembered him saving her from the snake. From the lightning strike in the woods and then trying to save her from the sinkhole. She’d never said thank you, never considered needing to, because all she saw in him was evil. But then he’d saved Miranda, too.

“I don’t even know your real name,” she managed to say.

“Roberto.” He smiled. “I managed to snag this.” He handed her Ellie’s cap.

Right then Kylie knew. Red ... Roberto wasn’t all evil.

“Thank you,” she said.

He stared at her as if he didn’t know how to respond. Then he reached out

and brushed a tear from her cheek. “You are even pretty when you cry.”

“No, I’m not. I get all red and—” A bolt of lightning shot down from above. Roberto pushed her away. Her back hit the rock wall behind her. He looked prepared to run, but before he did, the lightning struck again. It hit him. The ground beneath her shook at the impact. The smell of burned flesh filled her nose.

Kylie dropped to her knees. Panic clawed at her throat. She didn’t want to see it, but she couldn’t look away. Roberto’s eyes turned blood red, and his body contorted backward; something that looked like smoke billowed out of his mouth, and Kylie knew it was his soul. And then he fell. The sound of his soulless body hitting the hard earth was pure sadness.

She moved to try to save him.

“*Don’t.*” The sound of his voice startled her. She looked at him. His spirit stood several feet from his body, gazing toward the dusk-filled sky. “*I don’t want to stay.*” Purples, shades of bright pinks, golds, and shades of gray now laced the sky.

“Do you see them?” he asked.

For a second, she thought he meant his grandfather and the two other men, but then she did see, and she understood. Angels were dancing in the painted sky; like birds, they moved gracefully in the wind.

Kylie nodded. “I do.” But she still had to try. She laid her hands on his body. And concentrated. Nothing happened. Her hands would not heat up. Giving up, she finally gazed up at his spirit.

“*Why would you want to save me?*” his spirit asked.

“Because you saved me,” she said, and looked up.

He gazed back at her, and all hints of evil were gone from his eyes. What she saw was a person who never had a chance. A boy raised into evil, taught evil, and never loved. “*I understand now,*” he said. “*I was wrong, Kylie Galen. You are not my soul mate. But because of you, I have saved my soul.*” Then slowly his spirit was taken, pulled up by the sky. He became part of the colors in the dusky sky. Part of the beauty, part of something that was eternal. The death angels took him at the last second of dusk.

Kylie wasn’t sure how much time passed, but the colors of the sky had

turned black when another *whoosh* of wind hit. What was a flash in the night suddenly became a body, crouched down only a few feet from her. Kylie scooted back and then recognized Burnett.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Kylie nodded.

“I need to get you out of here, now.” He pulled her up.

She looked down at the body near her feet. And realized his eyes, empty, dead, were open. She lowered herself and closed his lids.

When she stood up, she told Burnett, “He died saving me.”

“Then maybe hell will be easy on him.” Burnett picked her up.

“He didn’t go to hell,” Kylie said.

She didn’t know if he heard her. It didn’t matter. She knew.

* * *

Burnett carried Kylie back to the main office, where Holiday paced across the front porch. He set Kylie down.

“Thank God!” Holiday ran to Kylie and hugged her.

“Thank you,” Holiday said to Burnett, but when she released Kylie, he was already gone.

Her frown deepened, but her expression changed and she met Kylie’s eyes. “Are you okay?”

Kylie nodded and tried not to cry. “Is Derek okay?”

“He’s resting.”

Kylie nodded.

“What happened, Kylie? You were there one minute and then gone the next.”

Kylie pulled out Ellie’s hat from her jeans pocket. “I went back for this, and...” The tears she didn’t want to cry came anyway, and she told Holiday the whole story.

Kylie wasn’t asleep when she heard the knock on her door several hours later. She heard Della answer it. Then she heard Lucas’s voice. He came into her bedroom and pulled her against him, and Kylie held on to him like a life preserver. She needed his strength. Needed to feel his arms around her. They

stayed like that for hours, not kissing, not making out, just holding on to each other.

* * *

The next morning, the mood at the camp was somber at best. Everyone missed Ellie. They missed Burnett. They missed Derek. He'd left for the weekend to stay with his mom. Kylie was almost afraid to see him. Ellie's funeral was set for next week because the FRU wanted to do an autopsy. Kylie knew that no one at the camp blamed her, but she couldn't quite keep from blaming herself.

Holiday, sensing Kylie's emotion, had taken her to the falls. It was there, behind the wall of water, that Kylie felt most of the ugliness of guilt lift. She asked the question why, why it had to happen. The answer came in a feeling. Fate had called Ellie home. Fate was still pissing Kylie off. But some of the guilt did fade.

Holiday worked like crazy to keep the camp running and do interviews for teachers. It was too much for one person, though. So Kylie got together with a couple of the other campers and assigned jobs. One person oversaw the contractors, while another answered calls at the office.

Holiday almost protested but then threw in the towel and accepted their help.

On Thursday afternoon, when Lucas had her for shadow duty, Kylie asked if he'd seen Burnett.

"No, but he's around," Lucas said. "He's set guards around the camp in case anything else happens."

Kylie hoped nothing else would happen. According to Miranda, whoever had been hanging around was now gone.

Apparently, so was Kylie's ghost, because she hadn't appeared in days.

* * *

The next afternoon, Kylie was sitting on the front porch when Derek walked up. He must have returned early.

The lingering guilt she felt at Ellie's death bubbled to the surface. And when she saw that he still had shadows of grief in his eyes, she felt her guilt swell to the point of pain.

He lowered himself beside her. "That's what I came to see you about."

She looked at him, unsure what he meant. "I knew you would feel responsible for this. And I just wanted you to know that Ellie made that choice when she took off after the intruder. I made the choice to follow her. It's not your fault. You would have done the same for anyone in this camp."

Kylie felt a knot form in her throat. "But he was here because of me."

"I know. I'm sure Ellie knew it when she went after him. But it didn't stop her. And she would be so unhappy if she knew you blamed yourself for her death. It would be a dishonor to her memory if I let you keep blaming yourself. She liked you. She liked you a lot."

Kylie felt a few tears roll past her lashes, and Derek put his arm around her. It wasn't a boyfriend kind of hug, just a hug from a friend who was offering a warm touch of comfort. And it felt really good.

* * *

When the next day came and Jane was still a no-show, Kylie went to Holiday with a request.

"No." Holiday shoved herself back in her desk chair.

"But I need to see her, and I know she's there."

"Don't you remember what happened the last time you went?"

"I remember I survived," Kylie said. "I also remember I ended up helping another lost soul, and I learned something when I was there. I need to go, Holiday."

Holiday slapped her pen onto the desk. "Someone is trying to kill you."

"Was trying," Kylie said. "I think Miranda is right. They're gone right now."

"Why would they leave?"

"I don't know. But I refuse to live my life in a prison."

"This isn't a prison," Holiday said.

"It is if I can't ever leave."

Holiday scowled. "If I say no, you're still going to go, aren't you?"

Kylie gave the question some thought and answered honestly. "Probably."

"Fine. I'll clear an hour after lunch and we'll—"

"I don't think you should go," Kylie said.

"Why?"

"I've been there. They know me, and if you show up, it might confuse things. I think you scared Jane Doe. She might not show herself if you're there."

Holiday's frown deepened. "There is no way in hell that I'm letting you go by yourself."

"Not by myself," Kylie insisted. "You could call Burnett."

Holiday frowned, but Kylie knew she wouldn't say no. Not when it involved someone's safety. And yes, this might have been a bit of a ploy to get them back together again, but it was killing Kylie to see Holiday so miserable.

Besides, Kylie did want to help Jane Doe.

* * *

Burnett agreed to the plan. But after Ellie's death, he said he wasn't going in with just the two of them. Lucas wasn't there. He'd driven into Houston to get the contractors their supplies. He wouldn't be back until three. So Burnett recommended Derek and Della.

Derek looked thrilled when she asked if he would go with her. He'd agreed before she told him where they were going.

"It's the cemetery," she said. "And there will be ghosts there."

"No problem."

Della hadn't been so thrilled. But of course, after grumbling, she agreed to go.

When they arrived at the Fallen Cemetery gates, Della grumbled some more. Derek put his warm hand against Kylie's back and whispered, "It's okay. I'm here."

Obviously, he'd read her misgivings about making the trip. Sure, she'd put up a good front with Holiday, but it didn't mean she wasn't scared. She

could still remember how terrified she'd felt when the ghosts had charged her all at once.

"Thanks." Then she mentally pulled up her big-girl panties and walked through the gates, with Della on one side of her and Derek and Burnett on the other.

Sun and shadows danced across the graves at the same time the unnatural cold fell upon them like an invisible cloud of fog.

Derek leaned in again. "I need to talk to you ... when we can steal a minute. It's important. Please."

She nodded.

"It's her. She's back..." Kylie heard one voice and then a merge of voices, male and female, young and old.

"She said she'd come back."

"And I thought she was just bullshitting us."

"I told you she wasn't lying."

Tension pulled at her skull, forecasting a headache. But the spirit of the old man's wife manifested and the voices retreated.

"My husband got his medicines right, thanks to you."

"That's good," Kylie said out loud.

"What's good?" Derek asked.

"She not talking to you," Della said. "Freaky, isn't it?"

"It's not that bad," Derek said, but Kylie saw him cutting his green eyes from side to side, as though he wondered where the spirits were. Burnett remained silent, standing stoic. He'd hardly spoken since he'd met them at the front of the camp.

Why haven't you passed over? Kylie asked this question in her head as she ambled down the path between the tombstones.

"I decided to just wait on him," Ima said. *"But Catherine passed on. That was the woman you helped. Her kids came here. I heard them say they're planning on changing her tombstone to show her real name. That was nice of you to do that."*

Kylie nodded. *Have you seen the other one? The one you call Berta Littlemon?*

“She was just here. She’s been a basket case since they took her away.”

“Took her away?” Kylie asked aloud again.

The spirit just shrugged and said, *“There she is. Sitting by the grave.”*

“I’m going to be right over there.” Kylie pointed to the grave where Jane sat on the ground.

“As long as we can see you,” Burnett said.

Kylie moved over to Jane. The ghost looked up and the sun hit her face. She had tears webbing her dark lashes. She didn’t have on any makeup. She looked young. And pregnant.

“Are you okay?” Kylie sat down next to Jane.

The spirit looked back at the grave. *“I want to remember so badly. But my brain doesn’t work. Sometimes I feel as if the answers are right there, but I can’t reach them. Then I remember something and it disappears. Why doesn’t my brain work right?”*

Kylie hesitated. But Jane deserved to know. Just like Kylie deserved to get her own answers. “I don’t know everything, but I know some.”

“What?” she asked.

“There’s an organization called the FRU. They’re like the government for supernaturals. According to the leader of our camp, several years ago, the FRU were doing tests, something about genetics. I don’t know what kind of tests they ran, but from the vision I had, I think you were one of the ones they tested, and they operated on you. You had your head shaved and had stitches. In the vision, you looked paralyzed. I think something went wrong with the test they did, so ... they killed you.”

Jane put her hand over her trembling lips. *“I remember I showed you that. They put a pillow over my face.”*

“Yes,” Kylie said.

“I didn’t want to do the tests, but ... my husband. What was his name?” she asked Kylie.

“I don’t know.”

Jane shook her head. *“He insisted that we do it, so they would leave us alone.”*

“Who would leave you alone?” Kylie asked, wanting to make sure they

were still talking about the FRU.

“The organization that you said. If we didn’t agree to be tested, they’d imprison us.”

“Why?”

Jane paused again. *“I can’t remember. But I think it was because we were different.”* She looked at the grave. The dirt around the tombstone had been disturbed. *“He took me away. He dug me out of the ground.”*

“Who did?” Kylie leaned closer.

“That bad man.”

“What bad man?”

“The one who wanted you to be tested.”

“Burnett?” Kylie asked. “He took you away?”

She nodded. *“I don’t like him.”*

Kylie stared at the grave, trying to figure out what that meant. “He’s not bad,” she said. But why would he dig up Jane’s body? Was it to prove what the FRU had done? Or was it to protect the FRU from her accusations?

“He looks bad.” Jane pointed toward the path.

Kylie looked up. Burnett stopped in front of her. “I can explain it.”

Kylie stood. “I hope so.”

He frowned but didn’t explain, so she decided to start asking questions.

“Why did you take Jane Doe’s body?”

He hesitated. “I thought you wanted to know who she was.”

Kylie sensed he was speaking only half the truth. “Do you know who she is?”

He nodded. “I was going to tell you, as soon as I had a little more information.” He paused again. “But I guess now is fine. Her name is Heidi Summers.”

Kylie looked around for the spirit. She didn’t see her, but she could still feel the cold. Whether it was from Jane or someone else, Kylie didn’t know.

“I have an address, too. She lived a couple of miles from here. I thought you’d want to go there.”

“Yes,” Kylie said. “Is her family still there?”

Burnett started walking, and Kylie followed him. She saw Derek and

Della waiting for them by the gate.

“The house is listed to Malcolm Summers,” Burnett said. “So I’m assuming it’s her family.”

Kylie caught her breath when a hundred or more souls lined up on each side of the path. They all reached out for her and started talking at once. Her head started to pound. The icy feel of their touches stung like thousands of needles.

She felt herself being pulled in a thousand different directions.

“Help me.”

“No, help me.”

“Stop it!” the spirit of the old man’s wife screamed. *“If you’re not nice, she won’t come back.”*

The jabbering stopped. They brought their hands to their sides, but they didn’t leave. They stood completely still and watched her with soulless eyes—all wanting, needing her to do something for them so they could cross over.

But there were too many to help. Guilt filled her chest. She breathed in the frigid air and forced herself to concentrate on the one she could help. Jane Doe.

“The Summers family. They’re supernaturals, right?” Kylie asked, unsure what she would say to them. But if they were supernaturals, perhaps it wouldn’t be so hard.

Burnett frowned. “They aren’t registered supernaturals.”

“You think they’re rogue?”

“Not everyone unregistered is rogue. But they could be.”

Derek moved in beside Kylie, appearing concerned. He brushed the top of his hand against hers. She felt the calm he offered and appreciated the assistance.

Burnett turned to Derek and Della as soon as they walked out of the gate. “I called Holiday and asked her to pick you two up. I’ll bring Kylie by later.”

Kylie and Burnett got into his Mustang. As she watched Della and Derek get smaller in the rearview mirror, the craziest thought struck. What if Burnett took her to the FRU to get tested? What if Jane was right? What if he wasn’t a good guy?

Chapter Thirty-seven

Neither of them spoke during the ride. The silence seemed heavy, but not that unusual, or so Kylie reminded herself. Burnett had never been Mr. Chatty.

But with every roll of the tires, Kylie's uncertainty rose. She glanced at Burnett, again sitting silent in the driver's seat.

"You seem nervous," he said.

"Should I be?"

He appeared confused. "I thought you wanted to see them."

She nodded, but the memory of Jane and her surgery hit harder. Oh sure, Kylie's heart told her Burnett was a good guy, but she could also remember Holiday saying that the FRU weren't above sacrificing one person if they thought it was for a good cause.

When Burnett parked his Mustang in front of a small white-framed house, the same house Kylie had seen in her visions, a wave of shame hit for ever doubting Burnett.

"I tried to call them, but no one answered," Burnett said. "Of course, I'm going to go in with you, but I'll let you explain things however you see fit."

Two minutes later, after receiving no answer to their knock, a woman, looking all of ninety years old, stepped out of the house next door.

"Can I help ya?" She came toward them, moving amazingly fast for someone her age.

Kylie, thinking she felt a whisper of cold, immediately checked the woman's pattern. Burnett did the same. The woman was human.

"We're looking for Mr. Summers," Burnett said.

“Well, you’re too late. He and his sister-in-law flew out this morning. Went to Ireland.”

Ireland? Was it a coincidence that the Brightens were there now? Kylie looked at Burnett and saw the same question in his eyes.

“Why did they go there?” Burnett asked.

The neighbor grinned. “Said he was looking for something he lost a long time ago. Said it was more valuable than gold and he figured it might be there.”

“Do you know when he plans to return?” Kylie asked.

“I’m supposed to water the plants and feed the cat for a week.”

Burnett started moving back to the car. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Did you want to leave a message?” the neighbor asked.

“We’ll come back.” Burnett smiled and waved.

Kylie got into the car, sank into the seat, and wanted to kick and scream with frustration. More questions and zero answers. She was friggin’ tired of this.

Burnett started the car. “Let’s drive over to the next block and come back on foot.”

“Come back for what?” Kylie asked.

“I figured you’d like to go inside,” he said. “See if we can learn anything.”

“Isn’t that against the law?” Kylie asked.

His eyes widened. “Only if we get caught.”

She bit down on her lip so hard, she tasted blood. “Do you, like, have any ‘get out of jail free’ cards if we do get caught? I wouldn’t look good in prison garb.”

He patted his pocket. “I think I brought two with me.”

* * *

The house smelled like herbs. Rosemary. Maybe a little thyme. The furnishings were old. Lots of antiques, expensive-looking things, but nothing too showy. When Kylie stepped into the hall, she spotted the closet Jane had pulled her suitcase from. Right then, she felt the cold come down on her.

She stopped abruptly. Burnett bumped into her from behind.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“You mean other than the fact that we just broke into someone’s house?” She knew he didn’t want to know they had company.

“It’s fine,” he said.

“Right.” She moved into the bedroom. Jane Doe, aka Heidi Summers, sat on the bed, staring at the photos on the bedside table.

Kylie studied the woman’s face behind the frame. “It’s you.”

“What’s ... Never mind, I’ll wait out here.” Burnett must have realized she wasn’t talking to him and wanted nothing to do with the ghost.

Considering what had happened to him the last time, Kylie didn’t blame him.

“*Me and Malcolm.*” Heidi said the name with so much love. “*I remember.*”

Kylie picked up the picture. She recalled feeling something odd when she’d seen the man’s face in the vision. The same thing hit her again. Then chills shot down her spine. Not from the cold this time, but from the realization.

“Burnett?”

“What?” He barged into the bedroom as if ready to fight.

She held out the picture. “That’s him.”

He took the picture. “Who?”

“That’s the same man who came to the camp. The one who claimed to be my grandfather.”

Burnett scanned the photo. “Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

Heidi stood up. “*It was him, wasn’t it? I remember. And that was my sister, too.*”

Her sister? Kylie remembered the woman, remembered feeling a connection. “Why would they come to the camp and pretend to be my adoptive grandparents?” Kylie asked, and she meant the question for both Burnett and Heidi.

“I don’t know,” Burnett answered.

Heidi stood there as if trying to think. *“Wait. They were from Ireland. And the neighbor said—”*

“Who was from Ireland?” Kylie asked, and saw Burnett leave again.

“The people who adopted my boy. I gave him up for adoption. I went to a doctor who placed children with good parents. The doctor was human, but he knew about supernaturals. I remember there were complications, I had to have a C-section, and the doctor didn’t want to do it because he didn’t have the supplies to put me under; I made him do it anyway. I couldn’t let my baby die. I knew whatever pain I experienced would be better than knowing I’d robbed my son of his chance at life. Then I made sure he would go to a good family.” She sat up straighter. *“Malcolm’s looking for our son.”*

Tears filled Kylie’s eyes as the truth swirled around her heart, making her dizzy. Heidi Summers was Daniel’s birth mother. She was Kylie’s grandmother. And Malcolm Summers, her real grandfather, and her grandmother’s sister had posed as Daniel’s adoptive parents. Why? Why not just tell her? More questions.

“He’s going to find our boy. And they’ll be a family, the way we should have been.”

The pain of everything her grandmother had endured suddenly swamped her. Knowing she would have to tell Heidi that Daniel was dead cut like a knife.

But she had to tell her, didn’t she?

“He won’t find him,” Kylie said.

“How do you know?”

Kylie wiped the tears from her eyes. “He’s not in Ireland.”

“Why else would Malcolm have gone to Ireland?”

“He went to find the Brightens.”

Heidi sank back on the bed, as if trying to absorb what Kylie said. *“Yes, that was their name. They adopted my boy.”*

Kylie nodded. “But your son isn’t with them.”

“Where is he?” She jumped off the bed. *“Take me to him. I want to see him.”*

Kylie’s breath caught. “He died a long time ago.”

“No!” she yelled. *“He lived. I went to see him right before they forced Malcolm and me to go to that place for tests. It was a few months after I had given birth. My son was fine. So healthy.”*

“He didn’t die when he was a baby,” Kylie said. “He grew up, met a woman whom he fell in love with, and then he joined the army. He died when he was twenty-one while on a mission, trying to save a woman. He was a hero. You should be proud.”

Heidi dropped back on the bed. *“Are you sure?”*

“Yes.” Another wave of tears filled Kylie’s eyes. “I’ll bet he’s waiting to meet you on the other side, too.”

She looked up as if she could see heaven. *“Did you know him?”*

Kylie nodded. “Only his spirit.” She felt tears begin to roll down her cheeks. “He’s my father.”

Heidi’s eyes rounded. *“That would mean that you...”* She reached out and touched Kylie’s cheek. *“I should have known. You look like Malcolm. Blond hair instead of red, but those eyes...”* A tear slipped from her cheek. *“I think ... a part of me did know.”*

Kylie blinked. “I have so many questions to ask you, so many things I want to know. First, what are we?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re supernatural, right?”

She hesitated, as if she had to think. *“Yes. That was why they took us in to do those terrible tests.”*

“So, what are we?” Kylie held her breath, waiting, hoping for her answer.

Heidi frowned as if trying to think again. *“I ... can’t remember. I’m sorry. But...”* She pointed to the picture. *“Malcolm will remember. The man never forgets anything.”*

Heidi stood up. *“I have to go to my son now. I need to tell him that I love him. That’s why I stayed here. To tell him how sorry I am that I gave him away.”*

“Why did you do it?” Kylie asked, hoping something would jog her memory. “Why did you give him away?”

She tilted her head as if to think again. *“Because they wanted the little*

ones more than they wanted us."

"Who?" Kylie asked. "The FRU?"

"Yes," she said. *"It was the only way to keep him safe. If I'd run with him, they'd have found me. So I gave him away. I told Malcolm I lost the baby. I had to do it. He trusted them. He said they wouldn't hurt our baby and they would just study him for a little while. But I didn't believe them. So I gave the baby away, I lied to Malcolm, and then I came back because I loved him so much."*

"Why did they want to study the baby?" Kylie asked.

"I don't remember ... Wait, it was because we were different and they didn't like it."

"How were we different?"

She shook her head. Her brow wrinkled. *"Everything is still so messed up. I remember some things and not others. Malcolm will know."*

She leaned down and pressed a hand to Kylie's cheek. *"I'm going to see my boy. But you, Kylie Galen, are everything I would have wanted in a granddaughter. I must go now."*

Kylie wanted to scream no and beg Heidi to stay, that she had more questions. But it was too late. Heidi had already disappeared.

Fifteen minutes later, Kylie sat silently in the Mustang as Burnett pulled up to the camp. She'd told Burnett everything. About how Jane Doe was really her grandmother, and she'd given Kylie's father away for adoption because the FRU were taking children like them to study. He put the car in park and looked at her. "So you think he went to find the Brightens?"

Kylie nodded.

"I'll see if I can find Malcolm Summers in Ireland. But there's a good chance you might have to wait until he gets back."

Kylie nodded, not liking being this close and still so far away. She reached for the door handle and then looked back at Burnett. "You're not coming in?"

He frowned. "No."

She hesitated to ask but then went for it. "Are you ever coming back?"

He gripped the wheel. "I don't know."

“Why?”

He stared straight ahead. “It’s what she wants. She doesn’t trust me anymore.”

Kylie swallowed. “Neither did I.”

He arched a brow at her.

“When you were driving me to the house, I was afraid that you were taking me to be tested.”

He frowned. Hurt lingered in his eyes.

“But that’s because I saw what the FRU did to my grandmother. I lived bits and pieces of it through her, and when someone lives through something bad, it’s hard to trust. I don’t know exactly what happened to Holiday with that other vampire, she won’t even talk to me about it, but it must have been bad. It scared her and now she’s scared to love again. But if you just hang in there...”

“I have hung in there. I’m done.”

They sat there staring at each other for several long seconds. “I should go,” he said finally.

Kylie got out. As she watched Burnett pull away, the emotions playing in her heart were the same as the ones she’d felt the day she watched Tom Galen drive away with his suitcases.

Shadow Falls was her family. They’d already lost Ellie. They didn’t need to lose Burnett, too. But for the life of her, she didn’t know how she could change this.

* * *

Lucas met Kylie at the gate. More than anything, she needed a hug. She wanted to tell him what she’d learned, but what she got was his anger.

“Why didn’t you wait on me?” he demanded.

Maybe it was because her emotions were already on the edge, but she just started walking away.

“Damn it!” Lucas said, and moved in step with her. “Why in the hell would you go back to the cemetery, anyway? And why would they allow Derek to go with you?”

“Because I needed answers. And because Derek is my friend. Just like Fredericka is yours!”

He caught her by the arm. “Do you know how worried I’ve been?”

“Yes,” Kylie snapped. “You were as worried about me as I am about you when you run off and play wolf for a night.”

He looked stunned. “I can’t help what I am, Kylie.”

“Neither can I, Lucas.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “I don’t know what I am, but I know that what I do is deal with ghosts. And if you can’t accept that, then maybe you can’t accept me.”

“I didn’t say that,” he insisted. “I just want—”

“You want me to be werewolf,” she said. “You want me to be werewolf so your family and your pack will accept me. But right now, it’s not looking good that you’ll get what you want. So maybe you need to think about that, too.”

She took off.

He caught up with her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just I can’t stand the thought of something happening to you. And ... nothing is going to change between us, no matter what you are.” He lifted her chin and met her eyes. “Don’t you know how I feel?”

He pulled her against his chest, and Kylie let him. She buried herself in his warmth and tried to believe that he spoke the truth, but she couldn’t lie to herself. She knew Lucas wanted to believe it, but she wasn’t completely convinced that it would be the case if his grandmother really got involved. Kylie wasn’t even sure it was fair of her to ask him to make that choice.

* * *

Kylie awoke very early Tuesday morning. Her first thought was that today was Ellie’s funeral. She recalled the vision she’d had about it and wondered if it was fair that she had to live through it twice.

She ran a hand over her face. Her alarm hadn’t gone off. So why was she awake?

The cold suddenly fell on her like a blanket of ice. “Heidi?” She sat up so fast, her head spun. “Is that you? I have more questions to ask.”

No answer came. Kylie sat there, waiting. Through the haze of darkness, she saw a figure appear at the end of her bed. “Heidi?” she asked again.

Kylie turned on the lamp. The light filled the bedroom and illuminated the spirit, who stood with her back to the bed. It wasn’t Heidi. Kylie couldn’t even tell if this ghost was male or female. Somehow he/she looked ... deader than the others. Sure, they were all dead, but for some reason even the matted hair looked deader than the hair of other spirits.

“Hello,” Kylie whispered.

The spirit turned around, and Kylie stopped breathing. Worms, maggots, and creepy insects crawled in and out of the eye sockets, eating away at what little flesh still clung to the face.

Screaming, Kylie slammed back against the headboard.

“*Can you help me?*” A stream of worms cascaded from the spirit’s lips as she spoke, and they landed on Kylie’s blanket.

“I...” Kylie kicked the covers to stop the gooey-looking creatures from crawling toward her. “I might, but can you do something about your face? Now!”

Della bolted into the room. “You okay?”

Kylie glanced back at the foot of her bed. The ghost was gone. Relief washed over her. “I’m fine,” her voice squeaked out. Remembering the maggots—and not one hundred percent sure the ghost had taken them with her—Kylie leapt up, yanked the covers off the bed, and tossed them on the floor. She backed away from the pile of bedding.

“Yeah. You look just fine,” Della said sarcastically.

Kylie jumped from foot to foot and brushed off imaginary maggots that she felt crawling on her skin.

Della stood there in Mickey Mouse pajamas, staring at her as if she didn’t know whether to laugh or run.

Kylie stopped dancing and tried to breathe normally. “If I die, promise me I’ll be cremated.”

Della frowned. “Die?”

“Not that I’m planning to die anytime soon.” She gave her arm one more swipe. “But still.”

Della shook her head. "I don't know why you pretend you're okay."
Kylie wrapped her arms around herself. "Me either."

* * *

Kylie didn't go back to sleep. She wasn't sure if she'd ever sleep in that bed again. Instead, she dressed and waited for Della and Miranda to go to the sunrise service.

The service happened just as it had in the vision. Only the grief felt deeper, especially when Kylie saw Derek, tears in his eyes, holding Ellie's hat.

Holiday kept looking over her shoulder. Kylie knew she was looking for Burnett. It wasn't until Chris started talking that Burnett slid into the chair next to Holiday.

She saw the two of them look at each other. Kylie wasn't sure what kind of look it was—other than sad. Sad seemed to be the mood of the day. Well, for everyone except the blue jay who kept flittering by, spouting out song as if wanting to impress her.

Only she wasn't impressed.

When the ceremony ended, Lucas took her hand to walk her to the dining hall, where they planned to have a celebration of Ellie's life. Everyone was going to tell Ellie stories.

But Burnett stopped her. "I need to talk to you and Holiday a minute."

Lucas said he'd meet her in the dining hall. Then Holiday and Burnett and Kylie walked into the office.

"Is something wrong?" Kylie asked once Burnett closed the door.

He pulled an envelope from his suit jacket and handed it to Kylie.

"What is that?" Holiday asked. From her tone, she seemed to think it had to do with Kylie having tests.

"It's the location of her grandmother's body."

"You had her buried in her own grave?" Kylie asked.

"Not exactly." He paused. "Let's just say that if the FRU try to force you to undergo any tests that you aren't comfortable with, you can use this to ... insist that you prefer not to participate."

“So you think they’ll push for Kylie to be tested?” Holiday asked.

He frowned. “I’m under the impression they will, yes.”

“You told them about what happened?”

“I haven’t told them anything since you asked me not to.”

“So the FRU doesn’t know you removed the body?” Holiday asked.

“No.” His gaze met Kylie’s. “What they did to your grandmother was wrong. And while the agency has admitted to some wrongdoings with some of the testing that went down in the sixties, this is one skeleton they wouldn’t want brought forward.”

“Why did they do it?” Kylie asked.

He shrugged. “The information I could find was very vague. Supposedly, there were a small number of supernaturals who were genetically different from the rest.”

“So we still don’t know what I am?”

Burnett’s expression tightened. “I’m afraid not.”

“Except a genetic freak,” she muttered.

Holiday sat beside Kylie on the sofa and reached for her hand. “Don’t say —”

“I’m assuming it’s just the opposite,” Burnett broke in. “They wouldn’t be interested in something that wasn’t working correctly. Just the fact that you can appear human would be considered an advantage. That could be all there is to it, or it could be more.”

“What advantage is there to appearing human?” Kylie asked.

“A lot. Right now, supernaturals aren’t allowed to run for any political office.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Kylie said.

“It probably isn’t. But what they did to your grandmother wasn’t fair either. However, I do have some news.” His expression seemed to change, but to what Kylie wasn’t sure.

“I actually spoke with Malcolm Summers. Your real grandfather,” Burnett said. “And before you ask, we didn’t discuss any details. I was afraid if I started asking too many questions, I’d scare him off. I told him you wanted to meet him.”

“And?” Kylie gripped Holiday’s hand. *What if he said he didn’t want to meet me?*

Chapter Thirty-eight

Burnett continued, “He said he was getting on the next flight available back to Texas. It may be Thursday before he arrives.”

Kylie got tears in her eyes. “It’s really going to happen, isn’t it? I’m finally going to get my answers.” She still felt fear, but less than before. She needed her answers. Deserved them.

“It looks like it,” Burnett said.

Kylie jumped up, stopping herself just before she wrapped her arms around him. “May I hug you?”

He grinned and grimaced at the same time. “Make it quick.”

She did. When she backed up, Holiday watched with tears in her eyes.

Burnett nodded at Holiday. “And this is for you.” He pulled out another envelope and handed it to her.

“What is it?” Holiday asked, sounding unsure.

“It’s a donation to help cover future costs for Shadow Falls ... and my resignation.”

Holiday stiffened. “That’s what you want?” She sounded so hurt that Kylie’s heart gripped.

“It’s what you want,” he said.

“I didn’t ask you to resign.”

“The hell you didn’t!”

“Should I leave?” Kylie asked.

But no one was listening to her, and Burnett was blocking the door.

“Hello?” Kylie said, but they were too busy staring daggers at each other

to pay attention to her.

“I said, if you couldn’t understand my not letting Kylie go in for tests by the FRU, then you’d best leave.”

“Because you don’t need me anymore now that you have other investors lined up, right?” Burnett sounded hurt.

“What investors?” Holiday asked.

“Don’t lie to me, Holiday! I saw the file. You have four possible investors waiting in the wings.”

“You went through my desk?”

“I wasn’t snooping! I had to pay the bills while you were away, remember?”

“Well, next time you go rummaging in my desk, you should read the dates on the paperwork!” She went to her desk, opened her drawer, and tossed the file at him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I didn’t find these people just now. I found them before you signed on.”

He stared at her in growing confusion. “You said the only reason you chose me was because you didn’t have anyone else.”

“I didn’t say that. You assumed it.”

Burnett stared at Holiday. “Are you saying you chose me over these other people?” He moved closer, leaving a slight opening to the office door.

“I’m gonna just slip out now.” Kylie took a step forward.

They ignored her. And Kylie hesitated for just a second.

“So you care about me,” Burnett grumbled. “Why the hell can’t you admit it, Holiday?”

“Hiring you was a business decision, Burnett.”

“Bullshit!” Burnett said. “Each one of them has more money than I do.”

“A business decision, not a financial one.”

“Is that why you kissed me?” he demanded.

“I did no such thing. *You* kissed me.”

“And you enjoyed it!”

“I’m out of here.” Kylie eased around Burnett and walked out, but she carried with her a smile and a lot of hope. She was pretty sure Burnett wasn’t

quitting now. And in two days, she would have answers from her grandfather Malcolm. God, she hoped it was true.

“Hey.” Derek met her on the porch.

“Hey,” she said, still smiling.

He stopped, obviously hearing Burnett and Holiday bickering in the office. “Is everything okay?”

Kylie chuckled. “They’re arguing. So it’s pretty much back to normal now.”

“Better than when they weren’t talking to each other.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Kylie said.

Derek studied her. “Can we talk?” He motioned to the two rocking chairs.

“Sure.”

She sat in the first chair. He took the other. For a second, she got the image of them here before. Of him moving in and kissing her while she reclined in the chair.

She pushed that image away. They weren’t kissing now. They were just talking. Two friends, talking.

He started to speak, but then his eyes widened. “You got good news?”

She grinned, knowing he’d read her mood. “My real grandfather is coming to see me in a few days.”

“Damn!” His eyes filled with contentment for her. “You’ll finally get your answers. Kylie Galen will know what she is. No more mystery.”

“I hope so.” An odd thought hit: What would her life be like when her quest changed? A wash of cold moved in behind her. She glanced back and just as quickly turned back around.

“I heard about your grandmother,” Derek said. “And the rogue vampire. He really sacrificed himself for you?”

“Yeah.” Her emotions took a nosedive. “All I saw in him was evil, Derek. But it wasn’t true.”

“It wasn’t just you,” he said. “That’s what I saw, too. So I get how that makes you feel.”

She sighed. That was the thing about Derek. He always understood her feelings.

“Thanks.” Someone walked past, and for a crazy second she thought it was Ellie. But of course, it wasn’t.

“I miss her, too,” Derek said, reading her again.

Kylie looked up toward the sky. “Sometimes, I just wish heaven wasn’t so far away.”

Things grew quiet. When she looked back, Derek was staring at her. Staring at her the way the old Derek used to stare. The gold flecks in his eyes brightened against his green irises. She felt the world go fairy tale around her, and she noticed things. Things like how his shoulders looked like a soft place to rest her head.

“You were right, you know.”

“Right about what?” she asked.

“Me pushing you away. It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. Then the mistake with Ellie, I ... messed up, Kylie, and it hurt you. I’m sorry. So damn sorry.”

“That’s history,” she said, and another silence fell upon them.

“I talked to Holiday,” he whispered.

His soft-spoken words had Kylie realizing that Holiday and Burnett weren’t arguing anymore. Were they busy doing something else?

“Talked to Holiday about what?” she asked.

“About why I was feeling supercharged emotions around you.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. She didn’t need to know this now, did she?

Derek sensed her feelings. “I’m not expecting you to do anything. I just want you to know.”

“Know what?”

He hesitated. “Holiday said that sometimes, when a fae really cares about someone, their emotions can become blown out of proportion. Most times, the problem goes away after they accept their feelings. So that’s what I’m doing. Accepting it.”

She opened her mouth to speak but didn’t have a clue what to say.

He cupped his jeans-covered knees in his hands. They were jeans that fit him really well, too.

“I’m in love with you, Kylie.” He looked almost embarrassed by the

admission. He jumped up, took one step away, then swung around and faced her again. “I don’t expect you to say it back, and I don’t think this will change your mind about anything. But you deserved to know. And I needed to tell you because ... I’ve never felt this way before—for anyone.”

Kylie sat there, his words running around her head, feeling ... Okay, what did she feel, exactly? First was confusion. Then came fear. Derek loved her. Her heart tightened.

She glanced up into his eyes and saw he was reading her emotions. Every one of them.

“I should leave now,” he said, but he leaned down and pressed the quickest of kisses on her cheek. It reminded her of how Perry had kissed Miranda that night in the parking lot. Romantic. Sweet.

She just watched him leave. Then she fell back in the rocker and tried to decipher the emotions swelling in her chest.

“How can everything feel so right and yet wrong at the same time?” she muttered.

“*Life’s weird like that.*” The rocker beside her, the one Derek had just left, creaked slightly.

Kylie glanced over at the reclined spirit and frowned. “Things aren’t going to get any easier, are they.”

The spirit chose not to answer.

“Look,” Kylie said, and pulled her knees up in the chair. “I don’t have a lot of rules. But I told you, you’re gonna have to do something about that face.”

The ghost’s face magically started healing, becoming normal. Kylie gasped. It wasn’t seeing it happen that shocked her; it was the face. She recognized it.

“God, no.”

The ghost disappeared. Kylie shot up to go find Holiday when another voice spoke behind her.

“Kylie?”

Recognizing Daniel’s voice, she swung around. “Daddy,” she said, and hugged him.

His cold arms came around her. When she pulled back, she saw he had tears in his eyes.

“That’s the first time you called me that.”

“I guess it just took me a while,” she said.

He smiled and touched her face. *“I met my real mother for the first time. She sure was proud of her granddaughter.”*

“She seemed sweet. She loved you so much.”

“I know,” he said. Suddenly he faded a bit. *“I don’t have much time, Kylie. But I found the answer you wanted.”*

“What answer?” she asked, scared to believe.

“What we are. My mother finally remembered.”

“And?” Kylie held her breath.

“We’re chameleons.”

Kylie shook her head as she tried to grasp what he meant. “We’re lizards? What does that mean?”

He faded a bit more. *“I don’t know.”*

“We can change our patterns. Is that what it means?” she asked.

“I have no more answers,” he said. *“But soon. Soon we will discover this together.”*

“Together?” she asked.

He nodded, and the cold and what vapor was left of his visual spirit faded even more.

“I’m going to die?” she asked as the icy tremors prickled her skin.

He didn’t have the chance to answer, but she could swear she saw him shake his head. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking.

She stood there on the porch, trying to breathe, trying to come to terms with what she had learned. She was a chameleon. She might be about to die. And ... she remembered the face of the ghost—the one who showed up before her father. She might not be the only one who was going to die.

“Holiday?” Kylie called out as she stormed back into the office.

Life really wasn’t going to get any easier.

Whispers at Moonrise

c. c. hunter

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Chapter One

Kylie Galen stood on the porch outside the Shadow Falls office, panic stabbing at her sanity. A gust of late August wind, still chilled by her father's departing spirit, picked up her long strands of blond hair and scattered them across her face. She didn't brush them away. She didn't breathe. She just stood there, air trapped in her lungs, while she stared through the wisps of hair at the trees swaying in the breeze.

Why does my life have to be so damn hard? The question rolled around her head like a Ping-Pong ball gone wild. The answer spun back just as quick.

Because you're not all human. For the last few months, she'd struggled to identify the type of non-human blood that rushed through her veins. Now she knew.

According to her dear ol' dad, she was ... a chameleon. As in a lizard, just like the ones she'd seen sunning themselves in her backyard. Okay, so maybe not just like those, but close enough. And here she'd been worried about being a vampire or a werewolf because it would be a little hard to adjust to drinking blood or shape-shifting on full moons. But this ... this was ... unfathomable. Her father had to be wrong.

Her heart pounded against her chest as if seeking escape. She finally breathed. In, and then out. Her thoughts shot away from the lizard issue to the other bad stuff.

Yup. In the last five minutes she'd been slapped with not one, not two, not even three, but with four oh-crap eye-opening revelations.

Well, one thing—Derek's confession that he loved her—couldn't

completely be called bad. But it sure as hell couldn't be called good. Not now. Not when she considered them history. Not when she'd spent the last few weeks trying to convince herself that they were just friends.

Her mind juggled all four disclosures. She didn't know which to focus on first. Or maybe her mind did know. *I'm a freaking lizard!*

"For real?" she spoke aloud. The Texas wind snatched away her words. She hoped it would take them all the way to her father—wherever the dead who hadn't completely passed over went to wait. "Seriously, Dad?"

Of course, Dad didn't answer. After two months of dealing with one spirit or another, the whole ghost-whispering gift and its limitations still managed to piss her off. "Damn!"

She took another step toward the main office's door to unload on Holiday Brandon, the camp leader, then stopped. Burnett James, the other camp leader and a cold to the touch but hot to look at vampire, was with Holiday. Since Kylie couldn't hear them arguing anymore, she figured that meant they might be doing something else—like sucking face, swapping spit, doing the tongue tango. All phrases her bad-attitude vampire roommate Della would use. Which probably meant Kylie was in a bad mood. But didn't she deserve a little attitude after everything that had happened?

Clenching her fists, she stared at the office's front door. She'd inadvertently interrupted their first kiss and she didn't want to do the same with their second. Especially when Burnett had threatened to resign from Shadow Falls. Surely Holiday could change his mind. Couldn't she?

Besides, maybe Kylie needed to calm down. To think things through before she ran to Holiday in bad-attitude hysterics. Her thoughts shifted to her latest ghost issue. How could a ghost of someone who was alive appear to Kylie? A trick, right? Had to be a trick.

She glanced around to make sure the ghost had really gone. The cold had vanished.

Turning, she shot down the porch steps and headed around to the back of the office. She started running, wanting to experience the sense of freedom she got when she ran, when she ran fast, ran non-human fast.

The wind picked up the black dress she'd worn to Ellie's funeral and sent

the hem dancing against her thighs. Her feet moved in rhythm, barely missing the Reeboks she usually wore, but when she arrived at the edge of the woods, she came to an abrupt halt—so abrupt that the heels on her black dress shoes cut deep ruts into the earth.

She couldn't go into the woods. She didn't have a shadow—the mandatory person with her to help ward off the evil Mario and his rogue buddies if they decided to attack.

Attack again.

So far the old man's attempts at ending her life had proved futile, but two of those times had resulted in the death of someone else.

Guilt fluttered through her already tight chest. Fear followed it. Mario had proven how far he'd go to get to her, how evil he was when he'd taken his own grandson's life right in front of her. How could anyone be that wicked?

She stared at the trees and watched as their leaves danced in the breeze. It was a completely normal slice of scenery that should have put her at peace.

But she felt no peace. The woods, or rather something that hid within, dared her to enter. Taunted her to move into the thick line of trees. Confused by the strange feeling, she tried to push it away, but the feeling intensified.

She inhaled the green scent of the forest, and she knew.

Knew with clarity.

Knew with certainty.

Mario wouldn't give up. Sooner or later she would face him again. And it wouldn't be serene, tranquil, or peaceful. Only one of them would walk away.

You will not be alone. The words echoed deep within her as if to offer her peace. No peace came. The shadows between the trees danced on the ground. Calling her, beckoning her. To do what, she didn't know.

Trepidation took another lap around her chest. She dug the heels of her shoes deeper into the hard dirt. The heel of her right shoe cracked—an ominous little sound that seemed to punctuate the silence.

"Crap!" She stared down at her feet. The one word seemed yanked from the air, leaving nothing but a hum of eeriness.

And that's when she heard it.

Someone drew in a raspy breath. While the sound came only at a whisper, she knew that the owner of this breath stood behind her. Stood close. And since no chill of death surrounded her, she knew it wasn't from the spirit world.

The sound came again. Someone fed life-giving air into their lungs. Odd how she now feared the living more than she feared the dead.

Her heart thudded to a stop. Much like the grooves left in the earth by her three-inch heels, her growing dread left ruts in her courage.

She wasn't ready. If it was Mario, she wasn't ready. Whatever it was she needed to do, whatever plan or fate she was destined to follow, she needed more time.

Chapter Two

“Are you ... okay?”

The voice. Not Mario. Derek’s voice.

His familiar tone had her initial panic fading, but only for a second. *I’m in love with you, Kylie.* The words he’d spoken less than fifteen minutes ago flowed through her head, bringing with them another emotional storm that made her mind and heart spin. Derek loved her. But what did she feel?

She shifted slightly, and the heel from her right shoe fell off, making her off balance. That’s how her life felt—as if it had lost a heel, and her only choice was to limp along.

“What’s wrong?” His voice rang with concern.

I’m fine. The words perched on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them. Derek, half-fae, could read her. To lie to him about her emotional state was futile. So she turned around and faced him.

“What are you doing here without a shadow?” Derek asked. “You know you’re not supposed to be without a shadow in case that freakish rogue returns.”

Meeting Derek’s gaze, she spotted the panic brightening his eyes. She knew the panic she saw was her own as well. When she hurt emotionally, he hurt. When she experienced joy, he lived it, too. When she feared something, he feared it for her. Considering her emotional state these last few minutes, he must be in hell.

His chest expanded behind the fitted dusty green t-shirt. He held a hand over his hard stomach as he sucked air into his lungs. His dark brown hair appeared windblown, and his bangs clung to his forehead. A drip of sweat

rolled down his brow. For a second, all she could think about was falling into him, letting his calming touch chase away the apprehension inside her.

“Is it ... what I said?” he asked. “If it is, I’ll ... take it back. I didn’t tell you that to tear you apart inside.”

One couldn’t take back an admission of love, she thought. Not if he really meant it. But she didn’t say that. “It’s not what you said.” Then she realized that, too, was a lie. His confession played havoc with her emotions. “Well, it’s other stuff, too.”

“What stuff?” His words came out breathlessly. His eyes searched hers and she saw the gold flecks in his irises brighten. “I sense you’re terrified and confused, and—”

“But I’m okay.” She noticed again his winded state, as if he’d just run a mile to get to her. *Had he?* “Where were you?”

He took in another deep gulp of oxygen. “My cabin.”

Over a mile. “You felt my emotions that far away?”

“Yeah.” He frowned as if he hoped she didn’t blame him. She didn’t like that her emotions were an open book for him to read, but she didn’t blame him. He’d told her once that if he could stop reading her, he would. She believed him.

“I thought you said it was lessening,” she said. “Does it still make you crazy?”

His left shoulder shifted upward a couple of inches. “It’s still strong, but it’s not overwhelming like before. I can handle it, now that I...”

Now that he’d accepted he loved her. That’s what he’d told her. That’s why their link had grown so strong. Her chest grew heavy with indecision again. It was a good thing that one of them could handle it. Because she wasn’t sure she could deal with this. Not with him loving her. Not with any of the revelations she’d been given. At least right now.

“What’s wrong?” He stepped closer. So close she could smell his skin—earthy, honest, real.

The temptation to walk into his arms washed over her. She longed to feel the up and down motion of his chest as he breathed, to let what was in the past be what was in the future. Closing her hands into tight fists, she limped

past him with her one broken heel, went to a tree, and lowered herself down to the ground. The earth felt cooler than the heat in the air. The blades of grass tickled the back of her legs, but she ignored it.

He didn't wait for an invitation; he lowered himself beside her. Not close enough that they touched, but close enough that she thought about touching.

"So it's more than one thing?" he asked.

She nodded and the decision to confide in him seemed already made. "My dad appeared to me." She bit down on her lip. "He told me what I am."

Derek looked puzzled. "I thought you wanted to know."

"Yeah, but ... He said I'm a chameleon. As in, a lizard."

His brows pinched and then he chuckled.

She didn't appreciate his candor. Her panic came back threefold. She'd wanted to know what she was so the others would accept her, so she would fit in, but what if she ended up being something that honestly made her a freak?

"I hate lizards," she blurted out. "They're right up there with snakes—evil little bug-eyed creatures scurrying around in the dirt and eating creepy-crawly things." She stared out at the woods again, imagining a brigade of lizards staring back at her. "I saw a program once that showed a long-tongued lizard eating a spider in slow motion. It was gross!"

Derek shook his head, all shades of humor fading from his eyes. "I've never heard of supernatural lizards. Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything. That's what's so scary. Not knowing." She shivered. "Seriously, devouring blood is preferable to having one of those long tongues and dining on insects."

"Maybe he got it wrong. You said ghosts have a hard time communicating."

"At first, yes, but now my dad makes perfect sense."

Derek didn't look convinced. "But what do you think a chameleon supernatural is, or does? All I think they could do is change colors."

Kylie let his words run around her brain for a second. "Maybe that's it?"

"You can change colors?" Doubt showed on his face.

"No. But maybe I can change my pattern. Like how my grandfather and

aunt appeared human. And like how I appear human now.”

“Or ... maybe your father’s having a relapse and he’s just confused. Because I’ve never heard of any supernaturals who could change their brain patterns.”

“What about me?” she asked. “What about my grandfather and aunt?”

He shrugged. “Holiday said it was probably a wizard who cast a spell for your grandfather and aunt.”

“Did he cast it on me, too?” Kylie asked.

“No, but ... Okay, I don’t have the answer.” He frowned. “And I know that frustrates you. But didn’t you tell me that your real grandfather was coming to visit? I’m sure he’ll clear it up.”

“Yeah.” She bit down on her lower lip.

Derek studied her. “There’s something else wrong, too?”

She sighed. “When I asked my dad what it meant about being a chameleon, he said we’d figure it out together.”

“And that’s bad because...?”

Kylie stated the obvious. “He’s dead, and he’s limited to earthly visits, so does that mean that I’m going to die soon?”

“No, he didn’t mean that.” Derek’s tone deepened with conviction.

She started to argue that he couldn’t say that with certainty, but because she wanted to believe him, she bit back the words. Taking a breath, she stared down at the grass and tried to find peace in knowing that her grandfather was going to come in a couple of days. Tried to find peace in having spilled her troubles. And she did feel slightly better.

“Have you asked Holiday?” He leaned in and his shoulder bumped into hers, his warmth, his soothing touch chasing away some of her angst.

She shook her head. “Not yet. She’s still in the office with Burnett.” And Kylie still hadn’t mulled over the whole ghost issue. If someone’s ghost appeared to you when they weren’t dead, what did it mean? The possible answers started her heart shaking.

“I think this is kind of important,” he said.

“I know, but...”

“There’s something else, isn’t there?”

She glanced up. Was he reading her emotions or her mind? “Ghost problems,” she said.

“What kind of problems?”

Of all the campers, Derek was the only one who didn’t run away at the mention of ghosts. “This person isn’t dead.”

“So it’s not a ghost.” Derek looked confused.

Kylie bit down on her lip. “Yes ... I mean, at first the spirit had the whole zombie thing going on—hanging flesh, and worms—but then it changed. And when it did, the face turned into someone I know.”

“How could that be?” he asked.

She paused. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a trick.”

“Or not,” Derek said. “You don’t think someone’s going to die?”

Not anyone else, she wanted to scream. “I don’t know.” She yanked a few blades of grass from the ground.

“Who is it?” he asked. “Not someone here, is it?”

Kylie’s chest tightened. She didn’t want to say it—afraid that if she said it aloud, it would make it so. “I just need to think it through.”

Derek paled. “Oh, crap! Is it me?”

“No.” She tossed the blades of grass and watched them whirl in the wind on their descent.

When she looked back at him, she could feel him reading her emotions, deciphering their meaning. “You care a lot about this person.” His brows pinched. “Lucas?” She heard the pain in his voice from just saying the name.

“No,” she said. “Can we drop it? I don’t want to talk about it. Please.”

“So it is Lucas?” Derek asked.

“What’s Lucas?” A deep, irate voice suddenly spoke up.

Kylie looked up and saw Lucas step out of the trees. His eyes were an angry orange color. She flinched with guilt for a just a second, then fought it back. She hadn’t been doing anything wrong.

“Nothing,” Derek bit out when Kylie didn’t speak. He stood up and took one step toward the office. Pausing, he looked back at her, and then glanced at Lucas. “We were just talking. Don’t go all were on her.”

Lucas growled. Derek walked away, appearing unaffected by Lucas’s

anger. Kylie grabbed another handful of grass and yanked it from the ground.

"I don't like this." Lucas stared down at her.

"We were just talking," she said.

"About me."

"I was telling him about a spirit and that ... it looked like someone I care about, and he asked if it was you. You should feel good that he knows I care about you."

Lucas's scowl deepened. Was it because of Derek or because she'd mentioned ghosts? Lucas's inability to accept her working with the spirits hurt.

"He has feelings for you," Lucas countered.

I know. "We were just talking."

"It makes me crazy." His eyes glowed a deep, burnt orange color.

"What makes you crazy? Me talking to Derek, or me talking about ghosts?"

"Both." His voice rang with such honesty that she found it hard to condemn him for it. "But mostly it's the thought of you spending time with that fairy."

She flinched at his insult toward Derek. Then, unsure what to say, she stood up. Forgetting about her missing heel, she almost tripped. He caught her by the elbow.

She met his gaze, still marked by his were anger. But his touch was tender and caring, with no hint of the fury she saw in his eyes. She remembered that some of his reactions were instinctual, which meant he shouldn't be held accountable. Another part of her knew that instinctual or not, it didn't make it right.

She sighed. "We've already talked about this."

"Talked about what?" he asked.

"Both things. I help spirits, Lucas. That's probably never going to change."

"Yeah, but they scare the shit out of you. They scare the shit out of me."

Kylie tensed. "You think your shifting into a wolf doesn't scare me?"

"That's not the same. They are ghosts, Kylie. That's not ... not natural."

“But turning into a wolf is completely natural,” she said with sarcasm.

He exhaled. “Okay, coming from someone who’s lived their life as a human, I can see your point. And while I’m sure I’m never going to love the ghost whispering part of you, I’m working on accepting it.” His tone told her how hard that was for him. “But accepting that you’re spending time with Derek isn’t easy when I know if he were given the chance, he’d steal you away in a snap.”

She swallowed raw emotion and touched his chest. His warmth soaked through his shirt and into her hand. “I know how it feels. Because I feel the same way when I see you with Fredericka. And that’s the reason I know I can’t tell you to push Fredericka away.”

He placed his palm over her hand and a soft pleading filled his gaze. “That’s different. Fredericka is part of my pack.”

She shook her head. “And Derek’s a friend.”

“Exactly. That’s what makes it different. A friend isn’t the same as a pack member.”

“It is for me.” She shook her head. “Think about it. You’re loyal to pack members. You would defend them. You care about them. That’s the same way I feel about my friends.”

“That’s because you’re not a were. Or at least not yet.” He snaked his free hand around her waist and tugged her a little closer. “Hopefully, soon, it will all make sense to you.”

I’ll never be a were. She stared up at him. The evidence of his anger had faded from his eyes and she saw affection in their deep blue depths. He cared about her. She knew that with certainty. And maybe for that reason, she wavered about telling what she knew. Instantly, it hit her that she hadn’t hesitated to tell Derek. Why could she confide in Derek and not Lucas? Bothered by the thought, she forced herself to say, “I’m not a were.”

“You don’t know that,” he said. “The fact that you developed more before a full moon and had mood swings has to mean something.”

She shook her head. “I’m not. I know what I am.”

His eyes tightened in confusion. “You ... How do you know?”

“My father appeared to me again. He said I was a chameleon.”

Puzzlement filled his gaze.

She frowned. "I don't know exactly what it means."

"That doesn't make sense." He released her. "There's no such thing. Just because some ghost said—"

"It wasn't just 'some ghost.' It was my father."

"And your father is a ghost." Whether he meant it to or not, it sounded like an insult.

His words and his attitude stung. She pulled her hand from his warm chest. All the emotional havoc from earlier whirled inside her.

"I know he's a ghost," Kylie said. "And I wish he wasn't dead. I wish I knew what he meant. I wish that you could accept me for what I am. But I can't change the fact that my dad died before I was born. I can't help that I don't understand what he meant. For that matter, I don't understand a tenth of what's happening in my life right now. And I have a feeling you will never be able to accept me for what I am."

"That's not true." His expression hardened with denial.

"Yes, it is." She turned and limped away.

She heard him ask her not to go. She ignored his plea. Then, stopping, she reached down to remove her shoes. As she straightened, her gaze caught on the row of trees—on how their leaves stirred even when no wind blew. She felt again the unexplainable sense that she was being lured to enter. As tempting as it was, she walked away. Walked away from the forest. Walked away from Lucas.

And both somehow felt wrong.

Chapter Three

Kylie's bare feet moved quickly against the earth as she ran. She heard the blend of voices coming from the dining hall where everyone had congregated after Ellie's funeral. Ellie, who'd died at the hands of Mario.

Another wave of guilt washed over Kylie. She ran faster. She didn't want to join the crowd. She wanted ... *needed* ... to be alone.

She'd almost made it to her cabin when she felt a whoosh of air fly past her. A vampire whoosh. Maybe a vampire on the hunt.

Kylie pushed herself to run faster and mentally prepared herself to fight. Not that she stood a chance of winning a battle with a vampire. Whatever super strength she had only served her when she was helping others.

A *protector*, the other supernaturals called her. But how could they call her that when she hadn't protected Ellie? Even Kylie's healing abilities had failed. How unjust was it that she could save a bird, pull it back from death, and yet couldn't save a friend? She would have paid the price. It wouldn't have mattered how much of her soul she'd had to give to save Ellie.

She felt it again—that flash of air as something swooped past. This time she saw a curtain of straight black hair billow in the wind. Definitely a vampire.

But not one on the hunt.

Della appeared beside her, running at the same breakneck pace. But being vampire, she moved with ease, as if she were taking a leisurely jog.

"What's wrong?" Della's dark hair, hinting at her Asian bloodline, flew behind her like a flag.

"You are what's wrong." Kylie came to a jerky stop. "I hate it when you

fly by me like that and I can't tell it's you. I feel threatened. I feel like ... prey."

"Well, damn," Della said in her everyday bad-attitude voice. "Excuse me for being concerned. I heard you running like hell and thought someone was chasing you."

"Sorry. No one is chasing me." Kylie's gaze shot back to the woods. *They're just taunting me to step into the woods and face them.* But who was it, and for what reason? Earlier she'd assumed it was Mario, but could she have been wrong about that?

"What happened?" Della asked.

Kylie pulled her eyes away from the woods. "Nothing."

Della tilted her head to the side, as if listening to Kylie's heart, listening for signs of deception. Della rolled her eyes. "Liar. Liar. Pants on fire."

Kylie groaned. "Fine. I'm lying. And if I were wearing pants, they'd combust and burn my ass."

"Wow. You are in such a lovely mood. What took a bite out of your attitude?"

"You did." Kylie flinched at the sound of her sharp tone.

Della grinned as if enjoying Kylie's anger. Kylie started walking.

"Who's supposed to be shadowing you?" Della asked.

"I don't know." Kylie's gaze shot to the woods and the sensation hit stronger than ever. She took off running down the path, pushing herself harder. She didn't stop until she got to her cabin. Her stomach cramped from running. She dropped down on the edge of their porch.

"So what happened?" Della, not even breathing hard, plopped down beside Kylie.

Something in the woods is calling my name. That sounded crazy. Kylie couldn't say it. She looked at Della. Her roommate's slightly slanted black eyes appeared genuinely concerned, and that made Kylie feel like a bitch.

"Sorry. I'm in a bad mood."

"Which is so rare," Della said. "I kind of like it."

Kylie rolled her eyes and pushed back her reservations. "Have you ever heard of chameleons?"

“Yeah,” Della said.

“You have? What do you know about them?”

“They’re lizards that change colors. According to Chan, they don’t taste too bad. In Hawaii, the local vampires sell their blood. It’s supposed to be as good as O negative.”

“No.” Kylie pulled her knees up and hugged them.

“No, what?”

“I mean ... chameleons as a type of supernatural?”

“A lizard supernatural?” Della laughed.

Kylie jumped up.

“Hey.” Della popped up beside her. “What’s wrong with you?”

Kylie yanked open the cabin door and looked back at Della. “Everything is wrong.”

“Is this about Ellie?” Della’s voice hinted at an emotion that the vamp kept hidden.

Kylie’s heart gripped tighter. “Yes, it’s about Ellie. It’s about me being a lizard. It’s everything.”

“You’re a lizard?” The seriousness faded from Della’s eyes, and she grinned.

Kylie stormed through the door, then swung around. “Yeah, you’re a vampire, and I’m a lizard, so just friggin’ get used to it.”

Della’s smirk faded. “Have you been smoking something? Seriously, I think you’re a werewolf. This new snarky attitude is a dead giveaway.”

“And vampires aren’t snarky?” Kylie rolled her eyes.

“No, we’re pissy. Snarky and pissy are two totally different things.” Della moved inside. The vamp’s attempt at humor was to help, not hurt.

But Kylie wasn’t in the mood. “I’m not a werewolf.” Tears stung her eyes. “If I were, then Lucas would be happy and all would be right in the world.”

Della’s mouth dropped open. “You’re serious. Who told you that you were a lizard?”

“My dad.”

Della’s eyes widened. “You’re shitting me.”

“No shitting.”

Della fell into the sofa and her gaze darted around the room. “Is he here now?”

“No.”

“Good.” She slapped her hands on her thighs. “Maybe he was smoking something.”

Kylie rolled her wet eyes. “Would you please stop making wisecracks?”

Della snatched up a sofa pillow and tossed it at Kylie. “See, there’s the werewolf attitude coming out again.”

Kylie swung around to go into her room, but before she got to the door, Della shot in front of it. It was freaky how fast a vampire could move.

“Fine,” Della said. “I’ll try to be serious, but ... it’s crazy. I know you don’t want to believe this, but someone’s pulling a practical joke on you. There’s no such thing as a lizard supernatural. Just ask her.”

“Ask who?” The cabin’s main door slammed as Miranda stepped inside. Her blond hair hung loose, streaked with pink, green, and black. Kylie didn’t know if Miranda used her Wiccan powers to color her hair or Nice ’n Easy.

Miranda frowned. “Why did you leave me?” she asked Della.

Della made a face. “Sorry. Kylie’s having a crisis. I can only be Superfriend to one of you at a time.”

Miranda looked at Kylie. “What kind of a crisis?”

Ordinarily, Kylie shared everything with Miranda and Della, but at this moment she wished she’d kept her mouth shut. All this time she’d longed to know what she was, thinking it would solve everything, and yet here she was, supposedly knowing, and feeling more confused than ever.

“A tasty reptile crisis.” Della giggled, put her hand over her mouth, and then looked apologetically at Kylie. “Oops.”

“What?” Miranda asked.

Della propped one hand on her hip. “Tell Kylie there’s no such thing as lizard supernaturals.”

“Perry can change into a lizard.” Miranda’s eyes brightened with pride. “Yesterday he shifted—”

“Please, not another Perry story.” Della pressed both her palms against

her stomach. “I swear, I’ll hurl.”

“You are such a bitch,” Miranda snapped.

“I’m not a bitch. I’m just sick of hearing Perry stories. ‘Perry’s pinky toes are so cute. Perry’s got the most charming freckle behind his right ear.’”

“You’re just jealous! Because you don’t have a boyfriend and Kylie and I do!”

Did. Kylie *had* a boyfriend. She wasn’t sure what was going to happen with her and Lucas now. His pleas for her not to run off echoed in her heart.

“Jealous?” Della roared back at Miranda. “Please, I’ll chew out my own heart before I become lovesick like you.”

Miranda held up her hand and wiggled her pinky—a sure sign a spell was about to spill from her lips. Della’s eyes brightened and her canines came out to play.

“Stop!” Kylie looked from one to the other. She couldn’t take it anymore. “Oh, hell, don’t stop. You two have been threatening to kill each other since I got here, and it’s driving me mad. So just kill each other and put me out of my misery.” Inside, Kylie flinched again. She didn’t mean it. Not even now, when furious, but maybe a little reverse psychology would fix these two.

Miranda and Della stared at Kylie as if she’d lost her mind, and they could be right, but it was partially their fault. Their arguing had caused her to go nuts.

“Come on. What are you waiting for? Kill each other. And make it entertaining.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared daggers at the two of them. Her right foot started tapping, just like her mom’s tapped when she was about to blow a gasket.

Della’s eyes returned to their black color and her canines disappeared under her top lip. Miranda dropped her threatening pinky. So reverse psychology did work. Ha. Who knew?

“What’s wrong with her?” Miranda asked Della as if Kylie were too mentally unstable to ask.

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” Kylie answered, frustrated beyond her limits. “It’s what’s wrong with you two.”

Della glanced at Miranda and shrugged. “She thinks she’s a lizard.”

“A chameleon,” Kylie corrected.

Miranda rolled her eyes. “Poor thing. She’s acting like a werewolf.”

Della shot Kylie a smirk. “I told her that. But did she listen to me? Hell, no.”

“I’m not a werewolf.” It didn’t matter what Kylie now wished she was.

“If you are, it’s okay,” Miranda said. “We’ve vowed to love you anyway.”

Kylie dropped down onto a living room chair while her two best friends stared at her with a mix of pity and leeriness. They thought she was crazy. Heck, maybe she *was* crazy. She thought the woods were calling her name and she believed she was a reptile. She leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

“I’m a chameleon,” she said, hoping that saying it would bring some kind of instinctual understanding. She held her breath, waiting for an epiphany—an internal knowledge that would make her right with the world.

Nothing came. And nothing felt right. Not her being a lizard, not seeing a ghost with the face of someone who was alive, not with her dad suggesting she would soon be making a trip into the afterworld, and especially not Derek’s confession of love.

Nope. Nothing felt right. She moaned.

“Get her a Diet Coke, Della,” Miranda said. “Maybe the sugar will give her some brainpower.”

“It’s fake sugar,” Della answered.

“I know. But haven’t you ever heard the saying fake it until you make it?”

“Ugh, forget the soda. I’m going to bed.” Kylie popped up from the chair and went into her room, slamming the door so hard it rattled on its hinges.

From behind the door she heard them say in unison, “Definitely werewolf.”

* * *

She hadn’t gotten to her bed when she heard a loud commotion from the living room. Had Miranda and Della finally decided to really duke it out? Feeling guilty for encouraging them, she went to stop them but stilled when she heard voices.

“Where’s Kylie?” Burnett’s deep tenor spilled through the walls at the same time that her phone started ringing.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and jerked open the door. Burnett stood there with his hand raised to knock. Both anger and a thread of guilt filled his expression.

“Something wrong?” Kylie’s ringing phone hummed in her hand.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Had something else happened? At this point, nothing could surprise her.

Chapter Four

“You left without telling me.” Burnett’s mouth thinned with his reprimand.

“I did not.” Kylie saw Della and Miranda behind Burnett, wearing concerned expressions. No doubt, it wasn’t wise to disagree with Burnett.

“You were in the office and then you were gone,” Burnett barked. “I was supposed to be shadowing you.”

“That was almost an hour ago,” she said. Had he just now realized she was gone?

The ringing of her phone drew her attention and she pulled it up to see who was calling. Holiday’s name appeared on the tiny screen. Then the camp leader, phone pressed to her ear, stormed into the cabin.

“You found her.” Relief filled Holiday’s eyes and she folded her arms over her stomach and breathed as if she’d run all the way here.

“You shouldn’t have left without telling me,” Burnett said to Kylie.

Holiday shut her phone off and silenced Kylie’s cell. Kylie stared at the camp leader, recalling the ghost issues that she needed to talk to her about. *How could someone alive appear as a ghost?*

“I was in charge of you.” Burnett continued his tirade.

Kylie glanced at Burnett as she set her phone down on the end table. She should probably keep her mouth shut, but her bad mood prevailed. “You can’t blame me. I told you I was leaving. Not once, but twice. You two were too busy being pissy with each other to hear me.” When her own hostile words rang in her ears, she worried maybe Della and Miranda were on to something about her being werewolf.

Holiday stepped closer. “We weren’t arguing.”

Really, Kylie thought, noticing that Holiday's shirt was on inside out. Not arguing, huh? So what had they been doing that led to Holiday wearing her shirt inside out? All Kylie's frustration lessened and she almost smiled. Almost.

"Yes, we were arguing," Burnett confessed, as if suddenly remembering.

"We were just discussing things." Holiday sent Burnett a look that said, *Don't disagree with me on this.*

"We were discussing it heatedly." Burnett received another hard stare from the redheaded camp leader.

"I'll say," Della mouthed off. "I heard you all the way in the dining room. And I'm not so sure it was my vampire hearing that caught it."

"Yes, it was," Miranda piped up. "Because I didn't get to hear a thing. Then again, I was probably talking with Perry." She got a faraway look in her eyes. "I love talking with Perry."

Della moaned.

"That said," Miranda continued, "nothing is as fun as a good argument. So if someone would like to fill me in, I'd appreciate it." She rubbed her hands together. "Just the good parts."

Burnett exhaled in frustration. "We were just—"

"What we were doing isn't important," Holiday blurted out, blushing.

"So you weren't arguing?" Miranda looked intrigued.

Kylie almost smiled again. Holiday was right. What they were doing wasn't important. The thing that mattered was that they'd made up. The thing that really mattered was if Holiday had managed to talk Burnett out of resigning his position. Shadow Falls needed him.

Holiday needed him.

Everything inside Kylie told her that the two of them were meant to be together. Unfortunately, Holiday resisted the idea of her and Burnett becoming an item. And while she hadn't completely admitted it, Kylie suspected it had everything to do with Holiday's vampire fiancé who'd broken her heart when he left her at the altar. Kylie also sensed there was more to that story than Holiday let on. Not that being left at the altar wasn't bad, but something told Kylie it had been something even more emotionally

damaging. Why else would Holiday reject Burnett's love?

God knew it wasn't easy for a vampire to take rejection. Kylie had told him he needed to be patient. Holiday couldn't continue to hold out. Not when Burnett was practically perfect. Tall, dark, moody enough to be fascinating, and with a good heart. Sure, being vampire, he didn't go around passing out good cheer like Holiday did. But he cared.

Did Holiday finally come to her senses?

"Are you staying on at Shadow Falls?" Kylie asked Burnett, breath held in hope.

Burnett glanced at Holiday and damn if he didn't almost smile. "I'm staying."

"Yes!" Miranda and Della high-fived each other and did a little victory dance.

A sense of rightness filled Kylie's chest. Maybe today wouldn't go down in history as the worst day in her life, after all.

Burnett, being his slightly brooding self, didn't seem to share her roommates' joy, but Kylie spotted relief in his eyes. "Next time you are under my charge, don't walk away without my permission."

Kylie nodded, too happy to care if she wasn't at fault.

"Even if you have to knock me over my head twice to get my attention," he continued, taking most of the blame on himself. Kylie's smile widened. As stern as Burnett could be, he wasn't unfair.

She watched Burnett start for the door, and Holiday turned to go with him. Again, Kylie couldn't help but wonder how far things had gone in their time together. Had their clothes been half off when they suddenly realized she was gone?

Holiday looked back at Kylie. Their gazes met and held.

Just from the quick glance, Kylie knew that Holiday, an empath like Derek, had read the swarm of emotions playing hide and seek in her mind. And not the happy ones.

Kylie seldom got anything past the fae. Not that Kylie attempted to hide a whole heck of a lot from Holiday. The bond they shared had moved past friendship. Holiday was family—not the kind you were born with, but the

kind you were lucky enough to choose.

“I need to speak to Kylie.” The warmth in Holiday’s tone had Kylie’s chest tightening and she wondered what she’d ever do without the woman in her life. She hoped she never had to find out. The thought sent a shiver down Kylie’s spine.

Burnett acknowledged all of them with a farewell glance, and then left.

As soon as he walked out, Della turned to Holiday. “Maybe *you* can talk some sense into Kylie. She thinks she’s a lizard.”

* * *

Five minutes later, Holiday and Kylie sat on the edge of the porch, their bare legs dangling over the edge. The camp leader had changed from the dark dress she’d worn at Ellie’s funeral to a pair of cutoff jeans and the yellow shirt that she wore inside out.

Kylie’s black dress flared across her thighs, landing right above her knees. If she stretched out her feet, her toes would brush against the grass. She usually liked how the light tickle felt, but for some reason it now reminded her of sitting with Derek earlier out beside the tree.

Pushing that thought aside, Kylie stared down at their feet. Holiday had on a pair of sandals, and her toenails were painted a soft pink.

“What happened?” Holiday asked, concern deepening her tone.

“I don’t know where to start,” Kylie said.

“How about with the whole lizard thing? What’s Della talking about?”

Kylie bit down on her lip. “Before I get into all that, what happened between you and Burnett?”

Holiday glanced away. “He’s staying on.”

“I know that.” Smiling, Kylie bumped her shoulder with Holiday’s. “Did anything good happen?”

Color brightened Holiday’s cheeks. “I don’t feel comfortable talking about this.”

“Wow. It must have been good, then,” Kylie teased.

Holiday frowned, which meant whatever happened hadn’t changed much. Some clothes might have come off, but Holiday’s reservations hadn’t.

“We didn’t...” Holiday dropped her face into her hands. “I’m confused, okay? I need Burnett at Shadow Falls. He’s strong in all the areas that I’m lacking. And where he’s lacking, I’m strong. But...”

“But you’re scared to admit you care about him,” Kylie said, even when her gut told her she needed to back off.

“You don’t understand,” Holiday said.

“That’s because you haven’t told me everything,” Kylie accused, and she got that sensation again that there were things, emotional things, Holiday kept bottled up inside her.

Holiday sighed. “This is something I need to work out myself. I know we’re close and I love that you care.” She put her hand on top of Kylie’s. “I feel that you’re only trying to help, but I need to go solo on this one. And I’m asking you to accept that.”

Kylie nodded, knowing she had to respect Holiday’s wishes, but not liking it.

“Now, let’s get back to you.” She bumped Kylie’s shoulder with hers. “Talk to me.”

Taking a deep breath, she told Holiday about her dad’s visit—both the chameleon stuff and the part about them figuring it out together ... *soon*.

Concern and confusion filled the camp leader’s eyes. “Okay, about your dad saying you will work it out together—I don’t think it means what you think. Time doesn’t mean the same thing in the spirit world.”

Kylie considered what Holiday said. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just ... there was something about the way he kept saying ‘soon.’ And he was happy about it.”

Holiday shook her head. “Your dad loves you. And I think if he knew you were going to die too soon, he’d be panicking. And the last thing he would do is share that news with you.”

It hurt to say it aloud, but she did it anyway. “If I’m going to die, I should know.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I mean, there are a few people who are able to know of their death and use the time wisely. But when you start planning for the end, most people instinctually stop living for tomorrow. Living for the

day is beautiful—too many of us don't do it enough—but to live fully, we must live for today and tomorrow. Think about it, if you knew you were going to die in six months, would you start a project that you knew you couldn't finish? Would you go to school to learn to be a doctor? Would you have a child, knowing you would leave it alone too soon? People miss out on so much if they stop living for tomorrow."

Holiday's little speech sent Kylie right into the lap of another problem. Her ghost problem. She tried to think about the best way to approach it.

"Now, about the whole lizard thing," Holiday said, taking Kylie's thoughts in another direction. "I've never heard of a chameleon supernatural. And while I'm inclined to tell you that he got it wrong, I wonder..."

"Wonder what?" Kylie asked.

"I don't know for sure, I'm just—"

"I know," Kylie said. "You're just speculating, guessing, but since I'm feeling pretty clueless, I'd like to hear it."

"I was going to tell you." Holiday's expression told Kylie she needed to be patient.

She'd grown tired of being patient. And yes, she knew that on Thursday, her grandfather Malcolm Summers was coming, and hopefully he'd make sense of all this for her. But that meant a couple more days of not knowing.

"So just tell me. Please." Kylie softened her tone because being impatient might be understandable, but blaming others for it wasn't.

Holiday inhaled. "Maybe he referred to you as a chameleon because your pattern hasn't matured to what it really should be. It's still changing, like a chameleon changes colors."

"But he said I was a chameleon like he was telling me that I was a vampire or witch. Is it possible that there's another type of supernatural race that no one knows about?"

Holiday paused. "My gut says no. The history of supernaturals is documented in books as old as the Bible. But ... I admit I'm baffled. It seems that whatever is causing this is probably hereditary because of your real grandfather and great-aunt's ability to change their patterns to human. But even that is completely off the chart weird. I'm still thinking it was Wiccan

related but...”

“Or...” Kylie considered Holiday’s words. “Maybe that’s what it means, the whole chameleon thing. I was talking about this with Derek earlier. Maybe chameleons can change our species. Like a chameleon can change its colors.”

Holiday paused as if thinking. “But DNA doesn’t work that way. You can’t have more than one string of DNA. It isn’t possible, because supernaturals only have the DNA of the dominant parent.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. “Then maybe it’s not the species that really changes, but just the pattern. And in a way it makes sense because a chameleon doesn’t turn into a rock, it just changes its colors so it looks like a rock.”

Holiday’s brow wrinkled. “But...” She shook her head.

“But what?” Kylie wanted to know everything Holiday considered.

“It just doesn’t feel right. If this ability to hide your pattern actually exists, why haven’t other supernaturals heard about it?”

“Maybe we have heard about it,” Kylie said. “Maybe this is exactly why they tested my grandmother. You mentioned once that you’d heard about those tests. Did anyone say what the tests were for?”

“Not specifically,” Holiday said. “Something about understanding genetics in some supernaturals. But that they went wrong.”

“That’s an understatement,” Kylie muttered. “They killed people.” *Killed my grandmother.* Kylie couldn’t understand how someone could do that—take a life. For that matter, how could Mario kill his own grandson? Or kill Ellie, who never did a thing to harm him? Or anyone else for that matter?

“I know.” Holiday sighed as if sensing Kylie’s grief. “Which is why I refuse to let them test you. I don’t think the FRU is evil, Kylie. I just don’t trust them to not take too many risks with you to find answers. Whatever is going on, we’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

Kylie sure as hell hoped so. Because right now, it didn’t make a lick of sense to her. She gazed back at Holiday. “Is that why you can’t trust Burnett? Because he’s part of the FRU?”

Holiday looked perplexed. “I trust Burnett.”

Kylie arched a brow in disbelief.

"I trust him with Shadow Falls," Holiday confessed.

Just not with your heart. And how sad was that? Kylie thought.

"I wouldn't have him working here if I thought there was a chance he would betray you or any of my students."

"I know," Kylie said. "And I trust him, too. I mean, the whole FRU thing with my grandmother scares me, but I trust Burnett."

Holiday met Kylie's eyes again. "I know that waiting for answers is hard on you. But hold on to the hope that your grandfather will come on Thursday and—"

"What do you mean 'hold on to the hope'? He told Burnett he was coming, right?" Seeing disappointment flash in Holiday's eyes, Kylie's heart sank. "What happened?"

"Burnett tried to contact him again and ... your grandfather's phone has been disconnected. But it could mean nothing."

"Or it could mean that he's decided not to communicate with me." A knot rose in Kylie's throat.

"Don't get worked up over it until we know."

Kylie pulled her knees up and dropped her head on them, trying not to cry. Was her hope of discovering the truth now slipping away?

Holiday rested her hand on Kylie's shoulder. A sweet calm came with the touch, and while it soothed Kylie's panic, it didn't change anything. They sat there for several minutes, not talking, Kylie trying not to cry and Holiday doing what she did best—offering emotional comfort.

The soft breeze whispered past and somehow Kylie's mind shifted from one problem to another. "Derek told me he talked to you about ... things."

Holiday brushed a strand of hair off Kylie's cheek. "I'm sorry. I imagine that came completely out of left field."

Kylie nodded. "What am I supposed to do with that information?"

"I don't think you have to do anything."

Kylie exhaled. "It makes me feel crazy and sad, and I start questioning things. And Lucas is jealous of him and I don't blame him for being jealous because I feel the same way about Fredericka. But..."

“But you care about Derek,” Holiday finished for her.

“I do. I’m just not sure if what I feel for him is what I feel for Lucas. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense,” Holiday assured her. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Will I?” Angst rose inside Kylie again. “Everything in my life is a huge effing question mark. I’m tired of not being sure of *anything*. And then the ghost...” Kylie let the words fade.

“You have a problem with a ghost?” Holiday asked. “Is it your grandmother? Have you asked her about what your dad said?”

“No, it’s not her.” How much should Kylie tell Holiday? “At first, the spirit showed up looking like a zombie, hardly even had a face. I insisted she fix that. But ... then the face she got was ... someone who wasn’t dead.”

Holiday bit down on her lip. “Are you sure she isn’t dead?”

“I’m sure.” *Extra sure.*

“Well,” Holiday continued, “it could be one of two things. The most likely answer is that you have a ghost with an identity crisis.”

“Seriously? Ghosts can have an identity crisis?” Kylie asked.

“Afraid so. They may not even know what they looked like. Or they may not have liked how they looked, so they plaster the face of someone else on their ghost bodies. Most of the time, they use the face of the ghost whisperer. And seeing your face on a ghost...” Holiday shivered. “Not good.”

“I can imagine,” Kylie said, but she didn’t want to imagine it. She already had too much on her plate. “What’s the other thing it could be?”

“It’s rare,” Holiday said. “But did you see *A Christmas Carol*?”

“Yes.” Kylie recalled the plot. “The Scrooge thing, right?”

“And the ghost from the future,” Holiday said.

Kylie’s breath hitched. “This person could be about to die?” Sure, the thought had crossed her mind, as it had Derek’s, but not until Holiday said it did it feel real. No, Kylie refused to accept it. She’d seen too much death already.

“Is this one of the things I can change?” Kylie asked, panic building in her chest.

“Probably not.” Holiday frowned. “Is it someone you know well?”

Kylie didn't answer. She couldn't. She just kept reminding herself that Holiday had said it was rare.

"Is it someone from Shadow Falls?" Miranda's voice piped up from behind them.

Kylie turned to see Miranda standing in the doorway behind them.

"Sorry," Miranda said. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop ... but is it someone from here?"

"No," Kylie lied.

"Oh, good." Miranda did a dramatic swipe of her brow. "Your phone's chirping." She held out the phone. "It's your mom. This is like the third time she's called in the last five minutes."

"You should call her," Holiday said. Then the camp leader's phone rang. She glanced down at the number. "It's Burnett."

Holiday and Kylie stood at the same time. Kylie reached for her phone from Miranda as Holiday answered hers.

"Hello." Holiday paused. The worry wrinkle between her eyes appeared. "About what?" Her tone had Kylie hesitating to make her own call. "Let's talk before you go. I'm on my way." Holiday hung up.

"What's wrong?" Kylie asked.

"I—I'll talk with you when I know something." Holiday took off, but her answer had Kylie suspicious that the call had something to do with her.

"That didn't sound good," Miranda said.

Just great, Kylie thought. How much more could she take?

Chapter Five

“Are you okay?” Holiday’s voice stirred Kylie awake about an hour later. After trying to call her mom numerous times and leaving several messages, her mind and heart gave up and she went to bed and took a nap.

She looked at Holiday perched on the end of her bed. Sitting up, Kylie yawned and brushed her hair from her eyes. “I’ve been better.”

“Life can be so hard sometimes.”

“Tell me about it.” Kylie remembered the call from Burnett. “Is everything okay? What happened?”

Holiday stared at her with a vacant expression. “Who’s Burnett?”

The cold in the room sent chills spidering across Kylie’s back. She blinked and focused again on the woman’s features. There was no doubt about it. She was Holiday.

Anger, fear, and frustration swarmed through Kylie’s chest. “Okay, let me make something clear. When I told you to fix your face, I meant for you to get your own face, not borrow one from someone else.”

The spirit pressed her palms against her cheeks, and her eyes widened. “*Is this not my face?*”

“No, it’s not! It’s the face of someone I care a lot about, and, nothing personal, but I don’t like seeing you wearing it.”

“*I’m so confused.*”

“You have an identity crisis,” Kylie offered, wanting more than anything to believe it.

“*An identity crisis,*” the spirit repeated.

“Yeah, and you need to figure out who you are and what it is you need

from me, because I can't help you if you don't."

"*It's mostly a blur.*" She pursed her lips in the same manner Holiday did when she was thinking really hard, and damn if the resemblance wasn't uncanny. Even the green color of her eyes matched perfectly.

"*Maybe you're right,*" the spirit said. "*I remember always feeling as if I lived in someone else's shadow.*"

"That's good," Kylie said, relief allowing her to breathe deeper.

"*Good that I lived in someone else's shadow?*" The ghost frowned. "*I don't see it as a good thing.*"

"No, I ... I mean it's good you can remember stuff." And right then, Kylie remembered something, too. One quick and easy way to assure herself that this spirit wasn't Holiday Brandon. Kylie tightened her eyes and focused on the ghost's forehead.

The whimsical pattern, like the face, matched Holiday's to a T. Kylie's chest swelled with concern. "You're a fae?"

The spirit propped one bent knee up across her leg, put her elbow on her knee, and then dropped her chin in the palm of her hand. The gesture was so Holiday that Kylie's heart skipped a beat.

"*Yup, that's what I am.*" She tightened her brows and gazed at Kylie. "*Oh, my, what are you?*"

Kylie hesitated. "I'm a ... chameleon."

The spirit made a face. "*You're a lizard?*"

Kylie frowned, but her concern wasn't about herself. "Do you remember your name?" Kylie held her breath.

The spirit met Kylie's eyes and her brow tightened in puzzlement. Then she stood up and walked to Kylie's window. Staring out in silence, she finally turned around. "*Someone is looking for you.*"

"Do you remember your name?" Kylie repeated her question.

Pulling her red hair over her shoulder, the spirit twirled it into a rope. The exact same way Kylie had watched Holiday do just a little bit ago. The ghost looked back. "*They want you to come to them.*"

Kylie's chest tightened a bit. "Let's talk about you right now," Kylie said, making a mental decision to focus on one problem at a time.

"But you are so much more interesting. There's all this mystery around you. A lot of questions to be answered. I can feel your emotions, you know. That's what faes do. We feel what other people feel."

"I know," Kylie said, frustrated and scared about the spirit's real identity, but she fought the angst back so she could learn more. Because if she was Holiday, then maybe Kylie could do something, change something to prevent ...

"I used to be able to touch people and make them feel better, but that went away."

"Why did it go away?" Kylie asked.

She frowned. *"I'm not completely sure. I think I did something bad."* The ghost's bright green eyes filled with tears. *"I hurt people."*

Kylie sensed the spirit's pain, her remorse, but she couldn't deny feeling a bit of reprieve from the confession. Holiday wouldn't do anything wrong. She was too good-hearted. Cared too much.

"Maybe you didn't mean to hurt them," Kylie said, wanting to help. She wrapped her arms around herself as protection against the chill that accompanied a spiritual being.

"I don't know. I think I was angry." The spirit stared at the wall as if lost in thought and then she reached up and touched her throat.

Kylie noticed the painful-looking bruises around the ghost's neck.

"What happened to you?" Kylie asked, a knot forming in her throat at the thought of being choked to death.

The woman looked back at Kylie, her eyes still wet with emotion. *"I'm dead."*

Kylie nodded. "I know." She waited a second. "What happened?"

The spirit shook her head. *"It's like bits and pieces of a bad nightmare. But I think it has something to do with why I'm here. I mean, I should have left by now ... We ... supernaturals don't hang around."* She looked down and her image started to fade. *"I need to go figure this out. I think it's important."*

"I'll help you any way I can," Kylie said, remembering Holiday saying the same thing about very few non-humans hanging around after they died.

“If you can tell me your name, I might be able to find something on the computer that will help us.”

The spirit moved to the window and touched the pane of glass. A layer of ice appeared on the window, the frost blurring the view outside. “*You’d better start figuring out your own problems, too.*”

“I’m trying,” Kylie said, again seeing Holiday’s personality in the spirit and not liking it. “What’s your name?” Kylie insisted.

The spirit’s figure faded at the same rate as the ice on the window. Then she spoke. “*I think it’s Hannah or Holly. Something like that.*”

“No,” Kylie said, her own voice little more than a whisper.

She then grabbed a clip and put her hair up, determined to go see Holiday, not even sure what she would or wouldn’t tell the camp leader. Kylie just needed to see Holiday alive.

Kylie moved out of her room and found the main room in the cabin empty. She started for the door and stopped. Who was supposed to be shadowing her? Not that Kylie really cared. She was just going to the office, but she’d already gotten in trouble once with Burnett about the shadowing business, and she didn’t want to go for two.

“Della?” she called out.

No answer came back. Was something wrong?

“Hey.” Miranda popped out of her bedroom a second later. “Della had a meeting with Burnett. I’m on shadowing duty.” She said it with pride.

Kylie nodded. “Good. Let’s go to the office.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to talk to Holiday.”

“About what?”

“About something.”

“Got a ’tude, do ya?” Miranda made a face as if she’d just had to swallow something really disgusting.

Kylie started to smart back, but caught herself. It was understandable that she was in a bad mood, but it didn’t give her the right to take it out on her friends. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve been cranky today. But I’ve just got a lot of crap on my plate.”

"I know," Miranda said in an apologetic tone. "The funeral put us all in a bad mood. But then with your whole lizard crisis, I mean, I'd be in an extra-bad mood if somebody told me that I was a reptile. Which is why I haven't raised my pinky at you one time."

"And I appreciate it," Kylie said, and then realized what Miranda had said. "What did Burnett want to talk to Della about?"

"Beats me."

"Was she upset?" Kylie couldn't help but worry that it had something to do with whatever Holiday was so upset about when she spoke to Burnett earlier. And Kylie hadn't forgotten that at the time she'd gotten the impression it was about her.

"Not really. Between you and me, I think Della's got a crush on Burnett. She just glows when Burnett asks her to do something."

"No, she doesn't. She knows he's totally into Holiday."

"Then why doesn't she go for Steve? She's jealous of us having boyfriends but won't go after Steve. And lately I noticed the same thing you did. That shape-shifter stares at her all the time. He's hot for her."

Kylie motioned to the door. "She doesn't go for Steve because she's still in love with Lee."

"Yeah, I guess that could be it, too." They walked out and started down the path toward the office. "You know, I could put a hex on him."

"On Steve?" Kylie asked.

"No, on Lee. I could easily give him warts. And I could put them some place it would really scare the piss out of him. If you know what I mean."

Kylie shook her head. "I don't think Della would want you to do that."

"She might if we caught her in the right mood."

"I wouldn't even chance asking, because if she's not in the right mood, it might really tick her off."

"Yeah, I guess." They continued down the trail. "Do I really talk about Perry all the time?"

Kylie looked at Miranda. "Yeah, but it's not as bad as Della makes it sound. I'll bet I talk about Lucas all the time." She remembered she'd walked away from him today. Was he going to be angry at her? Did he have a right

to be?

“Actually, you don’t. But you used to talk about Derek all the time.”

Kylie frowned, not liking how that sounded.

“Oh, that reminds me, he came by to see you when you were sleeping.”

“Derek came to see me?”

“No, Lucas.”

Embarrassed that she’d misunderstood, Kylie bit down on her lip. “Why didn’t he wake me up? Why didn’t you guys wake me up?”

“He told us not to. He peeked in on you and said to just tell you he came by. Actually, it was kind of sweet. He stood in the doorway watching you for several minutes. He kind of looked sad. Or sappy. Like he was totally in love with you. Della was waving her hand under her nose as if to say he was emitting all kinds of pheromones.” Miranda grinned.

Kylie’s heart hurt so much she couldn’t grin back. Guilt spiraled through her, both for not talking about him as much as she had talked about Derek and for walking away from him earlier when he tried to talk to her. At the time, she’d felt justified, but hindsight always gave her another viewpoint. Was she being too hard on Lucas?

Probably, she admitted. She’d been crabby lately. Hence why Miranda and Della were accusing her of being were. Something she needed to remedy.

She made up her mind. After she spoke with Holiday, she was going to find Lucas and apologize for leaving him like that. She quickened her pace down the trail. The trees on both sides seemed to grow closer together. And Kylie felt it again—the feeling of someone calling her. Luring her to step out into the woods. She stopped and looked out at the line of trees.

They want you to come to them. She heard the spirit’s words whisper in her head.

Who was out there? Was it Mario?

Suddenly, she wasn’t so sure. It didn’t feel evil. It felt ... She didn’t know how it felt, honestly, only that it wasn’t completely evil. However, it still scared her to the point that her breath came short, and a chill ran up her spine and tingled at the base of her neck.

“What?” Miranda asked, a note of fear in her tone. “Your aura is going all

sorts of strange colors on me.”

“Nothing,” Kylie lied. She turned and started jogging to the office. As her feet pounded the path, little clouds of dirt floated up. She blinked the dusty air away and that’s when she saw the moon—half full, but bright. And it looked as if it just suddenly appeared in the sky.

Moonrise, she thought. She felt again the whispers echoing in her mind. Whispers she couldn’t understand, whispers that both lured her and frightened her.

“Is it a ghost?” Miranda asked, her feet pounding the path as her multicolored hair danced in the wind. “Is it?”

“No,” Kylie said, able to speak without huffing.

“Then can you slow down? Because I’m not like you and Della. I mean, I could cast a spell and maybe I could run faster, but that would take some time. And the last time I tried it, I turned myself into an antelope.”

“We’re just about there,” Kylie said, but, remembering how she hated having to work so hard to keep up with Della, she did slow her pace. Suddenly, a whoosh of air blew past them. Kylie’s first thought was vampire, but then Perry, in his huge prehistoric bird form, landed in front of them.

Miranda, even huffing and puffing, squealed with pleasure. Perry took his right wing and wrapped it around the little witch, pulling her into his chest and giving her a warm bird hug. Then he cooed, sounding like a dove. As sappy as it was, and even in her bad mood, Kylie’s chest tightened. And the tender smile she spotted in Miranda’s expression sealed the deal. Love was a wonderful thing. Kylie wanted it. All of it. Complete devotion. All the sappy, crazy feelings.

Images of both Derek and Lucas filled her head. Oh, hell, could she be in love with both of them? Was that even possible?

Perry released Miranda and stepped back. Sparkles started falling around him like iridescent snow. In seconds, human Perry appeared. His sandy blond hair clung to his forehead as if he’d worked up a sweat. His eyes were blue. Bright blue. He wore a pair of black jeans and a T-shirt that read, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO BE?

“I was just coming to get you,” Perry said, shifting his gaze from Miranda

to Kylie.

“Me?” Kylie asked. “Why?”

He shrugged. “They told me to. Ordered me to.”

“Who?” Kylie asked. “Who told you to get me?”

“Duh. Burnett and Holiday. I don’t take orders from anyone else. Except maybe Miranda.” He grinned at Miranda.

“Is something wrong?” Kylie asked.

He looked back at Kylie. “I don’t know. But I know your mom showed up and she’s fit to be tied. Giving Holiday hell.”

“My mom’s here?” Kylie asked, feeling confused.

Perry nodded. “Sorry.”

Kylie took off at a heated pace. Worry had her feet hitting the dirt and leaving a cloud of dust in her wake.

Chapter Six

Kylie ran directly into Holiday's office. Her mom stood in front of Holiday's desk, making some declaration. Holiday sat behind the desk, listening to the declaration. Burnett stood stoic, taking it all in. Kylie barely gave him a glance. She focused on her mom, who swung around and ...

Kylie was engulfed in a quick but desperate hug. Over her mom's shoulder, Kylie's questioning gaze shot to Holiday, who stood up. Her mom backed up.

Kylie continued to stare at Holiday. The briefest of memories of the spirit pulled at Kylie's heart. How could they be so identical and not be the same person? Kylie told herself to deal with one thing at a time. So she refocused on her mom. The look on her face scared the crap out of Kylie. It was the same look her mom had when her grandmother had died.

"What's wrong?" Kylie's mind searched for possibilities and her breath caught as one hit. "Is Dad okay?"

She might still be angry at her stepfather, might not have forgiven him for his infidelity with his young intern, but Kylie loved him. She'd never been surer of that fact than right now. Now, when she imagined the worst—imagined her mother telling her that there had been an accident. That Kylie would never get another long hug from the man or go with him on a father/daughter trip.

"Your dad is fine. It's you that isn't." Her mom's gaze shot over Kylie's shoulder and then back at Kylie. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick?"

"I'm not sick."

"You had some headaches. And those nightmares, remember?" Holiday

spoke in a certain tone that Kylie didn't quite understand.

Her mom's gaze flipped from Kylie's face over her shoulder again and for some reason it made Kylie turn around. Sitting on the sofa was a man she didn't know.

"I ... don't understand," Kylie said, and looked back at her mom.

"It was in my records," Holiday said, again in a tone that seemed to mean something. "I put it in the files and the administrators thought maybe your mom should be contacted. To see if perhaps you needed testing."

Kylie continued to stare at Holiday.

"They called me and asked if they had my permission to test you. Baby, are you okay?"

Test me? Administrators?

Oh, hell, the dots started going together. It wasn't any administrators. It was the FRU. They were trying to get her mom's permission to test her.

"I'm fine," Kylie said. "I don't need to be tested." Fear shot through Kylie. Her gaze shot to Burnett. He looked at her, straight on. No guilt. And she sensed he didn't have any part in this. She remembered the phone call and suspected that this was what it had been all about. Her gaze shot to the man on the sofa. Was he from the FRU? Was this the bastard who wanted to use her as a lab rat like they'd used her grandmother?

"Who are you?" she asked before she could stop herself. Then she tightened her eyes and checked out his pattern. She blinked and did it again when he came up human.

"This is John," her mom said. "We were out having dinner when I got the message from Mr. Edwards that you've been blacking out."

"John?" Who the hell was John? Kylie looked at her mom. And damn if her mom didn't look guilty.

"He's the client that I had lunch with the other day, remember? I told you about him."

Kylie did remember. He was the guy who was going to ruin all the chances of her mother and stepfather getting back together.

"As I've explained," Holiday continued, "Kylie hasn't actually been blacking out. I think I might have just made it sound a bit worse than I

intended in my reports. And when someone read them, they interpreted things wrong.”

Emotion fluttered around like trapped birds in Kylie’s chest. Holiday glanced at her and Kylie got the feeling the camp leader was trying to communicate something to her. But damn, Kylie couldn’t read minds. She couldn’t even read emotions.

“Didn’t Kylie have night terrors at home?” Holiday asked.

Kylie suddenly thought she understood what Holiday wanted. “Yes. They were just night terrors, Mom. I didn’t pass out. You remember how out of it I get when I have one of those. I’m not sick. I don’t need testing. Besides, you already had me tested, remember?”

“But I didn’t think you were having them anymore.”

“I’ve only had a couple. And I’m fine. Look at me, I’m fine.” She held her arms out, mentally searching for a way to prove it. “I can touch my toes; I can touch my tongue to my nose.” It was a little rhyme she and her mom said when someone asked if they were okay.

“But why would Mr. Edwards want to run tests on you?”

Holiday leaned forward in her chair. “Oh, don’t listen to him. He’s just overcautious.” She smiled, doing her best to sound convincing. “But if you would like to schedule Kylie for some tests with your own doctor for your peace of mind, I’d completely understand. I mean, nothing against the doctors here, but I would hope you have a good relationship with your own physician.”

“Do you think I should?” her mom asked Holiday with her worried maternal look.

“Actually, no, I don’t. I think Kylie’s fine. With only two occurrences of the night terrors, I think she’s doing great.”

“I *am* doing great,” Kylie persisted. “I’m fine. I promise. Please, Mom. I don’t want to go through those tests again.”

Her mom ran her palm over Kylie’s cheek. “Do you know how scared I was? Oh, Lordie.” Her mom looked back at Holiday. “You should consider having a serious talk with Mr. Edwards. I swear, the way his message sounded, you would think Kylie was in serious trouble.”

“I’m sorry that scared you.” Kylie looked at John over her mom’s shoulder.

The man stood up, moved forward, and rested his hand on her mom’s shoulder. Kylie had the oddest desire to slap his hand away and tell him he didn’t have the right to touch her mom.

“Hello, Kylie,” John said.

Kylie took in his suave smile, brown eyes, and matching chocolate-colored hair that was styled to perfection. She so wished she could find something ugly about him, but nope. He wasn’t ugly. He wasn’t completely older-guy hot like Burnett, maybe because he was a tad older, but he had the whole distinguished-looking thing down pat.

“I wish our first meeting could have been under different circumstances,” he continued, “but I’ve been hoping to meet you. Your mom has told me so much about you.”

Funny, Kylie thought, her mom hadn’t told her so much about him. Well, she’d told her about having lunch and that he’d said he might call her again, but she’d neglected to say he had called. Probably because she knew Kylie had mixed feelings about her dating. Ahh, but right now, they weren’t so mixed.

Kylie didn’t like him. However, because she didn’t have a reason—except her gut feeling and maybe her wanting her mom and stepdad back together—she was going to have to suck it up. Be nice. What was it Miranda had said? “Fake it until you make it.” Could she learn to like this guy?

“It’s nice to meet you.” Kylie plastered a warm expression on her face. But she worried he could tell it was a sham.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said.

Kylie just smiled. He was completely right about that.

* * *

For the next half hour, Kylie sat in the meeting room in the office and visited with her mom and smarmy John and pretended like everything in her life was just peachy. Peachy and Smarmy. Phrases that Nana, who’d passed away about three months ago, would have used.

Weird how Kylie seemed to be channeling her right now. She'd love it if Nana would pop in for a visit. *You there, Nana?* Kylie asked in her head while John rattled on about the years he'd lived in England.

Nana didn't answer. But Kylie got the oddest sensation she was close.

"I've always wanted to see England," her mom said, holding on to every word the man said.

"We can fix that," John added with enthusiasm. "I have a trip scheduled next month. Why don't you take some time off and come with me?"

"Really?" her mom said. And damn if Kylie wasn't thinking the same thing. *Really?* The man wanted her mom to go to England with him. She didn't even know him. And would he expect her mom to share a hotel room with him, too? No way!

"Mom's work schedule is pretty demanding. She won't be able to make it," Kylie declined for her mom, before she realized she shouldn't have a say in the matter.

Her mom's mouth dropped open at Kylie's declaration and she shot Kylie a that-was-rude scowl. "Well, my work is demanding, but I might be able to get a few days off." She cut her eyes back to Kylie, warning her not to speak up.

"Great," John said, as if he missed the silent tension.

"Great," Kylie repeated, her smile so stiff she didn't think her lips moved.

"Speaking of schedules." Her mom looked at her watch. "We should be heading home. It's almost a two-hour drive. And I do have to work tomorrow."

Her mom gave her a quick hug. And for her hug-impaired mom, it was pretty good. When Kylie pulled back, she mouthed the word *sorry*. And she was sorry. She didn't want to hurt her mom's feelings, even if she didn't like this guy.

The look her mother sent her was one of pure understanding. Which only made Kylie feel a little worse.

Leaning in again, her mom whispered, "Love you."

"Love you, too." Kylie went back in for another hug, and this time she held on a little tighter and for a second longer.

When she walked them out and passed by Burnett's office, she saw his six-foot-plus frame seated at his desk. He pretended to do paperwork but no doubt his super-hearing ears had been tuned in the entire time. And that was fine, she didn't have anything to hide, but as soon as Mom and the creepy guy left, Burnett had better be up for more than listening. He had a lot of explaining to do.

She had known the FRU wanted her tested, but she hadn't believed they'd go so far as to contact her mom. And if they would go that far, what was next? Would her mom's refusal to have Kylie tested be the end of it? For some reason, Kylie didn't believe so.

* * *

When Kylie returned a few minutes later, Holiday and Burnett were waiting on the cabin porch.

"What's going to happen now?" Kylie asked.

Burnett frowned and led them into Holiday's study. "I don't know. I'm stunned that they did this. They called me to come in and talk about changing your mind. I told them that you'd already declined. Someone said you weren't of legal age and suggested they go through your mom. I pointed out that your mom wasn't supernatural and how that could lead to too many questions. I thought I'd convinced them it wasn't the route to take. But when I got back here, Holiday was on the phone with your mom. They must have called your mom the minute I left the office."

Holiday sat down on the sofa. Kylie joined her. When Holiday reached for her hair and twisted it into a rope, Kylie remembered the reason she'd come to the office in the first place. Her gaze went to Holiday's neck and she remembered the spirit's angry bruises. Fear for her friend took a lap around her heart.

"Lucky for us, your mom bypassed calling the FRU back and came straight to us," Holiday said. She met Kylie's eyes. "It's going to be okay," she said, obviously reading Kylie's concern.

"I hope so." Kylie slumped back against the sofa.

"You're still upset about what happened earlier," Holiday said.

“What happened earlier?” Burnett took a step closer.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you...” Holiday explained about Kylie’s father telling her she was a chameleon.

Kylie waited for disbelief to appear on the vampire’s face, or the *you’re a lizard* response everyone else had given her. When Burnett didn’t offer up either, suspicion settled in.

“What do you know?” she demanded.

His eyebrows pinched. “The word *chameleon* was mentioned in the documents I found about the test responsible for your grandmother’s death.”

“What did it say? Did it explain how I can have a human pattern and still be supernatural?” Kylie asked, annoyed he’d kept anything from her. Kylie saw Holiday frown as well.

Burnett’s gaze went from Kylie to Holiday and concern pulled at his frown. “They didn’t explain anything. One of the doctors used the word *chameleon* in his notes. It didn’t make sense; as a matter of fact, I wondered if it was a typo. I didn’t have the original documents. Just one doctor’s notes made while referring to the other documents.”

“But at least this proves it,” Kylie said.

“Proves what?” Burnett asked.

Kylie gazed from Burnett to Holiday. “That this is what being a chameleon is. Having a pattern that says you’re one thing when you’re not. I mean, we know I’m not all human.” She pointed to her forehead. “And yet my pattern says I am. Of course, it doesn’t tell me squat about what I really am.”

“I don’t think we’ve proved anything yet,” Burnett said. “Yes, I think somehow these two things mean the same thing. I just don’t think we’ve proven what they mean, yet.”

Holiday’s expression said she agreed with him. “I’ve been thinking,” Holiday said. “Maybe your ... pattern issues are somehow linked to you being a protector. I don’t think there’s ever been a part-human protector that we can compare you to.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Burnett said. “That could be it.”

“But what about the whole chameleon thing?” Kylie asked.

“I don’t know,” Holiday said. “I’m just saying it could explain your pattern issues.”

Kylie’s mind ran around everything that was said. The more she thought about it, the less sense any of it made. “I want to read those files.”

“I’m sure by now the few files I was able to pull up have already been hidden.”

“They killed my grandmother and got away with it, and now they’re trying to do the same to me.”

“The people who did that were either let go or have retired.” His frown deepened. “I know that’s how it looks and I agree you should decline testing, but I don’t believe they would intentionally jeopardize your life.”

“We don’t know that.” The firmness in Holiday’s tone reminded Kylie of her mom’s voice in maternal mode.

“Which is exactly why I’ve done what I have,” he said. “Why I’m basically going against my oath to the FRU. I’m on your side. What else can I do to prove that?”

“Please,” Kylie said. “I don’t want you two arguing because of me.”

“You don’t have to prove anything.” Holiday blushed with guilt. “I’m sorry. I just get so furious on Kylie’s behalf.”

“I know. I feel it, too.” Burnett glanced at Kylie. “And we weren’t arguing.” He turned and focused on Holiday for a second. “This time we really were just discussing. Right?”

“Right.” The slightest of grins appeared on Holiday’s lips when she met his gaze.

Kylie grinned, too, even as emotion filled her chest. She was so lucky to have these people on her side. But her smile only lingered a second. “What will their next move be?”

Burnett exhaled. “Chances are they still may attempt to change your mind. Convince you that it’s for a greater good. That’s what I thought the plan was when I left.”

“And is that when I tell them I know about my grandmother? Threaten to expose them if they don’t back off?” Kylie asked.

Burnett had taken it upon himself to move Kylie’s grandmother’s body

just in case someone in the FRU decided to hide the evidence of what had happened. In his own words, this would give Kylie some leverage to use against the FRU if they tried to force her to do something she didn't want to do.

"I would just say no, and then if they push, bring up your grandmother's remains." His expression tightened and concern flickered in his eyes. The same emotion reflected in Holiday's gaze.

"What will happen if they find out you were behind the moving of her body?" Kylie asked.

"They won't find out. I covered my tracks," he said adamantly. Maybe too adamantly, as if saying it with conviction would make it so.

"They'll suspect you because you work here. Because you're close to me," Kylie said.

"They might, but they'll have to prove it. And I haven't left any proof for them to uncover."

Kylie hoped that was the case. She glanced at Holiday again and remembered the ghost.

Holiday reached over and put her hand on Kylie's. "Is something else wrong?"

"No. Just this."

"You sure?"

"Do I need more?" Kylie's gaze shifted to the window. She could see the dusk sky going black, but she could still make out the tops of trees swaying ever so slowly.

Her gaze shot back to Holiday and she suddenly felt the need to come clean. "I feel as if I'm being called to something." She motioned to the window. "Something's out there calling me. But I'm not sure what."

Holiday looked confused. "Like being called to the falls?"

"Yeah," Kylie said. Only it felt a lot bigger than that.

"Then let's make a plan to go." Holiday leaned forward. "Do you think tomorrow's soon enough?"

Kylie started to clarify that she wasn't sure it was the falls calling her, but she didn't know how to explain it. So she just nodded.

“I’ll go with you,” Burnett said.

“Inside the falls?” Holiday looked back at Burnett.

“If you think I should, I will.”

“The thought of going to the falls doesn’t bother you?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been there before.”

Holiday looked at Kylie and then back at him. “I know. And I find that baffling. Most supernaturals can’t seem to force themselves to enter.”

A small grin tightened the corners of his eyes. “Like I’ve been telling you, I’m special.”

Holiday sighed. “But the falls—”

“Are not a problem.” He cut her off and focused on Kylie. “Why don’t I walk you back to your cabin? Della’s on shadow duty. I told her I’d see you back.” Burnett’s diversion of subject appeared to be a deliberate ploy to avoid talking about the falls. What was Burnett hiding? The same question seemed to brighten Holiday’s eyes as well.

“She missed dinner,” Holiday said.

“All I want is a sandwich and we’ve got that at the cabin.”

Holiday gave Kylie a long hug with warm calming emotion.

The effects from the hug lingered until she and Burnett started down the dark trail and he asked, “Would you like to explain why you lied to Holiday?”

Chapter Seven

“I didn’t lie.” As soon as those words were out Kylie recalled she’d indeed lied when Holiday asked if there was something else wrong. Damn, she should have remembered that Burnett could hear her heart racing if she lied.

She continued walking. He glanced down with one brow arched in disbelief. “Try again.”

Kylie frowned. “It’s a ghost issue. I’m just trying to figure it out myself.” No way in hell could she tell Burnett about the ghost looking like Holiday. Burnett would freak. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe he wasn’t so afraid of ghosts as he pretended to be.

“What is it that you’re hiding from her about the falls?” she asked.

His arched brow lowered. “I’m not hiding anything.”

“You can go into the falls when the others can’t.”

“It baffles me as well,” he said. “Though I don’t exactly feel comfortable there.”

“You didn’t feel called to go there?”

He hesitated. “Maybe a little.” They walked in silence for the next four or five steps.

“Why didn’t you tell Holiday?” Kylie asked.

He cut her a sly look. “Maybe I’m trying to figure it out for myself.” He used the same words she’d used on him.

“Okay.” She rolled her eyes.

In a few minutes, he spoke again. “I thought you could talk to Holiday about the ghost issues.”

“I can. But I’d like to handle it on my own if I can.” It was the truth, so

she didn't worry about what he'd hear beneath her words.

He nodded. As they neared the cabin, Kylie remembered she'd wanted to visit with Lucas. "Can Lucas take over shadowing me for a while this evening? I need to speak to him about something."

Burnett seemed to consider it. For a second, it appeared as if he might refuse. "Okay, but don't go into the woods."

His answer had her wondering. "Is the alarm working?"

"Yes, but in certain weather conditions, someone might be able to get into the forest without being picked up."

She nodded.

"Have you seen anyone?" he asked.

"No."

He stopped. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said. "Sometimes I just ... the woods scare me a little."

"Then listen to your fears and avoid them."

"That's my plan." Kylie looked at the line of trees and the dark shadows beyond them. She didn't feel anything. Maybe what she'd felt earlier was just her overactive imagination.

Kylie spotted her cabin nestled in the trees. The lights were on and a golden hue spilled out the windows. She saw Della's shadow pass in front of the window and remembered ...

"What did you have a meeting about with Della earlier?"

"Just FRU business." He sounded purposely vague.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No."

"Are you having her do something for the FRU?"

"It's possible. Why?"

Kylie frowned. "Considering the FRU is causing me such a headache, I'm not thrilled about you getting my friends involved with them."

He stopped, dropped his hand into his jeans pockets, and shook his head as if in frustration. "The FRU is an organization meant to help the supernatural people, just like the police help humans. There have been dirty cops and even groups of cops that have done bad things, but we don't stop

trusting the force as a whole.”

“I might if they killed my grandmother,” she said honestly.

His expression tightened. “I don’t agree with everything the FRU does, but without the FRU, the world would be in chaos. The races would all be against each other, killing and maiming each other. The human race would be viewed as a food source.”

Kylie shivered at his description.

“If you can’t trust the FRU, at least trust me on this,” he said. “The good the FRU does far outweighs the bad.”

“I’ll try to see it like that.” But she didn’t promise anything. She couldn’t.

* * *

“You could have just called him,” Della said, moving down the dark path toward Lucas’s cabin about an hour after Kylie had returned. Kylie got the feeling that Della was a little annoyed that Kylie wanted to spend the evening with Lucas instead of hanging out with her. Especially when Miranda had run off with Perry. But Kylie’s guilt over walking away from Lucas earlier made seeing him feel imperative.

“I kind of wanted to be the one to take the initiative.” Kylie noticed the moon, a bright silvery white, a little over half full, hanging overhead. It was a pretty night. The temperature had dropped to the low eighties, making it almost comfortable.

“Why? What did you do wrong?”

“I got mad and walked off earlier.”

“Was that why he was so sappy-eyed when he came by while you were asleep?” she asked.

“I guess.” Kylie gave the line of trees a good long stare and felt nothing, which felt really good. Then she looked back at Della. “What did Burnett want to talk to you about today?”

“Nothing really.”

Kylie looked at her. “You know, when you’re friends with someone for a while, you don’t have to hear their heartbeat to know they’re lying.”

Della made a face. “Yeah, but I thought that would be more polite than

telling you to bug off.”

Kylie frowned. “Are you going to do something for the FRU?”

“How did you know?”

“They already had Lucas and Derek do stuff. It just seemed logical. Not that I like it.” She remembered Burnett saying the FRU wasn’t all bad, and tried to give herself an attitude adjustment, but she couldn’t completely let herself trust them.

“I think it would be kind of cool to work for them,” Della said. “It would give me a reason to kick some asses every now and then.”

“Do you trust them?” Kylie asked.

“I trust Burnett,” Della said, and studied Kylie. “Don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” She hadn’t told Miranda or Della about Burnett moving her grandmother’s body. It just seemed like something that she shouldn’t tell anyone. “They went to my mom to see about testing me.”

“Oh, shit, I remember Miranda saying that your mom was here, but I forgot about it. What did your mom say? God, did they tell her you were supernatural? I’ll bet it totally freaked her out.”

“No, they told her they were worried because I had headaches and passed out and they advised her to have me tested. Holiday explained it was just the night terrors and advised against it.”

“Oh, hell. What did Burnett say?”

“He’s not for me getting tested either.”

“Good,” Della said. “I mean, I wouldn’t want anyone probing around my head. Not after hearing what happened to your grandma.” Della stopped and looked at Kylie. “Do you not want me to work for them because of this?”

Kylie got the feeling that Della would really give up her chance to work for the FRU because of Kylie’s opinion—even when it was clear that Della was excited about the possibility. Her appreciation for Della’s devotion swelled in her chest.

“No,” Kylie said. “But ... I do want you to be careful.”

“I’ll be careful.” Della rubbed her hands together. “I’m glad you figured it out. I’ve been dying to tell someone. It’ll be so cool.”

They got to Lucas’s cabin. The lights were on. Kylie knocked on the door

while Della hung back by the porch steps. Steve, the shape-shifter who had a crush on Della, came to the door. With everything happening, Kylie had forgotten he roomed with Lucas. And so had Della, Kylie realized, when she heard the vamp draw in a quick breath.

“Hey,” Steve said.

“Is Lucas here?” Kylie asked.

His gaze shifted behind Kylie and his expression changed. Kylie knew he’d spotted Della. “Uh ... yeah. I mean, no. He left a few minutes ago with Fredericka.”

“Oh.” Kylie tried not to let it show that the news bothered her as she turned to leave.

Steve called after her, “He’ll probably be back shortly.”

She turned back. “Do you mind if we wait for a while?”

“No.” His eyes lit up as he looked at Della. “Come in if you want.”

Della cleared her throat in a sound that said hell no.

“Can we just sit out on the porch?” Kylie asked. “It’s a nice night.”

“Yeah.” He stepped out. His brown hair hung across his brow. Even in the dark, Kylie could make out that his eyes were dark brown, and they were filled with interest as they cut toward Della.

When Kylie turned around, Della didn’t look too happy, but she sauntered forward. “We shouldn’t wait long.” She plopped down on the steps.

“Just a bit.” Kylie lowered herself beside the unhappy Della. Steve sat down on the side of the porch. No one said a word.

“I heard some of the new teachers were at dinner tonight.” Kylie tossed out the conversation starter, hoping not to slip into angst over Lucas traipsing through the woods with Fredericka.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “The English teacher, Ava Kane, seems nice. She’s half-witch and half-shape-shifter.”

“Why don’t you just admit that you like her because she has big tits?” Della said.

Even in the dark, Kylie could see Steve’s face redden. “I ... won’t deny she’s pretty, but that’s not what I meant.”

Kylie shifted her foot and kicked Della.

“Ouch!” Della glared at Kylie. “Why did you do that?”

“When are classes supposed to start?” Kylie asked, and no one answered—Steve probably because he was afraid to get in trouble again and Della because she was too busy rubbing her kicked ankle.

Steve finally crated. “I think next Monday.”

“Were there any other teachers there?” Kylie looked at Della to answer.

“Yeah,” Della added. “A Hayden Yates. He’s half vampire, half fae. I think he’s going to teach science. He seems okay.”

“And?” Steve asked, his tone deeper, even if it was just above a whisper.

“And what?” Della asked.

He stiffened his shoulders. Which Kylie had to admit were pretty broad. The guy was cute. Why wasn’t Della at least being nice?

“Why do you like Mr. Yates?” Steve asked. “His sexy body, or do you pretend it’s his mind?”

Damn, Kylie thought. These two were as bad as Della and Miranda. Or Burnett and Holiday.

Della scowled at Steve and then looked at Kylie. “I’m out of here.”

Embarrassed, Kylie looked at Steve. “Thanks. Can you tell Lucas that I came by?”

“You could probably find him.” Steve stood up. “I think they were going down to the clearing by the stream.”

“Oh,” Kylie said, and took off after Della. Kylie’s chest pinched with jealousy as she remembered her and Lucas going to the stream. She was so fixated on trying not to feel the green emotion ping-ponging in her heart, she hadn’t realized they were heading the wrong way.

“Where are we going?” Kylie asked.

Della glared at her. “To the stream, idiot. And don’t for one minute pretend that you don’t want to know what he’s doing down there with that she-wolf. If he was my boyfriend, I’d go grab him by the scruff of his neck and teach that wolf a lesson he wouldn’t forget. He’d be whimpering like a pup before I let him go.”

* * *

Kylie continued to follow Della while holding an out-and-out debate in her head over the wisdom of continuing or turning around. If she went to the stream, would Lucas think she'd come because she was jealous? But if she didn't go and Steve told him she'd dropped by and hadn't come, would he think she'd gone home because she was jealous?

Okay, the only thing that came out of that mental debate was knowing that she didn't want Lucas to think she was jealous.

Even though she was.

But did that mean she was wrong?

Or was Lucas wrong? Wrong for taking off in the dark to spend some time with Fredericka by the creek? Was he right now rolling on the grass with Fredericka, kissing her the way he'd kissed Kylie when he'd taken her to the creek?

Or was it as innocent as her getting caught behind the office with Derek?

Kylie looked up at the moon. The glow seemed extra bright and she felt that odd sting on her skin. Just like she felt on the full moon.

She inhaled deeply and told herself she was imagining things.

"Quit trying to talk yourself out of going," Della said.

"How do you know that's what I'm doing?"

"Because I can see it on your face. And because you couldn't walk any slower if you were a turtle on crutches."

"I just don't want to come off like a psycho girlfriend."

"If he's making out with her—or worse, playing hide the salami—then he deserves you coming off like a psycho. Hell, I'll join you and we'll both go psycho on his ass."

"I don't think he's doing that." As if saying it helped her believe it.

"You didn't want to think Derek did it, either." Della sighed as if she regretted saying the words. "No disrespect to Ellie and all, but it was still wrong."

Kylie's chest tightened at the mention of Ellie's name. "That was different."

"How is it different?" Della asked. A low-hanging limb swung back and Kylie caught it with her arm with complete ease. "I think it adds up to the fact

that all guys are scum. Maybe we weren't even supposed to mate with them."

"Derek and I weren't together."

"Maybe you hadn't said you were together. But in your heart, you were together."

Kylie remembered what Miranda had said about her talking about Derek more than she did Lucas. Suddenly she didn't want to talk about her screwed-up love life. So why not talk about Della's screwed-up love life? It seemed like the perfect diversion.

"You could have been nicer to Steve."

Della swung around, attitude in her body posture. "I was nice."

"No, you weren't. You accused him of liking the new teacher's tits."

Della resumed walking. "You should have seen him ogling her, it was embarrassing."

"It kind of sounds like you're jealous, which says you like the guy," Kylie pointed out.

Della started walking faster, her pace matching her mood. "I don't like him. But I'll admit he has a nice butt."

"And you said you were going to try to be more approachable to his nice butt," Kylie reminded her.

"I tried. It didn't work out. I guess his butt isn't that nice."

Another branch came back, and the instant Kylie caught it in her palm, she remembered. She stopped and looked up through the trees at the sky. A few stars twinkled back as if laughing at her.

"Crap," she muttered.

"What?" Della looked back over her shoulder.

Kylie glanced around. The moon's glow cast a silver shine through the trees and shadows danced on ground.

"I just remembered."

"Remembered what?"

"I'm not supposed to go into the woods." Kylie inhaled the verdant scent of the trees and the moist earth. Then she internally searched for that feeling of being lured, beckoned as she had been earlier. It wasn't there. So maybe all those feelings were just her overactive imagination. Oh, yeah, she wanted

to believe that.

Nevertheless, she'd disobeyed Burnett's orders. Maybe not on purpose, but she didn't think he'd find that excuse acceptable. "We should go back."

"But we're almost there. And you've got me—a badass vampire—with you. Nothing's going to happen. And don't you want to know if Lucas and Fredericka are doing the hokey pokey?"

Kylie caught another branch coming back at her. "If Burnett finds out, he's going to be pissed."

"Then we won't tell him. Trust me. It's gonna be fine."

Against her better judgment, Kylie continued taking steps with Della. The crickets did their thing and an occasional bird called out. In the background, Kylie could even hear the sounds of the wild animals in the park. Normally when the night sang, it meant all was well. It was in the quiet that things jumped out of the shadows. When evil seemed to appear.

Inhaling the night air, she continued moving, jumping over a few patches of thorny bushes and ducking under low branches.

"Crap," Della hissed, and came to an abrupt stop.

"What is it?" Kylie asked, and that was when the forest went silent. Not dead like in ghost silent, but dead like in threatening.

"The next time I tell you to trust me, don't." Della looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes were bright green and her canines extended. "We've got company."

Chapter Eight

“We should run.” Kylie’s voice was nothing more than a whisper. Her heart throbbing in her chest sounded louder.

“When things run, they get chased,” Della answered. “I’d rather do the chasing.”

“Smart girl,” a deep voice answered back. And just the sound of it sent chills down Kylie’s spine.

Three silent figures stepped out from the shadows. The only noise filtering through the thicket of trees was Della’s hiss. Kylie moved to stand next to Della in case they attacked. Her mind still played with the option of running. A good option. But first she had to convince Della.

The slight sound of twigs being snapped under footsteps sounded at their backs. They were surrounded.

Time to find a new option.

Even with only the half moon lighting the path, Kylie was able to check the patterns of the three men fronting them: werewolves. The edges of the patterns were dark, as if their intentions were not good natured. That could only mean one thing: rogues.

The bigger man in the middle stepped closer. Della hissed harder. Kylie felt her blood fizz with the need to protect the little vamp. As badass as Della considered herself, this was no fair match. Not that the rogues would care.

“I will kindly ask you to leave,” Kylie said, not sure where her bravado came from, but it was there, and she’d be damned if she wouldn’t use it. “You’re trespassing. This is Shadow Falls property.” She stood with her shoulders back, her chin up. Knowing they could smell fear, she tried not to

let the seed of that emotion grow any bigger.

Kylie saw Della, poised to attack, and Kylie touched her elbow, hoping to convince the vamp to wait. Maybe they could talk their way out of this.

“Leave now, or I’ll rip your throat out first,” Della said to the man facing her.

That wasn’t the kind of talk Kylie had in mind.

“We did not come here to do harm,” the guy in the middle said to Kylie, and then he cut Della a smirk as if mocking her threat. “But if provoked, that could change.”

Della hissed louder.

“Then leave.” Kylie’s gaze moved over him. She got the feeling the one who spoke was the leader. He didn’t look old, but things like the gray at his temple and the fine lines around his dark blue eyes told her he was older than she’d first assumed. Caught by his eyes, her mind tried to place him. She felt him staring, doing the same with her, and then his eyes pinched as he read her pattern.

As sudden as a flicker of light, she knew who he was. She sensed he recognized her as well. That kernel of fear lingering in her gut grew. This man didn’t value life. He’d already proven that to Kylie once.

He took another step forward. Della tried to jump in front of him, but Kylie grabbed her.

“Let me handle this.” The sizzle in Kylie’s blood—the sizzle that came when her need to protect arose—grew stronger.

“I’m not here to spill blood,” he insisted.

“Then leave,” Kylie demanded.

“Yeah, tuck your tail between your legs and run,” Della bit out.

A threatening growl came from behind them. Della swung around, yanking away from Kylie’s hold, her eyes glowing brighter. Fear took another lap around Kylie’s heart. Not fear for herself, but for what was about to happen. Her blood now buzzed as it moved into her veins. She kept her focus on Della. If anyone put a hand on her, this would not end well.

“Calm down,” the leader spoke, and Kylie sensed he spoke to her as well as to his own men. “I just came to speak to my son.”

“Then speak to him.” A new voice rang out from the trees. “But you and your guards back away right this minute.” Lucas’s voice, deep and menacing, came from Kylie’s right. When she turned, she saw that his eyes glowed burnt orange. She watched him lift his head ever so slightly to pull air in through his nose.

She knew then she’d lost her battle trying to hide her fear. Lucas had smelled it as the others probably had. But she wondered if they picked up on the fact that she hadn’t feared the fight. She’d feared the emotional havoc it would’ve caused. Killing your boyfriend’s father couldn’t be good for a relationship.

“I said, back off,” Lucas ordered.

When the three men didn’t back up, Della spoke up again. “You heard him, you jackasses. Back off.”

Lucas suddenly stood on the other side of Kylie. His warm forearm brushed against her shoulder, leaving no doubt of his loyalty to her, even over his own father. The thought warmed her heart, even as it thudded with panic.

More werewolf campers stepped out from behind the trees. They didn’t appear aggressive, but just their presence spoke of their loyalty to Lucas.

“It appears I’m not the only one who brought his guards,” Mr. Parker said.

“If I need them, they’ll back me,” Lucas said.

A low growl came from one of the weres bracketing Lucas’s dad. Mr. Parker glanced over at him. “There will be no trouble tonight.”

While still leery, and with the tension so thick it made breathing difficult, Kylie heard the command in the man’s voice and sensed his men would not defy him. The surge of adrenaline storming in her veins lessened.

Will, another camper and one of Lucas’s friends, moved in closer. Somewhere in the back of Kylie’s brain, the realization hit. Lucas hadn’t been alone with Fredericka. A thread of guilt over doubting him rose in her chest.

As if thinking of the girl brought her here, Fredericka walked out of the line of trees and into the small clearing.

“Mr. Parker,” Fredericka said in a light tone, breaking the tight tension.

“What a pleasure to see you again.” The she-wolf shot Kylie a slight smirk, as if wanting Kylie to know she was friends with Lucas’s dad.

“The same here,” the man replied with disinterest. He paid Fredericka no heed. He hadn’t stopped studying Kylie’s pattern. She felt the slightest bit worried that it was doing something strange.

“So the rumors don’t lie,” Mr. Parker said, sounding perplexed.

“What rumors?” Kylie asked.

“I can see why my son is intrigued by you. A shame that you are not one of us.”

Kylie’s chest tightened at the implication. As if her relationship with Lucas was doomed.

“Enough,” Lucas said. “I think—”

“You are one strange bird, Kylie Galen.” Mr. Parker tightened his brows as if to get a closer look at her pattern.

Kylie tilted her chin up a notch. Not a bird, Kylie thought. A chameleon. And an inexplicable sense of pride filled her chest. For the first time, Kylie accepted that while she knew nothing of what being a chameleon meant, there was value in the little knowledge she had.

Lucas turned to face Della. “Both of you go back to your cabin.” His gaze settled on Kylie. “I’ll see you later.”

Resentment at being told to leave stirred in Kylie’s gut, but logic intervened and she sensed his intention came from his need to protect her and not to control her. Then she realized that if she resented his authoritative tone ... She glanced at Della.

“I’d rather help you send these guys off,” Della growled.

Kylie spoke up. “We should go.”

Della frowned, but her expression said she’d concede. “Fine. I didn’t want to hang out with these dogs anyway.” She snarled at the intruders.

One of Mr. Parker’s guards took a defensive step forward, and both Kylie and Lucas moved in a step. That one step left little doubt that neither of them would allow the guard to touch Della. Kylie didn’t miss the frown that Lucas sent Kylie, as if to say he didn’t want her taking the protective role. But that was what she was. A protector. A chameleon protector.

Della scowled at both of them, as if to say she didn't need their protection.

"Go. Please," Lucas said.

Kylie motioned for Della to follow her.

As they walked away, Kylie couldn't resist looking back. She saw Lucas, his posture defensive as if his father brought out the worst in him. Her thoughts went to both her own father and her stepfather. Neither of them put her on the defensive. Yeah, her stepfather had made some bad mistakes, and Kylie might still be working on forgiving him, but deep down she knew he loved her. And with her real father, Daniel, well, he cared so deeply he hadn't even let his death separate them.

Kylie sensed Lucas had never felt any affection from his father. Her heart hurt for him, and her blood heated with the need to defend him.

But defend him against what? What was it that had brought Mr. Parker to camp? Something told her it wasn't just to give Lucas a hug. Was something wrong with Lucas's grandmother? His half sister?

A shame that you are not one of us. His words echoed in her head and heart. Could he be here about her? Protesting the fact that Lucas was ... intrigued with her?

"Burnett's going to be so pissed about this," Della huffed, her hurried pace matching her angry tone.

Kylie nipped at her lip with worry, before expressing her thoughts. "Which is why you aren't going to tell him."

Della looked at Kylie. The vamp's eyes were still bright with fury. "They are rogues."

"But he's Lucas's father." And the thought of Lucas having to deal with Burnett after already having to deal with his father seemed unfair.

"It's against regulations."

"Just like it was for Chan to show up," Kylie reminded her. "And like Chan, Mr. Parker didn't hurt anyone. He just wanted to talk to his son."

Della let out a breath of frustration. "You know, I really hate it when you do that."

"Do what?" Kylie dodged a vine swinging back.

“Use logic and rub my nose in the fact that you’re right.”

“I didn’t rub your nose in it.”

“Maybe not. But I still don’t like it.”

They walked a few minutes without speaking. “Thanks for not telling,” Kylie said, knowing that was what Della meant.

They moved through the dense vegetation with only the night’s song whispering through the trees. Finally, Kylie spoke up. “Lucas wasn’t alone with Fredericka.”

“Yeah, I figured that one out, too,” Della said. “But...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I kind of feel as if I sort of encouraged you to go with Lucas and maybe I was wrong.”

“Wrong?” Kylie grabbed Della by the arm. “Do you mean wrong to push me, or wrong for me to go after Lucas?”

Della frowned. “Both.”

“Why would you say that?” Kylie asked, hurt that Della would make such a statement—especially when her heart was already so confused.

“It’s not that I don’t like Lucas, I do. But he’s werewolf and you’re obviously not. I admit I thought you were before. But tonight when we were surrounded by weres, I could just tell that you weren’t like them. And after what his grandmother said and now after what his dad said, I think his family and his pack are going to stand in your way.”

“He told me he doesn’t care what they say.” And she believed it. She did.

Sadness filled Della’s eyes and Kylie felt the emotion resonate within herself.

Della exhaled. “That’s what Lee said, too. And look what happened with us.”

* * *

It’s not the same thing.

While Kylie waited on her porch for Lucas to show up, she contemplated what Della had said and thought about her day from hell.

She’d spoken to her mom, who needed reassurance that Kylie was okay.

She'd spoken to Holiday, who needed the same thing. Then her phone chirped again. Derek, this time, wanting the same thing.

"Hey, I just wanted to check in," he said.

It was funny, really, how well she knew him. She knew what he felt without his ever having to say it and so she knew why he'd called. He'd obviously sensed some of her earlier emotions. "I'm fine."

"If you need to talk or anything, I'm here." He sounded so wistful, she felt her heart grow tighter.

"I know," she answered. "And I appreciate it."

"Did you ever figure out the whole ghost issue?"

"Not yet," Kylie admitted, her tone echoing some of the frustration she felt.

"Did you talk to Holiday about it?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"A little," she said. "But I wasn't ... I only skimmed the surface."

"Oh, shit!"

"What?"

"That's who it is, isn't it? That's whose face the ghost has stolen. It's Holiday."

Kylie closed her eyes. "Yes, but please don't say anything. I'm trying to figure it out before I take it to Holiday."

"Is she in danger? Does this mean ... anything?"

"In a roundabout way, I asked Holiday, and she said it was unlikely. But..."

"But what?"

"It's just scary," Kylie admitted. "Seeing her as a ghost when she's not dead."

"Hell yeah, it's scary. And you shouldn't have to figure it out all by yourself. I'm here for you. I don't know how to help solve this, but whatever it takes, I'll do it."

"Thanks." She leaned back against the cabin wall, and right then she was hit by a wash of cold. Dead cold.

"And I don't expect anything in return," he said. "I accept we're just

friends.”

“Thank you.” The spirit, identical to Holiday, stood over her, looking down with a frown on her face. “I should go.”

“Something wrong?” he asked, and she couldn’t help but wonder if he could feel her now.

“Just ... got company.”

“Lucas?” His tone expressed exactly how he felt about the werewolf.

“No. The ghost.”

“Oh. So, I’ll let you go. But Kylie...”

“Yeah?” She stood because she didn’t like having the spirit staring down at her.

“I’m here if you need me.” He sounded so genuine.

“I know,” she said, feeling the words vibrate in her chest. She hung up and met the woman’s green gaze.

“I think you should pick him,” the spirit said.

“Say what?”

“Between him and the werewolf. I like him. He’s fae.”

Kylie bit back the frustration. “I think I’d better decide that.”

“Just a little advice,” the spirit said.

Kylie studied her. “Did you discover anything?”

“Not really, but I remember some stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Scary stuff.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

The spirit studied Kylie with the same kind of concerned look Holiday always did.

“I don’t think you need to hear it. You’re ... young.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “You came here for me to help you. I can’t help if you don’t tell me things.”

She blinked. *“I don’t know if that’s true.”*

“What’s not true?”

“That I came to you to help me.” She stood silent for a long moment. *“I think I came to you to help someone else.”*

“Who?”

“I don’t know exactly. But I sense it.”

“What do you sense?”

“That danger is right around the corner.” Her eyes filled with worry.

“Can I stop it from happening?”

She tilted her head to one side and considered the question. *“I think so. I think that’s why I came. So you could stop it.”*

Kylie’s heart filled with hope. Surely, if it wasn’t possible to help, the spirit would have known. So even if this was Holiday, maybe Kylie could save her. Maybe the person the spirit was supposed to save was herself and she just didn’t realize it. “Have you figured out your name yet?”

She shook her head. *“I just keep getting the same thing. I think it’s Hannah.”*

“Please tell me what you know. It might be important.”

She shook her head. *“I’m not ready to talk about it. And it’s not a whole lot. Just ... flashes of stuff.”*

“Why aren’t you ready to talk about it?”

The spirit turned and stared at the woods as if she’d heard something.

Kylie followed her gaze. She didn’t see anyone, but oddly, the feeling she’d felt earlier had returned. Someone was out there. Calling for her.

Who are you? What do you want? She asked the question in her mind.

“They want to talk to you,” the ghost said.

“Who?” Kylie asked. “And you said ‘they,’ so how do you know there’s more than one?”

“I just somehow know there’s more than one. But if I don’t know my own name, how could I know theirs?”

“Have you seen them? Do you know what they want with me?”

She shook her head. *“I just sense them. Calling you.”*

“Do they mean to harm me?” she asked.

“I ... can’t say for sure. But they don’t feel evil.”

“They don’t really feel evil to me, either.” Or maybe she just wanted to believe it. She moved down the steps. She’d almost reached the woods when someone caught her arm—someone warm, someone alive.

Chapter Nine

Kylie swung around, her heart bouncing off her stomach all the way up to her throat.

“Where are you going?” Lucas asked.

“Nowhere.” She swallowed the panic. “I was waiting on you and thought I heard something.” It wasn’t completely a lie; she’d heard it with her heart.

He pulled her against him. “That’s when you go inside the cabin, not into the woods. Even normals know that from watching those phony horror shows.”

She rolled her eyes. “I would’ve gone inside if I thought it was evil.”

“But sometimes you don’t know.” He slid his hand down to her waist.

She agreed with him on that point and probably needed to remember it, too.

Yet remembering anything became harder with him this close. So close she felt him breathe. The soft touch of his palm warmed her skin beneath her clothes. The tenderness and heat created a trail of tingling sensation.

He dipped his head down and gazed into her eyes. “Do you have any idea how I would feel if something happened to you?”

“Probably the same as I’d feel if something happened to you,” she said. “What did your father want?”

He frowned. “It’s Clara, my half sister. She ran off again. She told him she was coming here, but he suspected she went back to her boyfriend.”

“I’m sorry. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “I’ve already gone after her twice. She said she wanted to come here. But maybe she lied. If I bring her here against her

will, what's going to stop her from running off?"

"Is the boyfriend that bad?"

He grimaced. "He's rogue and heavily into a gang."

"And that automatically makes him bad?" She'd learned that not all supernaturals were registered, and to some people that alone made them rogue, but not all unregistered supernaturals were bad, either. Della didn't consider Chan evil. And Kylie chose to believe her grandfather and great-aunt weren't bad. "Are all gangs bad?"

Her question seemed to give him pause. "Not necessarily, but even the gangs that aren't completely unethical are generally into something illegal."

"Drugs?" Kylie asked.

"And other stuff."

Kylie remembered how badly she'd felt for Lucas when she'd seen him looking so defensive facing his own father. She remembered he'd stood up for her against his own family. Her heart hurt for Lucas. "If your half sister is anything like her half brother, she'll do the right thing." She stepped up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

It was late. It was dark. But the moment seemed so right. What was meant as a quick kiss lingered and became more. Much more. He deepened the kiss and she leaned into him. She felt his body come closer to hers, hard in all the places she was soft.

She heard the purring sound that a were made when he was close to a potential mate. She became almost hypnotized—lured by the sound, tempted and enticed by all that could follow.

He tasted so good, felt so good. She wanted more. She wanted to feel more. To taste more. To experience more.

Then the magic ended when he pulled away. He brushed his hand over her cheek and while his blue eyes held the heat of passion, she could tell his mind was chewing on something else. "I'm sorry that my dad scared you."

She fought the desire to tell him to just start kissing her again. "It's okay," she said, and tried not to sound disappointed.

"No, it's not." He caught her hand and moved to the porch.

"He stated right away that he wasn't there to cause harm," she said,

wanting to soothe Lucas. Wanting to make this easier.

“And you should never believe him,” he said.

A whisper of fear settled in her chest. They lowered themselves down on the porch so they could lean against the cabin.

He brushed his thumb over her lips. “I don’t want my father anywhere around you.”

She looked into Lucas’s serious gaze. “He hurt you?” The need to protect him made her blood run faster.

“Not me. I’m his son. But he considers anyone else fair game.”

“If he’s that bad, why do you go there? Why have anything to do with him?”

“For Clara, mostly. But then ... I need him right now.”

“Why?”

“His approval will go a long way to help me get into the were council.”

The council he couldn’t get on if he married her. The thought shot a wave of apprehension through her and she remembered what Della had said about things not working out between them because of his family and his pack. She pushed that thought out of the way and tried to understand. “But if that’s who they look to for approval, then why would you want to be on that council?”

He closed his eyes for a second as if explaining was difficult. “If I make it on the council, then I can change things.”

Kylie recalled his grandmother telling her that he wanted to change how the world viewed children raised by rogues.

“But until then, I have to convince him that I see things his way.”

“What things?”

He shook his head slowly. “Things I don’t think you even need to know.”

Kylie frowned, not liking being shut out of his world, even if she wasn’t sure she wanted to belong to it. She’d bet that Fredericka knew everything. “But I do need to know. I want to be a part of your life. I don’t want to be shut out.” *I don’t want your pack or your family keeping us apart.*

His eyes tightened. “I’m not shutting you out. I just prefer that you know this Lucas.”

She digested his words. “There can only be one Lucas.”

“There is only one. One real one. But I have to play games with my father and the council. I have to convince him that I’m on his side.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“And I don’t expect you to.”

She dropped her hand from his arm. “That’s not right. How would you like it if you thought I kept things from you?”

A frown pulled at his lips. “You do keep things from me. Things about your ghosts.” His eyes brightened with frustration. “Things you talk to Derek about and not me. And you’re right, I don’t like it.”

She considered his words and knew they were true. “I only keep things from you because you don’t want to know about them. They make you crazy.”

He nodded, and acceptance filled his eyes, but she could tell it cost him emotionally. “And believe me when I tell you that the things I keep to myself are things you wouldn’t want to know either.”

She looked deep into his eyes, hating this conversation, but only because she cared so much about him. “Secrets between people can’t be good. It can keep them apart. Why don’t we just tell each other everything?”

“Sometimes what we don’t know protects us. It can’t hurt us if we don’t know it.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “I can promise you this, Kylie Galen. I’ll do whatever I have to do, but I won’t let this hurt you.”

She frowned. “What do you mean by whatever you have to do?”

“Just that. I won’t let what’s happening in my messed-up life hurt you.”

His words scared her. But the fear was more for him than for herself. “I’m not some fragile little girl. I’m not the same girl whose window you peeked into.”

The playfulness in his eyes was both sexy and warm. “Oh, I’ve noticed.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know. But you’re still my girl, and I want to protect you.”

She rolled her eyes in frustration. “I’m the protector. That’s what I do,” Kylie insisted.

“I know. You’re amazing and can do amazing things. And you’ve already saved my life. But as a protector, the one thing you can’t do is protect

yourself. So please don't try to stop me from doing it."

* * *

Kylie woke up before the sun the next morning. The only thing she was aware of was Socks sleeping on her stomach, his pointed skunk nose resting between her breasts. She lifted her head and stared at the little guy. He opened one of his beady eyes and then the other, and stared up at her with adoration. The kind of look one got only from a pet.

The kind that said pure love and acceptance.

The silence in the room was loud. Unsure about what had awakened her, she pulled her arm out from under the thin cover to measure the temperature. No cold. No ghosts.

And then she heard it. Or heard her.

"Kitty, kitty," Miranda called from the slightly opened bedroom door. "Come on, Socks. Don't you want to be turned back into a kitten?"

Socks sprang to his feet, leapt to the floor, and scurried under the bed. Kylie wasn't sure if his annoyance was at Miranda for constantly trying to change him back or if he perhaps didn't want to change. Considering Kylie had changed a whole hell of a lot these past few months, she couldn't blame Socks. Change was scary.

Miranda pushed open the door a bit more. "Come on, don't make it hard on me."

Kylie leaned up on her elbow and yawned. "I think he's scared."

Miranda moved in a little more. "I think I got it figured out. I just need to take him outside and into the first morning light."

"Hmm." Kylie rose up, putting her bare feet on the cold wood floor. Too cold? She did another visual sweep to check for ghosts. Nope. She had a ghost-free zone happening.

"Sorry I woke you up. I thought I could just sneak in and grab him." Miranda seemed wide awake and in a good mood as she plopped down and gave the mattress a little bounce.

"No big deal. I was practically awake anyway," Kylie lied. In truth, it had been a pretty sleepless night. After Lucas had left, Della had retired to her

room and Miranda hadn't come home, so Kylie had grabbed Socks and gone to bed. Not to sleep. That would have been too easy. She'd tossed and turned for hours, juggling her problems like balls, and not really solving a single one of them.

However, she had to admit, she'd gotten used to thinking of herself as a chameleon. And was thrilled it was one day closer to Thursday, when her real grandfather would visit.

Or at least she prayed he'd visit her.

Remembering her difficulty falling sleep reminded her that the last time she checked the clock, at around three AM, Miranda still hadn't come back.

"So, are you going to fill me in?" Kylie asked.

"Fill you in on what?" Miranda's smile tightened with mischievousness. Kylie studied her friend closer. She wore the same clothes she'd worn to her date last night. Had Miranda woken her to try to transform Socks back into a kitty, or did she need someone to talk with? Not that Kylie minded. She'd woken Della and Miranda up many nights, mostly with dreams or those scary visions—but if she had just needed to talk, she knew they'd be there for her.

"Just what time did you get home, young lady?" Kylie asked in a teasing voice.

"Early. I swear." Miranda giggled. "Early this morning."

"Details. I want details." Kylie rubbed her hands together, mimicking Miranda.

"Don't get too excited," Miranda said. Then she sighed. "We didn't ... you know. But we did ... well, you know."

Kylie let the riddle roll around her sleep-dazed mind and shook her head. "I think I get the first 'you know,' but I'm lost on the second 'you know.'" Still feeling the cold on the bottom of her feet, she pulled her legs up on the mattress. The darkness in the room felt lightened just by Miranda's presence.

"We kissed, we made out." Miranda's grin widened, and then she got that sappy lovestruck look on her face. "We fell asleep in each other's arms down by the swimming hole. He held me all night long, and I think I'm in love for real. It's like I know I belong there. In his arms."

Kylie remembered the times she'd fallen asleep in Lucas's arms.

Awesome didn't begin to describe it. But had she woken up knowing for sure that he was the one? She couldn't remember ever feeling that way.

Then, realizing this was Miranda's moment, she pushed her self-indulgence away. "Well, I'm thrilled for you." And Kylie was. Even if she was just a tad envious, too.

"I know *you* are." Miranda's smile faded. "I don't think Della will feel the same way."

"Of course she will," Kylie said. "She just has a hard time showing it. Remember how she kept encouraging you to make up with Perry when you were mad at him?"

"I guess," Miranda said, not sounding convinced. "I mean, I feel as if I can't say anything about Perry around her now. I get that she's hurt about Lee and I don't want to make her feel bad, but I also want to be able to talk to her about what's going on in my life. And right now what's going on in my life is all about Perry. Seriously, I don't want to have to walk on eggshells around her."

"And I think you're just worrying too much. Believe me, in a day or two things will be back to normal and you guys will be threatening to rip each other's limbs off for a reason that has nothing to do with Perry."

Miranda exhaled. "You make it sound like we argue all the time."

"Not all the time," Kylie said. "Just most of the time."

Miranda shrugged. "Anyway, do you think you can help me snag Socks so I can see if I got the spell right? Perry listened to me practice for an hour. I want to fix this." Miranda frowned. "I feel like a screw-up."

"You're not a screw-up." Kylie looked down at the floor. "Come here, Socks. Come here, baby."

Miranda fell back on the mattress. "I feel like one, especially when my Wiccan sisters tease me about it. I suck at being a witch."

"They tease you about Socks?" Kylie asked.

"Yeah, not that I blame them. I messed up."

"Screw them," Kylie said. "You should figure out how to curse them with a dose of dyslexia and see how they deal with it."

"They're really not being mean," Miranda said.

“But it hurts you.” Anger for Miranda burned Kylie’s chest. She hated bullies. Hated people who put other people down so they could feel better about themselves.

Miranda popped back up. “But they’re just teasing.” She knelt and tapped her fingers on the floor. “Here, kitty, kitty.”

Miranda’s words seemed to be sucked up by the shadows in the corners of the room. Kylie lowered her foot from the bed and swiped her heel against the bed ruffle.

She waited to feel Socks attack her ankle. The only thing she felt was an icy cold leaking from beneath the bed skirt. An icy cold that gave Kylie a bad feeling.

She looked at Miranda. “Why don’t you go outside and I’ll ... I’ll bring him to you. He’ll probably come out when you leave.” For some reason the room seemed to grow darker. Kylie hoped Socks was all that would come out.

Miranda stood. “I don’t know why he doesn’t like me,” she muttered, and walked out.

Kylie cautiously stood and stared down at the bed ruffle. “Socks? Kitty?”

No little skunk came scampering from beneath the bed. No soft meow whispered from beneath to let her know he was okay.

Taking a deep breath, she got on her hands and knees and stared at the unmoving ruffle. She fought the temptation to breathe on it. For some odd reason, she wanted to see something move; the odd stillness of the material didn’t feel right. Nothing felt right.

She reached for the cotton material to peer beneath it, praying all she’d find was one scared skunk. Kylie’s fingers almost touched the ruffle when a sound—a moan or a strangled cry—whispered from beneath the bed. She jerked her hand back. Her breath caught. That didn’t sound like Socks at all.

An icy and unnatural cold snaked from under the bed. Steam billowed out from the bed skirt. Fear, ugly, raw fear filled her chest. She glanced back at the door. Wished she could leave. Knew she couldn’t. Instinct told her Socks wasn’t alone under that bed.

Still on her hands and knees, she took one tiny knee shift backward. How

many times as a child had she feared a monster under the bed? How many times had her mom promised that monsters didn't exist? That moan sounded again.

Her mom was wrong. A monster, or something equally scary, lurked right under Kylie's bed.

She couldn't blame her mom for the lie. Mom didn't know.

But Kylie did.

Not that it mattered. Unwilling to abandon her pet, trying to settle her pounding heart, she reached again for the bed skirt. Right before her two fingers caught the cotton fabric, a hand shot out.

Her own scream faded into the shadows as the cold, dead hand grasped Kylie's arm and yanked her forward.

She fought for freedom, clawed at the fingers, twisted her arm, anything to pry it loose. Nothing worked.

"Help!" she screamed, but no one answered. The clasp around her wrist tightened, dragging her closer. The last thing she saw was the bed ruffle sliding over her face as she slipped into dark oblivion. Her last thought before her mind went numb was that she was finally going to meet the monster living under her bed.

Chapter Ten

Kylie lay flat on her back, cloaked in darkness. Deep, black darkness. *Just a vision. It's not real. Not real.*

Something on each side of her pressed tight against her forearms. It felt real. She tried to move, but couldn't. Fear swelled inside her. She tasted the bitterness of it on her tongue.

Disoriented, she tried to make sense of it. Inhaling, she smelled the earth. Wet, moist dirt. She wasn't under the bed. Where was she? An answer came and she wished it hadn't. She was buried. Another scream filled her throat, but logic told her this wasn't real. *Just a vision.*

But from who? And what? Holiday?

The sound of Kylie's own breath leaving her lips sounded too loud. Instantly, she realized she wasn't alone. It wasn't the sound of someone else breathing. No one breathed but her. Yet the grip on her wrist hadn't loosened. Whoever had dragged her under here hadn't left—someone still clung to her wrist as if that person's very life depended on it. Unfortunately, Kylie knew it was too late. Only she was alive.

"Why am I here?" She tried to move again but felt somehow constricted.

No answer came.

Blinking, her vision slowly adjusted to the darkness. She saw the pattern of old wood a few inches from her face.

She tried to pull her wrist away from the tight grip, but the hold only tightened.

"*Oh, shit. What have you guys done?*" A familiar voice echoed in the darkness.

Holiday.

"I'm in here," Kylie called out. Only this time no words left her mouth. She couldn't speak.

"Cara M. said she could help us get out of here," another female voice answered.

Footsteps sounded above. The wood panel creaked. Dust and dirt sifted down on Kylie's face. She blinked the grit from her eyes and tried to hold her breath so she didn't choke.

"He's leaving," someone whispered.

Kylie blinked, and when she opened her eyes, everything had changed. She stood in an old dilapidated cabin, staring down at the creaky wooden boards beneath her feet. Then, as if the floor faded, Kylie saw what lay hidden below.

Three decaying bodies lay positioned shoulder to shoulder. A scream spilled from Kylie's lips. She tried to run, but her feet felt frozen. She tried to look away, but couldn't.

One corpse was a woman with dark hair, probably in her early twenties, wearing a nightgown. The second was a blond around the same age wearing a familiar waitress outfit with a nametag on it that read CARA M. And the third ... Oh God! Holiday.

Tears filled her eyes. Kylie screamed louder when she realized she once again lay flat on her back. Darkness swallowed her up. Panic tightened when she felt something moving at her side. Adrenaline surged through her veins. She leapt up and banged her head so hard, it rattled her brain. She collapsed on her back again.

"Where the hell are you?" A voice echoed around her. A familiar voice. Della's voice. "Mofol!" Light suddenly filled Kylie's vision. "What are you doing under there?"

Kylie gasped, swallowed her scream, and realized she lay on her bedroom floor with a shivering Socks plastered to her side.

"You are just too friggin' weird." Della, looking half-pissed and half-asleep, stood over Kylie holding the bed up above her head. Yes, the whole twin bed—frame and mattress. Holding it up as if it were nothing more than a

lightweight piece of foam.

Socks let out a pathetic meow.

Afraid Della might drop the bed, Kylie snatched up the little skunk and lunged to her feet. Her knees wobbled; the skunk trembled in her arms. She glanced down, praying it would be her bedroom floor and not a grave.

No grave. No dead girls. No dead Holiday.

Kylie inhaled. As much as she wanted to push the gruesome memory from her brain, she couldn't. Something in the vision might help her. Help her figure it out so she could prevent it from happening. Help her save Holiday's life.

"What the hell is going on?" Della asked again. "Or do I not want to know?"

"Sorry. Bad dream." Kylie's voice shook.

Della dropped the bed. It banged and clattered on the floor.

"Is there a ghost here?" Della glanced around, obviously not believing Kylie's bad dream excuse.

Kylie took a second to feel the temperature. "No," she said honestly.

Della studied her, her expression softening. "Are you okay?"

Kylie nodded and watched Della's frown return.

"And you aren't going to explain this?" Della asked.

Kylie shook her head. Della really didn't want to know.

"Then good night!" The little vamp shot out of the room, leaving as quickly as she'd come.

Kylie breathed in. Breathed out. Tried to calm her racing heart.

She tried to see the bright side—the bright side of being in a grave with three decaying bodies.

Not an easy task.

However, at least she had something to go on. But would it help her? Oh, God, it had to, didn't it?

She pulled Socks closer, offering comfort and trying to take comfort in holding something as scared as she was. It might have worked if the loud knock on her window didn't have her heart slamming against her rib cage. Kylie jumped clear across the room.

Another scream rose in her chest, but before she released it, she spotted Miranda peering through, her palm pressed against the glass.

“You coming?” she yelled. “We’re going to lose the first light.”

The cold filled the room. And so did the spirit. Kylie looked over at the ghost who looked just like Holiday. *“I’m so sorry. She shouldn’t have done that.”*

Kylie tried not to envision Holiday, or God help her, the Holiday lookalike, as she had appeared in the grave. “It’s okay,” Kylie said, and she meant it. She could do this. If hanging out with dead people would save Holiday, she’d do it. Heck, she’d dance with the dead if it meant saving Holiday.

“I need to know things,” Kylie said. “You need to show me things so I can figure out how to help you.”

“Show you what?” Miranda asked.

Kylie ignored Miranda.

The spirit shook her head. *“I told you, I don’t think I’m the one you have to help.”*

And wasn’t that just like Holiday, Kylie thought, too damn stubborn to accept help. Even in ghost form.

“The only help I need is you to bring out Socks,” Miranda called from the window again.

“You should go,” Holiday said. *“That little fellow would like to be a cat again.”*

Kylie looked at Miranda and then back to the spirit. “How do you know what he wants?”

“It’s one of my gifts; I can communicate with animals.”

“No, you can’t,” Kylie said. Or Holiday couldn’t communicate with animals. Did supernaturals who passed over change their gifts? Kylie didn’t think so. Did that mean this wasn’t Holiday? And if so, who was she?

“Fine, you want him to stay a skunk,” Miranda said in her irate voice.

Socks chose that moment to put his paw over his eyes and Kylie moaned.

* * *

A few minutes later, Kylie walked out behind the cabin with Socks held close to her chest. It was still dark and quiet, as if the world hadn't woken up yet. Unlike her, the world didn't get woken up by witches or visions of dead people.

The air held an early morning chill, one of the first signs that summer had outworn its welcome and fall waited nearby to fill its shoes.

When she took another step, she felt it. The calling. Her gaze shot to the edge of woods. Her heart raced and the temptation to move closer whispered her name like an old friend.

Kylie took one step, almost answering the unexplainable yearning, but Miranda's voice pulled her back. "What took you so long?"

"I had to get him out from under the bed," Kylie said, not in the mood to do this, but she remembered the insecurity in Miranda's voice when they'd talked earlier about the other witches giving her a hard time about the goof. Since the first morning light lasted only a few minutes, it was a small price to pay for Miranda's happiness. Then Kylie would sit down and rehash what she'd gotten from the dream. Something in there had to help her make sense of the visions.

Miranda, holding her little black pouch of magic herbs, led Kylie around to the back. "I haven't mistreated him. I have no idea why he doesn't like me."

"I know." But after a month of Miranda following the skunk around trying different spells, Socks had grown leery of her. Kylie would have grown leery of her, too.

Miranda looked up at the eastern sky and saw the light. "It's time." She did a little happy dance. "Put him down."

Kylie gave Socks's black-and-white fur a soft stroke. As crazy as it sounded, she would miss his skunk side. Savoring the sight of him in skunk form one last time, she set him down and backed up, giving Miranda space to work her magic. Of course, Socks started following her, not wanting to be left behind.

"Stay," Kylie said, and motioned for Miranda to start.

Miranda began chanting. Something about light and your true self. Socks

started forward again. Miranda waved at Kylie to catch him. Kylie spoke gently to the skunk and he stopped moving. Then, reaching into her bag, Miranda pulled out a pinch of a strange herblike substance. She tossed it in the air over Socks; a few pieces popped and sizzled as they rained down around him.

Kylie held her breath, waiting to see her beloved pet transform into a feline. But nope. The little animal with a white stripe down his back remained in his skunk form.

Miranda frowned up at the sky and commenced chanting again. She tossed more herbs in the air. This time, Socks rose up on his short skunk legs and swatted his tiny paws at the sparkles.

Yet even after all the sizzle of crackling herbs, he remained the same black-and-white skunk. Miranda looked back at the sky as if desperate and commenced another chant.

She held up her little black bag over his head and just shook it down on the animal.

Socks spotted the string hanging from the pouch and leapt up in the air to catch it. When Miranda pulled it back, Socks started to leave.

“Stop him!” Miranda’s frustration rang loud and extra clear.

Kylie knelt and waved the little guy back. His beady black eyes looked at Kylie with confusion. Empathy for her pet filled her chest.

Miranda started to chant again.

Socks tried to escape again.

Miranda insisted Kylie stop him again.

It continued for several more minutes until Kylie held up her hand. “This isn’t going to work.”

“It has to,” Miranda said. “I only have another few minutes of first sun. Just keep him there.”

As if Socks understood, he darted between Miranda’s legs.

“No,” Miranda said.

Kylie caught the confused animal. “I think he’s had enough,” she offered in her most sympathetic voice.

“But he’s still a skunk. Put him down. I can do this. I *have* to.”

Kylie understood Miranda's need to prove herself, but ... "Can't you try again tomorrow?"

"One more chant. Really quick, please? All he has to do is stand there."

Relenting, Kylie set Socks down and Miranda went back to reciting some fancy spell.

When Miranda stopped and Socks was still a skunk, Kylie gave Miranda a look of condolence. "It's okay. We'll try another time," Kylie said, beginning to lose her patience.

"Wait. I forgot to bless the light and wind." Miranda paused as if recalling the words.

Kylie held her hand out, pinky first, and muttered, "Why can't you just wave your pinky at him and say, 'Change back into a cat'?"

The pieces of herbs left on the ground shot up in the air. They crackled and popped around the little skunk and then started swirling around him like a tiny tornado. Socks, raised up on his hind legs, swatted at the bits of herb.

And then, just like magic—well, it *was* magic—Socks the skunk disappeared and Socks the feline appeared.

Miranda gaped at Kylie. "How did you do that?"

Kylie's gaze shot back to her kitten, still batting at the sparkling herbs floating around him. "I didn't do that!" She stared at Miranda.

"Oh, my gawd!" Miranda squealed.

Someone whisked past them in a blur.

"What the hell is it now?" Della came to a jolting stop by Miranda.

"She's a witch." Miranda pointed at Kylie. "You're a witch."

Kylie shook her head. She was a chameleon. "I didn't do that. It was you. Just ... a delayed reaction."

"No. You're a witch. Right now, you're a witch."

Della rolled her eyes. "What the hell?"

"I'm telling you, I didn't do that," Kylie insisted.

And she hadn't. Had she?

Della squinted at Kylie.

"Mofo!" Della said.

Miranda slapped her forehead a couple of times. "Your pattern says you

are a witch.”

“What’s wrong?” A deep voice came from behind Kylie.

Kylie turned around. Derek, looking disheveled as if he’d climbed out of bed in a hurry, came running up.

“She’s a witch,” Miranda screeched.

“No,” Kylie said. Swinging around, she stared at Socks, still in feline form. Her father had told her she was a chameleon. Her father would know, right? Sure, she hadn’t wanted to be a lizard at first, but she’d accepted it. Besides, why would her father lie?

From the corner of her vision, she saw Derek move in front of her. His brow pinched.

“It’s not true, is it?” Kylie waited for Derek to deny it.

Doubt filled her. Had Daniel lied? Had her grandmother just been confused when she told Kylie’s father they were chameleons? But why would Burnett have heard of chameleons if they didn’t exist? Why did her life have to be so damn difficult?

“Tell me already!” Kylie insisted. “Am I a witch?”

Chapter Eleven

Derek nodded. "It's true. Your pattern says you're a witch."

Miranda folded her arms against her chest. "Don't you want to be a witch?" She sounded offended.

"Of course she doesn't want to be witch," Della mouthed off, still looking pissed at being woken up. "It's boring as hell. You don't do anything but throw herbs around and the only way you can fly is on a broom."

"It's not boring! And I do not fly on a broom! I swear, one witch did that and now we all get stereotyped." Miranda's eyes tightened with anger.

"Admit it," Della said. "If you had the power to change yourself, you'd be a vampire."

Miranda vehemently shook her head. "Who would want to be a bloodsucking, cold bitch with fangs!"

Kylie stared at the two of them verbally sparring, tossing insults so fast she couldn't even keep up. Then, too befuddled to intervene, she grabbed Socks before he wandered off in the woods.

Her gaze shifted back to the trees. The woods still called to her. What the hell was going on?

Her mind whirled as she headed to the cabin. Derek fell in step beside her. His shirt, left unbuttoned, fluttered open, exposing his hard abs. Not that she really noticed. Okay, so she noticed, but it didn't mean anything. Except that she was female and females found shirtless guys appealing.

"You're feeling confused," Derek stated.

"Yup." She didn't slow down. She couldn't. She was too annoyed that she found him so appealing. Too annoyed at the damn woods calling her like an

old friend to come out and play. She didn't have any old friends. Not anyone looming in the woods.

"You're feeling betrayed," he said.

"Yup. Well, sort of." She continued to the cabin and snuggled her kitten to her chest. Her heart ached and the beginning of tears stung her eyes.

"And you're scared."

"Three out of three," she said. Yet all she felt now was ...

"Frustrated." Derek finished her thought for her.

She stopped and looked him dead in the eyes. "You don't have to tell me what I feel. I know what I'm feeling."

"And you're in a pissy mood," he added with a smile. When she didn't respond in kind, his humor faded. "Sorry. I'm just ... I want to understand."

"You know what I'm feeling; what more do you need to understand?" She stormed up the porch steps with Socks tucked under one arm, and yanked the door open so hard it made a loud banging sound when it hit the wall. Socks flinched. Derek followed her inside.

"I know your emotions, but I can only guess the reasons for them."

She dropped down on the sofa and held Socks in her lap. "Look, I'm in a really bad mood right now, and I suggest you might want to leave."

Derek dropped down beside her. He ignored what she said and continued, "For example, I know you're afraid, but what are you afraid of? Are you frustrated because you're a witch, or because your two best friends can't stop biting each other's heads off? And who are you feeling betrayed by right now? Is it me? Is it about..."

"No," she said before he mentioned Ellie and Kylie had to deal with those emotions as well. "It isn't you." Or maybe it was a little, she thought, remembering Miranda's comment about how she'd talked about Derek all the time.

"Is it about Lucas?" he asked. "You can tell me if it is. I want to help you and if it means listening to your issues with him, I'll do it."

She pulled Socks closer. "It isn't Lucas." But then she remembered their meeting last night, when Lucas had admitted to keeping secrets from her.

A long pause filled the room. Derek leaned in, his shoulder touched hers,

and his emotional healing abilities flowed over her like a welcome breath of fresh air. Kylie had no doubt that the touch was on purpose, that he'd meant to help her.

She stared at Socks, then at Derek, trying to slow down her emotional overload. Trying not to be a bitch.

"Tell me what you're afraid of. I want to help." He stared at her forehead. "Does being a witch scare you?"

"I'm not a witch," she said before she could stop herself. Even with his warm calm flowing through her, she felt her frustrations build. Then she recalled Socks's magical transformation. Had she done that?

"At least, I don't think I am. It's not that I don't want to be a witch, it's ... Why would my father tell me I was a chameleon if it wasn't true? I don't think my grandmother would make that up. And why would Burnett have heard about the species, if they didn't exist?"

"Burnett heard about it?" Derek asked.

She nodded. "Nothing concrete, just read it in some of the reports." She touched her forehead. What did all this mean? "Is my pattern really showing that I'm a witch?"

He nodded, as if afraid to disappoint her, then asked, "What's going on? I woke up this morning after a terrible nightmare. I couldn't remember it, but the point of it was that you were in trouble. When I was alert enough, I realized that maybe you really were in trouble and I'd just dreamed what I was reading from you. Then I felt all these other emotions from you. Is this about the ghost? Holiday's ghost?"

The vision she'd had flashed in her head like a bad movie clip. She closed her eyes, trying to shut it off, and searching for what to say to Derek. Tell him, or not tell him?

"I had a vision," she finally said, needing to confide in someone—needing to filter through everything she'd learned from the vision. "There were three bodies in a grave."

"Three? So it's like a serial killer?"

Socks moved from her lap and tucked his face into the curve of her arm, almost as if he understood what Derek had said. Kylie brushed her hand

down his soft black feline fur. Feline. Had she done this? Had she changed him back?

“I think so.” Kylie bit down on her lip and pushed those questions away to concentrate on something more important. “Holiday, or the one who looks like Holiday, was one of them.” She recalled all the things her gut insisted might be important. “They were buried below some kind of an old cabin.” Her chest tightened. “Seeing Holiday like that was ... hard.”

“I can imagine,” Derek said. “Didn’t you tell me that the visions were like puzzles to help you figure things out?”

She nodded. “But it wasn’t the one who looked like Holiday that brought me into the vision. It was one of the other girls. I think she wants to be found, so they can leave the makeshift grave. So I’m still not sure if the vision is going to help me. Or maybe it can. I don’t know.” Her chest clutched. “Why can’t they just tell me what they need?”

“Maybe if you tell me about it, I can help figure it out.”

She looked at Derek. “How?”

“I worked for a PI. I sort of know how to dig things up. I’m good at it.”

Kylie scratched Socks under his kitty chin as she tried to think of anything that might help them understand the vision. “One of the girls had on a waitress uniform. Like from a diner or something. For some reason, the uniform looked familiar. And she had a name tag on that said ‘Cara M.’ The others even called her Cara M., not just Cara, as if they didn’t really know her but were calling her that because of her name tag.”

“That’s good,” Derek said. “Maybe you should make a list of all the dinerlike restaurants you’ve been to lately. I’ll go online and see if I can find what their uniforms look like.”

As Kylie’s mind tried to latch on to any other details that might help, she recalled the spirit’s visit right before she’d gone outside to bring Socks to Miranda.

“What’s puzzling you?” he asked, sensing her emotions.

Kylie watched her kitten—still finding it hard to believe that he wasn’t a skunk anymore—leap down from the sofa. “The spirit told me that Socks wanted to be changed back into a cat. When I asked how she knew that, she

said that she could communicate with animals.”

“Holiday can’t read animals.” Derek’s eyes widened. “Wait. She can’t, but she knows someone ... someone close to her that is full fairy and actually had a little of the ability to do so.”

“Are you sure?” Kylie asked.

“She told me during one of our counseling sessions.”

“Did she say who it was?”

“No, but ... I got the feeling it was someone close. I also got the feeling that it was someone who’d hurt her, because I felt her emotions when she talked about her. And then she changed the subject.”

Kylie nodded. Holiday was good at changing the subject when it came to something personal. “So, if this person was close to Holiday, then it would be understandable why she would take on Holiday’s appearance as a ghost.” Kylie chewed on that thought for a moment, feeling some relief. And it gave her the first real hope that Holiday wasn’t in danger.

Kylie sighed. The early morning sun must have risen higher, because she watched as the first gold rays spilled through the window and cast shadows on the wood floor. “So how do we find out who this person is?”

“I can bring it up again in our next counseling session with Holiday. It’s this afternoon. Like I said, she didn’t want to talk about it, but maybe I can sneak it into the conversation.”

Derek’s words pulled Kylie away from the problem at hand. “You get counseling sessions from Holiday?”

He frowned. “Not counseling like my-head’s-messed-up counseling. We just chat ... like you two do.”

“I didn’t mean it was a bad thing. I just didn’t know you met with her regularly.”

“I have since I came here.”

“I knew you were in the beginning, but I didn’t think you still did.”

“I didn’t for a while. But since I’ve been back ... I see her now.”

Before Kylie could stop herself, the question slipped out. “Do you talk about me?”

“Some,” he admitted, looking guilty.

She almost asked for details, but wisdom slipped in. She didn't need to know. Especially if it was about his feelings for her. The less she heard, or even thought, about his confession of love, the better off she'd be.

Her gaze, as if it had a mind of its own, lowered again to his bare chest. Reprimanding herself, she popped off the sofa. "I think I'll go talk to Holiday now about this whole witch issue."

"Are you going to mention the vision?"

She considered the question, but her heart said no. The message came with such certainty that she wondered if she wasn't getting some divine advice. "Not yet. If I don't get anything in a day or so, I think I should."

He nodded. "I'll get busy later trying to figure out what I can." He stood up. "Let's go." The sun spilling through the window hit his chest, making his bare skin look even more golden.

"That's okay," she sputtered. "You don't have to ... tag along."

Disappointment flashed in his green eyes. "Yes, I do. I'm your shadow until after breakfast."

Oh, great. Her gaze slipped down to his open shirt again. Was she going to have to look, or try not to look, at his chest all morning? "Then at least button your shirt." The words were out before she realized how that sounded.

The disappointment in his eyes vanished and a sexy twinkle took its place. The twinkle brought out the gold flecks in his irises, which she used to admire so much.

"Why?" he asked. "Does it bother you?"

She glared at him. "Don't go there." Then to make her point even clearer, she held up her pinky at him. "I might have powers you don't want to mess with. And since I don't know how to use them, I could really mess a person up. By accident, of course."

He held up his hands in complete submission. "I won't go there. I swear." But the sexy grin on his lips remained as he started buttoning his shirt.

Freaking great, Kylie thought. He'd probably read her emotions and assumed she still found him attractive. Which she did, but not in the way he thought. Okay, so it was in the way he thought but it didn't mean anything. Or so she tried to tell herself as she took off for the front door.

Derek followed right behind her.

When they walked past her two roommates still tossing threats at each other, Kylie didn't even look back. If they were really going to tear each other's body parts off, they would have done it by now. Right?

* * *

"Don't panic," Holiday said after Kylie walked in, pointed to her forehead, and explained she might have pulled off a bit of abracadabra and changed Socks back into a kitten.

"Panicking is never good." But she couldn't stop staring at Kylie's pattern.

It might not be good, but Kylie could see panic in Holiday's eyes. Well, maybe it wasn't so much panic as it was sheer befuddlement. No doubt Kylie shared the same expression. Though hers probably *was* panic. And not all because she'd turned into a witch. It was more about seeing Holiday, and the images of the vision that were now popping up like flash cards in her mind. The vision Kylie still sensed she didn't need to share with the camp leader.

"Okay, exactly what happened?" Holiday asked.

"Just what I said." Kylie plopped down in the chair across her desk. "Miranda was trying to change him back with all these fancy spells, but not having any luck. I was concerned about Socks; he didn't want to be there. So I pointed my pinky at him and blurted out something like, 'Why can't you just say, change back into a kitten.' And it happened."

Holiday nodded and continued to stare at Kylie's pattern as if she expected it to change.

"Am I really a witch?"

The fae's brow puckered. "Yes. But ... yesterday you were a human and before that you were ... a pattern no one could recognize."

"So you think it'll go away?"

Holiday looked apologetic before she even spoke. "I don't know for sure but ... more than likely, you're a witch. I mean, if you really have powers."

"But the powers could go away, too." Kylie sighed.

"But ... if you have powers then you obviously have the witch DNA.

Unlike a pattern, DNA is pretty permanent,” Holiday said, but she didn’t sound sure of anything. “Then again, witches don’t have speed the way you have when you run, or sensitive hearing. Most wouldn’t have the type of healing gifts you have, either. And very few of them dreamscape.” Now Holiday was thinking out loud more than talking to Kylie. “Of course, it could all be related to you being a protector. Or it might be because of the hybrid mix. Some hybrid mixes have—”

“How about ghost whispering? Do witches have that?” Kylie asked.

“A few have it, but not all.” Holiday touched her chin, as though completely puzzled. “But what’s really odd is that you’re appearing to be a hundred percent witch now. But I guess your being a protector could maybe ... affect that.”

She slumped back in her chair as if stumped. “Have you tried to see if you could do anything else?”

“Do what?” Kylie asked.

“Magic?”

“No,” Kylie said. “What if I screw something up? Like Miranda does. I could turn someone into a kangaroo or even something worse.”

“I doubt you would do that. Why don’t you just try to move something?” Holiday pushed a leather, heart-shaped, sand-filled paperweight to the edge of her desk.

“I don’t know.” Kylie bit down on her lip. “It’s totally freaky.”

“Not really. Just try.” She made a funny face. “And be prepared to duck if we have to.”

“Oh, that makes me feel so much better,” Kylie said.

Holiday grinned. “Try it.”

Kylie took in a deep breath. Then, pointing her pinky at the red heart, she said, “Move.”

Nothing happened. Kylie exhaled and grinned. “See, I’m not a witch.”

Then the paperweight started to jiggle ... or beat. At least that’s what it looked like it was doing. Beating, pumping, as if it were a real heart.

“Shit!” Kylie said, and either there was an echo in the room or Holiday spurted out the same word. “Did I make it come alive?”

Holiday didn't answer; she was too busy watching the throbbing heart. Then the thing floated up and shot across the room. "Duck!" Holiday screamed.

Kylie dropped to the floor just as the paperweight whizzed past.

Unfortunately, Burnett walked into the room.

The heart went right for him.

Chapter Twelve

The heart paperweight hit him in the chest. Shocked, he tried to catch it, but missed. It bounced off his wide, masculine upper body and whizzed off. It stopped in the middle of the room, hung in the air like something filled with helium, and then it rocketed forward, aiming again for Burnett. And like the first time, it didn't miss.

But this blow was much ... much worse.

Right in the crotch. Or as Della would say, his "boys" took a direct hit.

"What the hell!" he growled. He doubled over in pain. The heart moved back, and he snatched the leather-covered, sand-filled paperweight from the air, and squeezed it until it burst. Unfortunately, when the sand exploded from his tight fist, it regrouped in the shape of a heart and managed to hover in the air.

"Is Miranda in here?" Burnett growled, still doubled over.

Kylie, realizing the screwed-up witch he sought was her, raised her hand and said, "Stop." When nothing happened, she remembered to extend her pinky. "Stop!"

The sand fell to the floor and scattered like ... well, like sand.

Holiday sat back up in her chair, looking too stunned to speak.

Burnett, fist still pressed into his thigh, rose up to his full height.

"Damn!" Holiday muttered finally.

"Damn!" Burnett echoed.

Kylie looked from the shocked Holiday to the hurting vampire. Kylie thought his outburst was due to the pain, but nope. He stared at her forehead.

"Interesting," said Holiday.

“Strange,” Burnett followed, never taking his eyes off Kylie’s forehead.

“Just lovely!” muttered Kylie. Their dumbfounded expressions were a foreshadowing of what was to come at breakfast. Leave it to Kylie to be the mealtime freak-show entertainment.

“You’re a witch,” Burnett said in disbelief.

“Appears that way,” Holiday agreed.

“No. I’m a chameleon.” And each time Kylie said it, she believed it a little more. It didn’t matter that she could reverse spells and turn animals back into their normal form, or that she’d sent a heart flying around the room and ball-busted a vampire. Her father told her she was a chameleon and she believed him.

“Maybe chameleon means something else,” Holiday said. “Maybe it has something to do with you being a protector. For that matter, all the other gifts could be due to that as well.” The camp leader’s phone rang. As if needing a distraction, she eyed the caller ID. Raising her gaze, she met Kylie’s gaze with empathy.

“What now?” Kylie bellowed.

“It’s ... Tom Galen, your stepfather.”

Just lovely, Kylie thought. A call this early couldn’t be about anything good. So, what new disaster did he want to add to the mix?

“Is everything okay?” Derek shot inside the office door. “I heard a commotion,” he muttered.

“No,” Kylie said just before Holiday answered the call. “At this particular moment, I can’t think of one single thing that’s okay.”

* * *

After breakfast, Kylie and Miranda walked out of the dining hall to head back to the cabin. Della had some kind of meeting with Burnett. Kylie had begged out of Meet Your Campmate hour due to her sucky start of the day. Plus she was supposed to go to the falls with Holiday and Burnett as soon as Burnett talked with Della.

“They like you. They’re just surprised,” Miranda said, apologizing for the entire witch group, who’d done nothing but gape at Kylie’s forehead during

breakfast. “I mean, we all thought you were vampire or werewolf. Some people had bets on you being a shape-shifter, but none of us ever thought you’d turn out to be one of us.”

“You seriously took bets on what I was?” Kylie asked.

“A couple of warlocks started it.” She frowned. “Sorry. If it makes you feel better, I lost five bucks.”

Kylie shook her head in disbelief. Not that it was just the Wiccan gals or guys reacting. The entire Shadow Falls breakfast crowd had ignored their runny eggs and raw bacon and had eyes only for Kylie’s newly emerged witch brain pattern. Or they had until Della, bless her cold heart, tried to help.

The vampire had vaulted up in the air a good five feet, landing with big thump on top of the table—her black tennis shoes landing half on and half off several campers’ trays of food. Then with concern for Kylie, Della announced that Kylie had just whispered a curse and anyone gawking at her forehead would be turned into a flatulent goose.

It was, of course, a bald-faced lie. Since Kylie had sent the heart paperweight zipping around the room, she’d been super-conscientious about not moving her pinky. Not an easy feat either when trying to fork up runny eggs. Nevertheless, her two pinky fingers were on time-out until Kylie figured out the witch thing.

Kylie stopped out front of the office and debated popping in and asking Holiday if she’d ever gotten in touch with her stepfather. The two were playing phone tag. Kylie also wanted to check and see if Burnett had heard from Malcolm Summers, her real grandfather.

He’d told Burnett he would be here tomorrow, but what were the chances of that happening now when he’d had his phone disconnected and dropped off the face of the earth? Kylie suspected it was because of Burnett’s tie with the FRU. Then again, maybe he just didn’t care about her. It wasn’t as if he’d even known his own son, her father.

That thought stung until she realized it didn’t make sense. If it were true, why would he and her aunt have come to the camp pretending to be her father’s adoptive parents? The fact that they’d come disguised as humans reinforced that he didn’t trust someone at Shadow Falls. And that someone

had to be Burnett because of his connections to the FRU.

“Don’t you just love Della?” Miranda asked. “She’s a pain in the ass, but when it’s about protecting us, she steps up to the plate, or on the plates.” She giggled. “I’ll bet she stomped on about six breakfast platters this morning.”

“I know. She’s great.” Even if the plan backfired.

“I mean, really? A flatulent goose? Where does she get these ideas?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kylie muttered. Frankly, she wasn’t even completely sure what flatulent meant. Nevertheless, feeling overwhelmed, she decided to chalk it up to a learning experience. Not only did she have a word definition to look up, but she’d learned another important lesson—that being stared at wasn’t any worse than when people refused to look at you. Nope, not one person chanced even giving her a quick peek after Della’s warning. Flatulent must be really bad.

“This is still so cool. You are a witch like me!” Miranda rubbed her hands together with complete glee.

Kylie wished she shared Miranda’s optimism. “I still don’t believe it. I don’t care that even Holiday half believes it,” Kylie said, and then added, “You do know it could change, right? I was all human and now I’m not.” And her dad told her she was a chameleon. She believed him.

“But this is the first time you’ve shown a real supernatural pattern, so it’s probably real.” The little witch did a butt-wiggling victory dance. “Aren’t you over-the-moon excited?”

For Miranda’s sake, Kylie plastered a smile on her face, but the over-the-moon comment repeated in her head, reminding her of a certain werewolf.

“I wonder why Lucas wasn’t at breakfast,” she said aloud. Not that she was all that eager to tell him the news.

“I don’t know,” Miranda said, still wearing her toothpaste ad smile. Then her smile faded. “Are you worried he’ll be disappointed that you aren’t were?”

“No,” Kylie said, not sure if it was an out-and-out lie. She wasn’t worried he’d be disappointed; she was worried he would be devastated. Her heartstrings gave her a few emotional pulls and a knot tightened in her throat.

“Is there any legendary bad blood between weres and witches?” Kylie

asked.

“Nothing that I know of,” Miranda said. “I mean, weres don’t typically like any race but their own. But they don’t dislike witches as badly as they do vampires.”

Kylie supposed she should be grateful she hadn’t morphed into a vamp.

Then again, she had a feeling nothing other than her turning into a were would make her acceptable to Lucas’s family and pack. Could their relationship survive the prejudices?

“Do you want to go to the cabin and try out a few spells?”

“Oh, hell no! I don’t want to goof anything up.”

“You won’t,” Miranda said. “I’ll be with you. I won’t let you mess up.”

Right, like you’ve never messed up. The words shot from Kylie’s brain and landed on the tip of her tongue, but she managed to swallow them. Just because she was hurting didn’t give her the right to hurt others.

“You’re just nervous. You gotta trust me.” Miranda’s bright smile widened even more. “We witches have to stick together.”

“Sorry,” Kylie said. “I’ve already managed to zap Burnett in the balls with a paperweight. I’m taking the day off.”

“Seriously? You did that?” Miranda snorted with laughter, causing frowns from the group of weres walking past.

Kylie spotted Will and called out. “Will?”

The dark-haired, brown-eyed teen turned around and appeared annoyed. Was it rude to call a were’s name? Or was his expression due to more personal reasons? Were all of Lucas’s pack members going to start giving her the cold shoulder?

“Yes?” His tone matched his expression.

Kylie moved a few feet away from Miranda. Standing in front of Will, she tried not to let his discontent intimidate her. “Lucas wasn’t at breakfast. I was wondering if you know where he is.”

Will glanced at the woods, as if stalling. While Kylie couldn’t read minds, it was almost as if he were trying to come up with a lie. Why?

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

He motioned the other weres to go ahead. Then he waited for them to get

out of hearing range before he spoke.

That had to mean something was wrong, didn't it?

"Lucas was summoned by the Council," Will finally said.

"Is that a bad thing? Is he in trouble?"

"I ... don't know. That's between him and the Council."

Concern pricked at Kylie's mind. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No." He shuffled his feet against the rocky path, then glanced off at the woods again before facing her. "I'm sorry," he added, and something about the tone in which he offered the apology, even the sincerity in his eyes, told Kylie he meant it—but why? For what was he apologizing?

"What are you not telling me?" she asked. "Please just tell me."

"If you have questions, you should ask Lucas, not me."

"So something is going on?" She stepped closer, feeling her heart beating against her ribs. Without warning, her gaze shifted to the woods, and she felt it again. As if the trees were calling her name. But with her heart stuck on her concern for Lucas, she focused on the problem at hand, and on Will. "Is it about me?"

Will's discontent grew more noticeable in his frowning expression. "I don't know. I have to go." He walked away. She watched him leave, silently, and got a nagging feeling that something was brewing.

Will disappeared down the path. Kylie's heart remained on Lucas, but her gaze shifted back to the woods where the trees slowly stirred in the gentle breeze. It was the oddest feeling, like being really thirsty and seeing a glass of water. This feeling, the calling, was even stronger than the call to the falls.

What the hell was going on?

Miranda cleared her throat, and Kylie glanced back at her roommate. "Are you okay?" Miranda asked, and moved closer.

Kylie rolled her eyes. "Why does everyone ask that question when it's obvious that I'm not?"

"Probably wishful thinking," Miranda answered, bumping Kylie with her shoulder, and smiling in sympathy. "Don't worry. If Lucas likes you enough, things will work out. It did for Perry and me."

Kylie breathed in. Then she breathed out. She started walking again,

consciously fighting the temptation to take a flying leap into the woods—to figure out who it was and why they wanted her attention so desperately.

They walked another five minutes without talking. Kylie concentrated on the rhythmic sound of her own footsteps, which created a sense of calm. But the scream, a cry of sheer panic, pretty much shot that calm all to hell.

Kylie stopped so fast she nearly tripped and grabbed Miranda's elbow to steady herself. The sound came from the very place she felt lured—the woods. Deep in the woods.

“What is it?” Miranda asked.

Kylie looked at her. “You don't hear that?”

Miranda tilted her head. “Hear what?”

Kylie stepped a foot or two closer to the woods and tried to identify the voice of the screamer. The high-pitched sound told Kylie it was female, but there were no notes of familiarity to it. None.

It didn't matter. She felt it—the familiar fizz, the telltale buzz in her blood that happened when she moved into protective mode.

Her breath caught in her throat; everything inside her said someone needed her. She had no choice but to answer the cry for help. She bolted toward the woods.

“Kylie!” Miranda screamed out. “Don't run!”

Right before Kylie entered the thicket of trees, she called back for Miranda to go get help.

And fast.

Chapter Thirteen

Kylie ran like the wind.

Nothing slowed her down. Nothing could.

Not the thick underbrush.

Not the overhanging limbs.

Not even the seven-foot barbed-wire fence telling her she was leaving Shadow Falls property. *Don't you dare leave Shadow Falls property.* She heard Burnett's warning ring in her head, but she ignored it. She followed the screams.

She even ignored her fear that she was running full-speed ahead into a trap set by Mario and his friends. It didn't matter. She was a protector. She had to protect.

After several minutes of running on pure adrenaline, her breath heavy, she sensed the scream and the screamer getting closer. Then she saw it.

Not the screamer.

She saw the fog—the thick, low-hanging cloud that moved over the underbrush, as if swallowing the ground up. It moved in a way that said the force behind it was more than Mother Nature. This was some unnatural power.

A power that traveled at breakneck speeds.

Logic told her to run, but the screams grew louder, and instinct kept her feet moving right into the mouth of the fog. Movement to the left caught her eyes. A girl raced to escape the thick mist. Her long black hair stirred around her head, reminding Kylie of the picture of Medusa she'd seen in a Greek mythology book.

Still a distance away, the girl's gaze met Kylie's. Relief sparked in the runner's eyes. Doubt sparked in Kylie.

Was this real, was the girl real, or was this another vision? Was the girl truly running for her life, or was she running from a death that had already claimed her?

Questions bounced around Kylie's mind as her feet hit the earth. Faster, she told herself when she saw the fog almost at the girl's heels. "Run faster," Kylie screamed.

Dead or alive, helping the stranger felt essential. The sound of the girl's rapid footfalls echoed through the trees, until her speed helped her escape the mouth of the fog.

Then, as if in slow motion, the girl tripped, lost her footing, and hit the ground. Hard.

The thud of her fall bounced off the trees.

Kylie watched in horror as the fog moved in. She pushed herself, sensing the need to reach the girl before the strange fog. The fizz in her blood gave her strength.

Coming to a sudden stop beside the lifeless body, Kylie snatched the unconscious girl into her arms. She weighed next to nothing. When Kylie looked up the fog was almost upon her. Running on instinct and perhaps panic, Kylie shot off.

Her feet pounded the underbrush into the ground. She hadn't gotten ten feet when the feeling of being lured hit her again. *Come to us. Come to us.* The wind, the trees, everything whispered the same message.

She stopped running. Her breaths came short, in and out. She swung around. "What do you want? Who are you?"

Her heart slammed against her rib cage. Cradling the girl closer, Kylie stared at the fog.

The thick gray cloud hovered twenty feet back, pulsating as if a heart beat within. The air around it stirred as if it breathed.

That's when she stopped being able to breathe, because ... because freaking hell, fog wasn't supposed to breathe. Fog wasn't supposed to be alive.

Before Kylie could react, the cloudlike air shifted and separated into two different masses. While she didn't sense an evil presence, she could no more deny the fear biting at her backbone than she could deny her own need for oxygen. Part of her instinct screamed to run, another part screamed to stay.

The fog inched back a few more feet as if it sensed Kylie's dread.

So she waited.

She watched.

She listened.

Listened to her name being called.

Kylie. Kylie.

Listened to the words spoken that came with the wind—whispered softly like a breeze stirring in the leaves. *We mean you no harm.*

"Who are you?" Kylie called out.

The girl in Kylie's arms shifted. The weight that had felt lifeless now stirred with life. Glancing down, she saw that blood oozed from the girl's brow. The need to get her help pulsed through Kylie's veins. She looked up again at the fog. The two different masses had taken shapes. Humanlike shapes.

Don't go.

Kylie's instinct to move the girl to safety swelled in her chest. To face the unknown alone was one thing. To do it with a bleeding girl in her care was another.

"I have to," Kylie answered, and turned to leave. She got only a few feet.

Stay.

There was something about the voice, a male voice. She glanced back over her shoulder; air caught in her chest.

Her grandfather? Was that not him? Then Kylie saw the woman and recognized her as her grandmother's sister. Tears filled Kylie's eyes.

She started to turn back but the girl in Kylie's arms screamed. She looked down. The girl's eyes shot open. Her dark blue irises stared up in bafflement and sent a bolt of familiarity rocketing through Kylie.

But she had no time to ponder. The blood oozing down the face of the girl came down faster. Kylie's instinct to get the girl to safety made her own

blood sizzle. How badly was this stranger hurt?

“Release me!” the girl ordered in a low growl, and tried to squirm free. “Release me!” she screamed again, and started to fight this time. Her strength told Kylie this was no human. Without Kylie’s protective powers, the girl would have easily won her freedom, but not now.

“In a minute.”

Kylie took flight—holding the squirming blue-eyed stranger close. *I’m sorry.* Kylie spoke the words in her head and prayed they would be heard by those she’d just left. She’d had no choice but to leave. Her need to protect bit down stronger than her own quest.

* * *

Clutching the screaming stranger in her arms, Kylie jumped over the barbed-wire fence. Once on Shadow Falls property, the silence in the woods seemed louder than the girl’s protests. Without warning, Kylie felt one, two, and then three whisks of air fly past her.

Then Burnett, Della, and a large bird—Perry—appeared beside her, all three moving at Kylie’s pace.

Kylie stopped running. So did the others. Tiny sparkling bubbles appeared beside Perry as he morphed back into human form.

The three of them stared at Kylie, or rather, they stared at the screaming girl in Kylie’s arms.

“Who is she?” Burnett asked.

“Don’t know.” Kylie’s breaths came short, her mind on her grandfather and great-aunt. “She was running from—”

“She’s a were,” Della interrupted. “I could smell her as soon as we passed.”

The girl stopped struggling against Kylie’s hold. Her voice deepened as she met Kylie’s eyes. “Release me now! Or you will regret this with your dying breath.” She raised her head and glared at Della and then Burnett. “All of you will regret it!”

Burnett spoke directly to Kylie’s package. “Give me your word that you will not run.”

She glared at him.

“If you do, I’ll catch you and I’ll be really pissed off.”

“If you’re fast enough,” the girl quipped.

“Oh, he’s fast enough.” Perry tossed in his two cents. “When he was fifteen, he chased down a shape-shifter in antelope form and kicked his antelope ass. There wasn’t enough of that animal left to make a rug.”

“Fine,” the stranger bit out. “I won’t run.”

Della moved in and stared at Perry. “You knew Burnett when he was fifteen and chasing antelopes?”

Releasing the girl, Kylie’s gaze collided with the antelope ass kicker himself. His expression prepared her for what came next. “I thought I made it clear you were not to go into the woods.”

Kylie nodded, but she refused to be reprimanded for doing what, for her, was as natural as breathing. “Someone was in danger.”

“You put yourself in danger.” His gaze shot back to the girl. “What were you running from?”

“Fog.” The girl wiped away the blood that oozed from her forehead. “It chased me.”

“Fog chased you?” Della snickered. “You smoking something?”

“She’s telling the truth.” Kylie almost told them about her grandfather, but something compelled her to think first ... speak later.

“Who are you?” Burnett asked the girl.

“Who are *you*?” the girl countered.

“Definitely were with that attitude,” Della muttered.

Perry laughed, then waved at the girl. “You’re bleeding. It’s dangerous to bleed in front of vampires.”

“Don’t worry,” Della said. “Were blood is nasty.”

The girl shot Della a cold look. Kylie got the feeling again, that something about this stranger was familiar.

Burnett spoke next. “I’m Burnett James, the camp leader of Shadow Falls, and you are trespassing.”

“You’re ... Burnett?” The girl showed the first bit of insecurity.

“She wasn’t trespassing,” Kylie spoke up. “I brought her across the

property lines.”

The female shot Kylie a look of surprise. “I don’t need you to defend me.”

“I wasn’t. Not really.”

Burnett’s body posture hardened, but his scowl targeted Kylie. “You left Shadow Falls property?”

“I heard her screaming.” The bleeding stranger pinched her brows, trying to read Kylie’s pattern. Was she still a witch? Or was her pattern doing something else weird?

“You...” The girl shook her head. “You’re a witch. How could you...”

Well, that answered that question, Kylie thought.

The girl turned her blue eyes back on Burnett. And just like that, Kylie knew who she was. The color of the eyes, the way she tilted her head, even her body language hit the mark.

“I’m—”

“Lucas’s sister,” Kylie said.

“Yes.” She focused on Kylie again. “I’m Clara Parker. Who are you?”

“Kylie Galen,” Kylie said.

Surprise widened the girl’s eyes. “But you’re a witch? I thought...” She paused. “And you ran and have strength like you’re either a were or ... a vamp.” The last word came out sounding like an insult.

Della growled. Burnett’s frown tightened.

The frustration of the whole witch issue came rushing back. “I’m just an evolving piece of art. Just call me the mealtime freak show here at Shadow Falls.”

“You’re not a freak,” mumbled Perry. “I’m the resident freak,” he said with pride.

Clara continued to stare at Kylie, and then she said, “Why was that fog chasing me? Did you do that with magic?”

“No, I didn’t do it.”

Burnett focused on Clara. “Your family is worried about you.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “They worry too much. I told them I was coming here.”

“You were expected two days ago,” Burnett reprimanded. “And just so you know, if you plan on staying on at Shadow Falls, we don’t like changes in plans without going through the proper channels.”

Clara arched her chin up as if to offer Burnett some lip. Remembering it was Lucas’s sister, Kylie intervened. “I’m sure she’ll adjust. Lucas will fill her in.”

“Where is my brother?” Clara insisted.

“He was called to visit the Council,” Burnett answered.

Kylie looked at Burnett and wondered if Lucas had told Burnett. If so, why hadn’t Lucas told her?

“Is something wrong between him and the Council?” Clara asked Burnett.

Kylie recalled Will’s odd behavior earlier when Kylie asked the same question.

“Not that I know.” Burnett stood stoically for a few seconds, and then asked Clara, “How badly are you hurt?”

“Just a scratch,” Clara answered.

“She passed out,” Kylie said.

“Did not,” insisted Clara, as if it would make her look weak.

Kylie started walking back to the clearing. Everyone fell in step with her. The sounds of the woods returned to normal, but Kylie barely noticed. Her mind chewed on what she’d seen when she’d looked back the last time, and tried to decide what if anything to share with Burnett. Glancing briefly over her shoulder, she tried to listen with her heart to see if she still felt her grandfather and aunt calling. Were they still there? Or had they left?

The sensation lacked the earlier power, but she still felt it.

“Perry,” Burnett spoke up, “you and Della go ahead and make sure Clara gets to the office to be seen by Holiday.” Burnett’s demanding voice bounced off the trees and caused another wave of silence. “Kylie, I want a minute with you.” His tone left little doubt that the minute wouldn’t be pleasant.

Kylie stopped walking. Perry shot Kylie a look of pure sympathy. “She was just trying to help,” the shape-shifter offered.

Della spoke up. “And nothing happened. All’s well that ends well, right? You can’t get mad when—”

“Go,” Burnett ordered.

Della grunted, and Perry sent Kylie another look of empathy. She loved both of them for feeling the need to intervene, but she could handle this. She hoped.

“I’ll see you,” Kylie said when Perry appeared poised to argue.

As they walked away, Kylie inhaled a deep breath of wood-scented air. Burnett stepped beside her. They watched the three others move ahead. Clara glanced back. Her gaze expressed more curiosity than concern.

“Is she in trouble?” Clara asked, her voice getting softer as the distance between them increased.

“Let’s just say, I wouldn’t want to be her right now,” Perry answered.

“And your wolf ass is the reason she’s in trouble,” Della smarted back.

“I didn’t ask her to help me,” Clara countered.

Kylie waited before she spoke to Burnett. “I shouldn’t be reprimanded for doing what I was supposed to do.”

“You could have been killed. It could have been a trick to lure you away from Shadow Falls.”

“It wasn’t. Clara thought she was in danger. I felt her fear and reacted.”

“She thought she was in danger?” he asked, picking up on Kylie’s slip of the tongue. “Are you saying she wasn’t?”

When Kylie paused, Burnett continued. “Exactly what was it you two were running from?”

A need to tell the truth filled her chest, but another need—the need for answers—kept her quiet. “Like I said before. It was fog,” Kylie answered, confident that her response wouldn’t read as a lie. Her words were true.

Just not the whole truth.

“Did you sense it was evil?”

“I was scared,” she admitted again. A shiver rushed down her spine. Not from fear, but from the cold that came when the dead neared. She glanced around, trying not to let on that they had company. The ghost, Holiday’s look-alike, peered at them from behind a tree.

“But...?” Burnett asked, sensing she wasn’t finished.

“But I didn’t sense it was evil.” A whisper of guilt came, but if she told

Burnett her grandfather and aunt had attempted to see her without permission, what would Burnett say?

"I'm trying to protect you. I can't do that if you don't follow my rules."

"I don't normally break your rules." The cold grew colder and she cut her eyes to where the ghost had been. She'd disappeared. In a flash, the Holiday look-alike stood beside Burnett, looking at him as if she recognized him. The thought sent a tremor of fear through Kylie's heart.

"It could only take one broken rule and it would be too late."

Kylie bit down on her lips, fighting the cold. "I'm sorry." *For upsetting you, not for going.* "I heard the scream and I felt called to help."

"Next time, before answering that call, get me."

"I'll try." She shivered in spite of her attempt not to.

"I think you could do better than try," he countered, then he looked up as if questioning some higher power. "Explain to me why I wanted to be a part of Shadow Falls."

"I can answer that," Kylie said, feeling bad for making him angry. "Because beneath that crusty exterior of yours, you care about us. And you love the other person who runs this place." Kylie glanced at the ghost, wondering if she would react to the words.

The spirit's gaze widened. "*Do you mean...?*"

Burnett frowned, but he didn't try to deny it.

Kylie would've been happy that he'd come to terms with his feelings for Holiday if she didn't have the ghost staring as if ... as if the confession of love had affected her.

The spirit looked at Kylie. "*He's in love with the camp leader?*" Panic laced her tone. Did the spirit now know she was Holiday?

What's your name? Kylie asked in her head.

"*I told you,*" the ghost answered.

"I'll never get used to this." Burnett started walking.

"Get used to what?" Kylie caught up with him, her attention more on the spirit who walked beside the vampire, staring at him with surprise.

"The ghosts," Burnett blurted out as if the words cost him.

Kylie stopped and grabbed him by the elbow. "You can feel them?" she

asked. Generally, only when a spirit was trapped in a small room could a non-ghost whisperer feel them.

“No,” he said.

Kylie stared at him.

“Fine. Maybe I feel them a little. It’s probably more about the look you and Holiday get in your eyes when they’re around,” he confessed. He looked around. “Is she gone?”

“How did you know she was a female?” Kylie asked, realizing the spirit was gone.

His jaw clenched. “I could smell her,” he said, as if it were some kind of a sin.

“You can? I didn’t think ... I mean, I didn’t think vampires had ghost-whispering gifts.”

“I didn’t think so either.” And he didn’t sound happy about it. He shot off walking again, only faster—his pace reflective of his mood.

Kylie kept up, but barely. “Does Holiday know?”

“Know what?” He didn’t even look at Kylie.

“About you detecting ghosts? She was curious as to why you could go into the falls and—”

“No, she doesn’t know,” he said. “And don’t mention it. I’ll tell her later.”
Worry tightened his jaw.

They walked in silence for a second. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble by going after Clara. I just reacted to my internal instinct.”

“Sometimes our internal instincts can be skewed,” he added.

She wondered if he was talking about his ability to smell and sense ghosts as well as her protective instincts. “I’ll try to do better next time.”

“Thank you,” he said, as if conceding to what she offered.

They continued forward. The wind stirred the trees.

“Can you tell me more?” he asked.

“About ghosts?”

“No. About the fog. I’d like to forget about the ghosts.”

Kylie remembered how she’d felt when she first learned she could detect the dead. She could relate to his feelings. Sometimes she’d still like to forget

about her ability.

“Did you sense it was Mario?”

“No.” Kylie went over the details, careful not to leave anything out except the ending. No doubt he would question Clara later. But Kylie was almost certain Clara hadn’t seen anything that would give the secret away.

“It has to be Mario and his buddies again.” Burnett’s fist clenched as he walked.

Kylie hesitated to say anything, knowing if she slipped up and lied, he would know. But neither did she want Burnett to worry too much. “Remember I said it didn’t feel evil.”

“It has to be them.” He looked at her directly, a stern, fixed stare. “You do not go into the woods, with or without a shadow. You understand?”

She nodded. She understood, but she didn’t say she would comply.

“It has to be some witch or wizard behind this.” His brows pinched. “You don’t think that you accidentally caused the fog, do you?”

“No,” Kylie insisted.

“You sure? With the other incident—”

“It was different.” Her cheeks warmed, remembering the incident.

Their pace slowed. The trees and underbrush seemed to soak up the sound of their footsteps. Kylie’s mind returned to Clara, and from Clara, it moved to the girl’s brother.

“Can I ask you something?” Kylie asked.

“If I said no, would it stop you?”

“Probably not.” She debated on how to word her question.

“If it’s about anything concerning Holiday and me, I’ve been ordered to plead the fifth.”

She grinned. “Don’t worry, the inside-out shirt the other day pretty much told me what I wanted to know about you and her.”

The stern-looking vamp half smiled again. His smile faded. “It’s not about ghosts, either, is it?”

“No. It’s ... When a Council calls someone in for a meeting, is it bad news?”

“You’re talking about Lucas?” he asked.

She nodded.

He moved a limb out of his way, holding it back so it wouldn't hit Kylie.
"It can be, but not always."

"Do you know what it is they want with Lucas?" She pushed another limb away.

"No, I don't." His words rang completely honest.

"Are you concerned?" Kylie asked.

He hesitated. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I respect Lucas's need to become a part of the Council so he can help bridge the problems between the weres and the FRU, but I don't want the Council to have too big of an influence over him."

"You don't trust Lucas?" Kylie asked.

"If I didn't trust him, he wouldn't be here. My problems stem from the fact that the were council and the FRU have issues. In general, the were community is less compliant to work within the FRU's rules. It goes back to the pack mentality."

"But couldn't that be because the FRU considered werewolves lower-class citizens?"

"That has changed," he said. "But I'm sure that plays a big part in their behavior, and I can assure you that the FRU treats all were situations with that in mind. However, prejudices stem from both sides. One of the reasons they were viewed as outcast was because they viewed others as the same."

"So it's a 'which came first, the chicken or the egg' kind of thing," Kylie said.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he said.

When they arrived at the clearing, Burnett looked at her. "I'll walk you back to your cabin. If Della or Miranda isn't there, I'll get someone else to shadow you for the time being. Holiday and I will be there shortly to go to the falls. But until I investigate this whole fog thing, you're not to leave that cabin without me knowing where you are and who you are with."

She flinched slightly at his tone and new demands. Surely he was exaggerating. "Do you mind if I go back to the office with you?" Kylie

asked. "I'd sort of like to check on Clara."

He hesitated, but nodded, and they started down the path to the office. Kylie gave the woods one last glance and felt nothing. Had they already left?

Her gut instinct said they had. Question was, would they come back? And if so, could she find a way to go to them?

* * *

Before Kylie stepped up on the porch, she heard Lucas talking. "You can't keep doing this!" His voice carried.

Kylie wasn't sure if it was her sensitive hearing or if he was talking that loudly. Considering how private werewolves were, she suspected the former.

"What did I do?" Clara asked. "I told them I was coming here and I did."

"Where else did you go? Did you go see Jacob?" Lucas's tone came out tight.

"Of all people, I would assume you could understand my need to see who I wanted to see."

"As strange as it is, I think Dad's right about him."

"Really, are you going to let him choose your lifemate? Wasn't that what you two were arguing about when you were back there? Your affection for Kylie?"

Kylie's breath caught. Lucas had argued with his dad about her?

"We're talking about you," Lucas snapped.

"I'm here, isn't that what matters?" Clara asked. "Isn't that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to quit playing games, Clara. I'm trying to help you."

"Games? Please, you are the biggest game player of them all. You play games with the Council, with Dad, with your mom, and with Grandma. You even play them with Fredericka. I'll bet you're even playing games with that witch of yours."

"I'm not playing games, and I don't have a witch."

Kylie hesitated as they moved closer to the cabin's steps, and from the look Burnett sent her, she supposed that he, too, was hearing the

conversation.

“I could still walk you to the cabin,” Burnett offered, and from his tone, Kylie sensed he understood how this might be hard for her. His concern should’ve been touching; instead she didn’t like knowing everyone knew her business. She preferred her private life to stay private.

“I’ll have to face him sooner or later,” Kylie said, glancing away.

But even Kylie had to admit, later sounded really tempting. Yet she squared her shoulders and continued walking, her gut tight at the thought of Lucas’s response to her being a witch.

Chapter Fourteen

As Kylie and Burnett took the steps up to the office, Kylie suddenly wished she hadn't come.

Behind the door, Clara continued arguing with her brother. "I think she might have been the one who sent the fog after me. She pretended like she rescued me, but maybe the witch was just—"

"You think who sent the fog after you?" Lucas demanded.

"Kylie!" Clara fumed.

Kylie's breath hitched.

"Kylie isn't a witch," Lucas said.

Burnett pushed open the office door; Clara and Lucas, positioned in the entryway, turned around. Kylie prepared herself for his reaction.

"I am for the time being." Kylie decided to expose her cards and worry how the game would be played later.

"You're what for the time being?" Lucas asked, unaware that Kylie had been privy to their conversation.

"A witch," she said.

Lucas stared at her forehead. Shock, confusion, and disappointment flickered in his eyes. "What ... Witches don't have speed. They can't run ... like you run."

"Confused the hell out of me, too," Clara said. "That's when I realized she probably cast a spell, and if she cast that spell, maybe she did it all."

"I didn't create the fog," Kylie said. Was Clara really already turning on her?

"So how did you know where to find me? And don't lie again and say you

heard me. I wasn't close enough for you to hear my screams."

The accusation stung, but Kylie tried not to take it to heart. Clara had reasons for being suspicious. Witches weren't supposed to be able to run like lightning or have super hearing. Which validated Kylie's belief that she wasn't a witch.

But if her grandfather and aunt could turn themselves into fog, did that mean they belonged to the Wiccan species? She didn't think shape-shifters could change into fog, could they? Doubt pulled at her mind.

"Kylie isn't your normal witch." Burnett came to her defense.

Lucas glanced at Clara, to Burnett, then back at Kylie. An apology replaced the stunned disbelief in his eyes.

He continued to gaze at her, but spoke to his half sister. "If Kylie says she didn't do it, she didn't do it."

"You take her word over mine? Now I see our father's concern." Clara's tone rang heavy with accusation. "How can you call yourself a leader of our people when you stand up for a witch over your own kind, own blood?"

Lucas's jaw tightened. "My belief does not come from her words. I know the facts. Kylie has sensitive hearing. She could hear your screams from miles away."

"Witches don't have—"

"As Burnett pointed out, I'm not a normal witch." Kylie gazed at Lucas. Why couldn't he have simply declared he believed her? Was a were's loyalty to his pack so restrictive that his faith in her held no credibility?

Feeling Clara's stare, Kylie continued. "Apparently, my brain has a bad habit of showing different patterns."

"Then there's something seriously wrong with your brain." Clara's tone made her words even more of an insult.

Kylie waited for Lucas to correct Clara. When his gaze found hers, she could swear she saw an apology flash in his eyes, but he remained silent.

And just like that, she knew why. Because to do so would be putting her before Clara. Because Kylie wasn't a werewolf, she wasn't supposed to matter to Lucas. Or at least not matter as much as one of his own. The realization brought with it a wave of pain that caused her chest to clutch. She

told herself she didn't need him to defend her, that she knew he cared, so what did it matter that he remained silent?

"My mind is fine." Kylie met Clara's eyes and then briefly glanced at Lucas. Yup. Kylie's mind would be okay; it was her heart she worried about right now. Because while it shouldn't have mattered, it did.

A lot.

"Why weren't you scared of what you saw?" Clara asked.

Unsure what Clara meant, Kylie paused. Had the girl seen more than Kylie knew? "Who says I wasn't scared?"

"Kylie's a protector," Burnett intervened.

Clara's eyes widened. "No shit?"

Uncomfortable at the girl's stare, Kylie suddenly wanted to escape. "I should go." She turned to leave.

Burnett gently caught her by the arm and, as crazy as it seemed, she felt empathy in his cold touch. He leaned in and whispered, "Not until you have a shadow."

"I'm here." Holiday stepped through the door. "I took a short walk to give Lucas and his sister a few minutes to talk." Her green eyes went to Kylie as if she sensed the emotional storm brewing inside her. Holiday motioned for Kylie to follow her out.

Burnett looked at Holiday. "Stay close. There could still be danger around."

"Exactly what happened?" Worry filled Holiday's green eyes.

"We'll talk later," he said. "I need to chat with Clara while everything is fresh in her mind."

Kylie walked out, her heart breaking at Lucas's behavior and her gut worrying about what Clara remembered. Yet one glance at Holiday and Kylie remembered her vision and Holiday's possible demise. Heck, maybe Clara was right. Maybe something was wrong with her mind. Perhaps the stress of everything had finally driven her loony.

Was becoming a witch the first sign of insanity? Or was it just part of being a chameleon?

* * *

Kylie followed Holiday to the dining hall to grab a sandwich. Lunch had come and gone and so they had the place to themselves. They barely talked and the awkwardness didn't feel right. When they walked out of the dining hall, Kylie's gaze went to the woods to see if the feeling had left, or if she sensed her grandfather and great-aunt calling her. But she felt nothing.

Holiday reached over and touched Kylie's shoulders. "Talk to me."

Kylie absorbed the calm that Holiday offered and faced her. "I hate prejudices," Kylie said, knowing that only one of the problems at hand, Lucas, could be discussed with the camp leader. If she told Holiday who was in the woods earlier, she'd tell Burnett. And both of them would refuse to let Kylie go to them if they returned. But she had to, didn't she?

"I hate them, too," Holiday said, as if she knew exactly what prejudices Kylie referred to. "If there was one thing I could change in the world, that would be it."

Closing her palm, Kylie fought the feeling of disappointment Lucas's stance with Clara had given her. "You would think after being the target of prejudice, the whole society would know how unjust it is."

"I think—"

"Can I please have a moment with Kylie?" Lucas's voice came from behind them. Just hearing his deep tenor caused another wave of pain to wash over her chest. She couldn't think of anything, or anyone who would have stopped her from standing up for him if the shoe had been on the other foot. And yet ...

Kylie and Holiday turned around. The camp leader met Kylie's gaze, almost asking if this was what she wanted. She nodded.

"Fine, but don't go far." Holiday walked back to the porch and sat down on one of the rocking chairs.

Lucas took Kylie's hand and led her around to the back of the office. He didn't speak, and neither did she. He stopped by the tree, where they'd been earlier, and turned to face her. Not a word left his lips; he just stared.

What she wouldn't give to be able to read his mind. What was he

thinking? Was he upset because she was a witch, was he sorry that he hadn't come to her defense? Was he realizing how hopeless this relationship was?

"Thank you for rescuing my sister," he said. "I'm sorry she's so ungrateful."

Kylie nodded.

He leaned down and pressed his forehead against hers. All she could see was his eyes, the blueness of them, the long dark fringe of lashes surrounding them.

"I hurt you." His voice came out even deeper than before.

She didn't deny it.

She continued to stare into his eyes and he didn't blink. The pain reflecting in his deep blue irises made her breath catch.

He closed his eyes and inhaled before speaking. "Have you ever known the right thing to do, but couldn't do it?"

She pulled back just a few inches. "Depends. What's the right thing to do?"

She posed the question even though she was afraid to ask. It wasn't the question that scared her, though. It was the answer. Because deep down, she sensed it. She had sensed it since his grandmother talked to her. She and Lucas had too many things standing in their way for them to make this work.

"I should let you go," he said. "I should put a stop to this ... to us. Because until things change, everyone will be against us. And yet..." His head dipped down ever so slightly and his lips met hers.

So much emotion came with that brief kiss. And while she didn't think she had any room in her heart for more emotion, she felt it move inside her. His pain was her own. His fear was hers. She closed her eyes, fought the ache radiating in her heart, and just savored his touch.

He pulled back and ran his thumb over her lips. "And yet, how can I let you go when you're the thing that keeps me going? When the main part of the reason I want change is you?"

His finger swept over her chin, a sweet touch that nearly brought tears to her eyes. "I'm begging you. Please be patient with me. Trust me when I say that you have a place here." He took her hand and rested it on his chest. "I

have to behave a certain way or it will get back to my father and the Council, but it's not how I feel." He paused a moment. "Please don't give up on me, Kylie Galen."

She could feel his heart beating. She could feel it breaking, too, right alongside her own. "I don't give up easily." It was the truth. If she was a quitter, she wouldn't still be at Shadow Falls.

He wrapped his arms around her, leaned against the tree, and pulled her flush against him. They stood like that for the longest time. Not talking. Not making promises. And Kylie couldn't help but wonder if it was because they both instinctively knew those promises wouldn't hold.

He finally pulled away. "I should go help Clara get situated."

Kylie loosened her hold around his waist. But she didn't want to. She didn't want to give him back to Clara or to Fredericka or to his father. As selfish as it was, she wanted him all to herself. Or maybe it wasn't that she didn't want to share him. Maybe she just didn't want to share him with people who were trying to keep them apart.

"Do you want to come with me?" he asked.

Clara would love that, Kylie thought. Not. "I'll let you two have some time alone."

"Thanks," he said as if he'd hoped she'd refuse. He smiled, but beneath the smile was a touch of disappointment. "So you're a witch. I never would have guessed."

"I'm a witch right now," she said.

He looked confused. "You think it will change?"

"Yes. Maybe." What did she believe? "I changed from that strange pattern to human."

"Yes." He stared at her pattern. "But this is a true supernatural pattern." Lucas's attention shot over his shoulder and he growled. Derek came around the office.

Derek's green gaze met hers. There was no apology in his eyes for interrupting them. Even his posture seemed to say he had a right to be here. "I need to see you, Kylie. It's important."

"About what?" Lucas asked.

Derek didn't look at Lucas. The fae's gaze never left Kylie, and while he answered the question, he spoke to Kylie. "It's about your ghost."

"Since when did you become a ghost expert?" Lucas asked.

Derek looked at the were for the first time. "Since I found out Kylie needed help with them." His implication hung in the air. He supported her when Lucas didn't.

Lucas heard it as well. His eyes tightened and turned a light orange.

Before trouble started, she placed a hand on his back. "Go help Clara."

He didn't look happy, but his expression told her he wasn't planning on arguing.

Yet his next move surprised her. He leaned down and placed an affectionate kiss on her lips. The kiss seemed more about letting Derek know she was his girl than for her pleasure, but she didn't completely blame him.

There had been a time or two she would have loved to kiss him like that in front of Fredericka.

* * *

"What is it?" Kylie asked Derek as soon as Lucas moved around the office and was out of earshot.

Derek stared after Lucas and then back at her. "You're disappointed. What's disappointing you?" he asked, reading her emotions right on the mark.

"Nothing." She refused to talk about this with Derek.

"Is it Lucas?" he asked.

"Let it go," she insisted. "I'm with Lucas now."

Though for how long? The question whispered through her head.

A frown pulled at his lips. "I know. I screwed up and didn't realize that I loved you until it was too late."

She held up her hand. "Don't say—"

He reached out and laced his fingers with hers. The press of his palm against hers came with a soft warmth, a sense of calm, and endearment. She frowned at how tempted she was to just hold on, but knowing her emotions were completely out of whack right now, she pulled her hand from his. He

was her friend. Just a friend.

“It’s okay.” He dropped his hand into his pocket. “I accept that it’s my fault. And you don’t have to tell me you love me.” His gaze met hers. “But I can read you, Kylie, and I know you don’t want to admit it, but you care about me, too.”

“Stop it,” she said. “I care about you like a friend.”

“No.” He continued to stare. “It’s more. But don’t worry. I know you care about Lucas, too. And that’s my cross to bear because I pushed you right into his arms. And as long as you’re happy, I can accept that. But if you’re not—”

“Please stop.” Kylie wanted to start singing “la la la” and cover her ears. And if it wouldn’t have been so childish, she would have done it. Instead, she reminded him of the real matter at hand. “Didn’t you say you had information about my ghost issue?”

He stuffed both his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. Good news, at least I think it is. But I guess some of it could be bad news, too.”

“What?” She hoped it was more good than bad. She could really use some good news.

“I don’t think your ghost is Holiday.”

“But ... how ... what makes you think that?”

“I did some research on the Internet. Simple stuff.” He hesitated. “I found out that Holiday has an identical twin. Her name is Hannah.”

I think my name is Hannah or Holly, or something like that. The spirit’s words echoed inside Kylie’s head. “A twin? Why hasn’t she ever mentioned her?”

Derek shrugged. “It seems a little odd, doesn’t it? I mean, you would think she’d have said something about having an identical sister.”

“Yeah.” Kylie couldn’t deny it hurt that Holiday didn’t feel she could tell Kylie things, when she shared everything with Holiday.

“Do you still think this ghost is from the future?” Derek asked.

Kylie considered it. “No. She’s dead.” Just as the other girls were in the grave she’d seen in her vision. And just like that, Kylie’s angst about Holiday not trusting her faded and Kylie’s heart filled with sympathy. Kylie couldn’t imagine losing a sister, let alone a twin. Was this why Holiday hadn’t ever

mentioned her? Did grief over her twin's death keep Holiday from ever talking about her sister?

Derek let out a deep breath. "Okay, here's something else that's weird. I couldn't find any death records on her. None. That's why I said this might be bad news."

"What are you saying?" Kylie asked.

Derek frowned. "Holiday might not know her sister is dead."

A knot of grief formed in Kylie's throat. "So I have to tell her."

"If you want, I could do it," Derek offered. "Or we could do it together."

Genuine concern filled his expression. She appreciated his offer, more than he would ever know, but she couldn't let him do it. As much as she dreaded being the bearer of bad news, Hannah had come to Kylie, and she should be the one to tell Holiday.

Then Kylie remembered something else Hannah had said. *I think I came to you to help someone.*

What exactly did Hannah need Kylie to do? Was telling Holiday about her death enough or did she need more?

Derek ran his hand down her arm. "Have you made a list of all the diners you've gone to recently?"

"Diners?" Kylie asked, unsure of what he was talking about. Unsure of why a simple touch could seem so wrong.

"You said one of the girls in the vision was wearing a diner uniform that looked familiar to you."

"Yes, I mean I remember, but no, I haven't had time to do it." She took in a deep breath. "I'll get to it as soon as I get back to my cabin. I'll e-mail it to you."

"E-mail me the description of the uniform and the girls, too," he said.

"Hey." The sound of Holiday's voice had the knot in Kylie's throat doubling. She turned to face the camp leader and a chasm of empathy and hurt opened in her heart. And yet Kylie couldn't help but admit the relief of knowing that the dead girl wasn't Holiday.

Holiday's green eyes softened. "Something happen?"

For the life of her, Kylie didn't know how to tell her. "No," she lied, but

for a good reason. The last thing Kylie wanted to do was just blurt out the news. Then it hit her, maybe she should talk to Hannah first. Perhaps she needed to know exactly what it was Hannah needed before she moved forward.

Holiday nodded, but disbelief flashed in her eyes. “Burnett got called to the FRU office and he insisted we hold off going to the falls until he comes back. I was hoping you could help me set up a few things in the dining hall. We’re having a welcoming reception for the new teachers later this afternoon.”

“Sure,” Kylie said, and she met Derek’s eyes briefly.

“Good luck.” He mouthed the words and then he reached out and touched her, sending a much-needed current of calmness through her.

“Thanks,” she whispered to Derek before she turned to join Holiday. They took a few steps and Holiday glanced over at Kylie with suspicion.

“Boy trouble?” Holiday asked in a low voice.

“Yeah,” Kylie said, and it wasn’t even a lie. While her heart was aching for Holiday, Derek’s earlier words echoed in her mind and left a trail of uncertainty. *I can read you, Kylie, and I know you don’t want to admit it, but you care about me, too.*

And the worst part was, he was right.

Chapter Fifteen

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here,” Holiday said as they moved around to the front of the office.

“I know.” Kylie gazed briefly at the woods, but the feeling from earlier, the feeling of being called, hadn’t returned.

Holiday looked over at her and frowned. “Are you really okay? I mean, I respect your privacy. But lately you’ve been ... closed off a bit. And I worry. Because ... well, you usually trust me.” Holiday rested her hand on Kylie’s arm. Warmth and concern flowed from the touch.

Usually, I’m not dealing with a ghost who looks just like you, who I just found out is your sister, and I don’t know if you even know she’s dead.

“I don’t mean to be closed off,” Kylie said. “I’m just ... between Lucas and Derek, and my grandfather changing his number, and the FRU trying to do experimental tests on me, and my mom dating, I’m a tad overwhelmed.”

“And rightfully so,” Holiday said.

Thinking about her mom dating led Kylie to think about her stepdad. “Oh, I almost forgot. Did you ever get in touch with my stepdad and see what he wanted?”

“Yeah, he called a while ago. He found out about the FRU saying you needed some medical tests and was concerned.”

“Did the FRU call him, too?” Kylie asked, ready to panic that they hadn’t given up their mission to treat her like their very own lab rat. Maybe even give her the same test that had killed her grandmother.

“No, and I asked because it scared me, too,” Holiday answered, telling Kylie how accurate the camp leader was at reading her emotions. “He said

he'd spoken with your mom."

"My mom? Really?" An unexpected smile spread across her lips. "So they're talking again? That's the best news I've heard all day. Maybe she'll dump the creep who wants to take her to England and give my stepdad another chance."

"Perhaps," Holiday said, as if wary of giving Kylie too much hope.

Kylie remembered that Holiday had dealt with the whole parental divorce thing, too. "How long does it take?"

"How long does what take?" Holiday asked.

"How long before you stop wishing they hadn't split? How long before you stop wanting to tell them to cut out the fighting and go back to the way things used to be?"

"I wouldn't know." Holiday sighed and offered a sympathetic smile. "I'm still waiting. I think when you grow up with them together, you just always assume they will stay together. But I do know I've reached a place where I know my parents are probably better off not being together. Nevertheless, I still have times that I remember how it used to be when we were a family, and ... I wish things were different now. The sad truth is that we change. Parents. Siblings. And when that happens, people grow apart and—"

"But who we love shouldn't change." Or could it? Kylie's mind went from her parents' divorce to Derek, and then to the ghost issue. Then, suddenly, Kylie realized that this line of conversation might be the opening she needed to ask about Holiday's sister. "Did you go through it alone?"

"Alone?" Holiday looked confused.

"What I mean is, do you have any brothers or sisters?" Kylie asked.

Holiday was looking away so Kylie couldn't see her expression, but if the sudden flinch in the woman's shoulders was any indication, Kylie had hit a nerve. Why? What was Holiday not willing to talk about? Had Hannah and Holiday grown apart?

As another second ticked by, Kylie hesitated, not knowing what to do. Should she push for an answer, or just let the moment pass? After all, this wasn't just about her wanting Holiday to trust her, this was about helping Hannah cross over. Once she solved the whole ghost issue, maybe then she

could focus more on solving her other issues.

“Unfortunately,” Holiday said, ending the uncomfortable silence, “siblings are not always a help in this matter.” She reached for her phone. “I just remembered I need to make another call. Can you head over to the dining hall? I asked Miranda and Della to help me, too. Della’s taking over shadowing duty. I have a couple of banners to put up and there’s some balloons to blow up. They’re in the back of the dining hall, and I just wanted to get some tables set up to hold the appetizers. I should be over there in a few minutes. And hopefully Burnett will be back and we can take a quick run to the falls before the ceremony.”

“Sure,” Kylie said, disappointed. She sensed Holiday was running away so she could avoid answering any more of Kylie’s questions.

Holiday arched another brow, obviously picking up on Kylie’s discontent, and shook her head. “I still wish you’d talk to me.”

And I wish you’d talk to me. “I’m fine.” Kylie watched Holiday head to the office and when she turned around, Della was standing there.

“At your service, Miss Witch.” Della grinned and stared at Kylie’s forehead. “However, I won’t deny that I’m disappointed. I mean ... you liked the taste of blood, so I figured you’d at least be half-vampire.”

Kylie rolled her eyes and pointed to her forehead. “I keep telling you guys, I don’t think this is final.”

“It looks final to me.”

Kylie looked back at the woods and wished she felt that her grandfather was still there. Wished she could meet him face-to-face and finally get the answers she needed. But she didn’t feel it. Didn’t sense that something out there called to her to join it.

She looked back at Della. “And what was I last week? A human, right? And for how long? A few weeks?”

Della made a face. “Okay, I see your point. But this is the first real supernatural pattern you’ve shown.”

“Yeah, and I’m betting it won’t be my last. Let’s just say, I think I’ve got ADD brain patterns. They never sit still. One comes, one goes.”

“Damn,” Della said. “Miranda’s right. You really don’t want to be a

witch, do you?”

Kylie let out a gulp of frustrated air. “That’s not it at all. It’s just I was told—”

“That you’re a lizard.” Della made her sympathy face. Not one she used a whole lot, either. “Look, no hard feelings, but I think I’d believe you’re a witch before I’d believe that you’re a lizard. And if I may add one little thing, if you keep this not-a-witch front up, you’re really going to hurt Miranda’s feelings. She’s already upset. And you know what she’s like when she gets upset.”

Kylie closed her eyes and inhaled. “I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings. If I hadn’t gotten the message from Dad saying I was a chameleon, I’d be ecstatic at the idea of being a witch.” If frustration wasn’t in the driver’s seat of Kylie’s emotions, surprise would have been behind the wheel. When had Kylie and Della traded places? Normally, it was Kylie calling Della on this offense. “Look,” Kylie said, trying to explain herself. “Witch and fae were my top choices of species, but—”

“You didn’t want to be a vampire?” Della sounded insulted.

Oh, crap, now Kylie had offended Della. Nothing was going right today. “Please,” Kylie said, her frustration not just sitting in the driver’s seat anymore, but revving up the engine. “I didn’t say that, I just—”

“It’s being cold that bothers you, isn’t it?” Della asked, looking more hurt, but not mad. And Kylie guessed she should be thankful about that. A hurt Della was hard to deal with, but dealing with an angry and hurt Della was impossible.

“No, it’s not being cold, it’s...”

“It can’t be the blood because you liked the taste of blood.”

“I like the taste of it, but I don’t necessarily like the idea of having to drink it, or the idea of having French fries taste like toad’s butt, because that’s exactly how you described it. But if I’m vampire, then I’ll be happy.” When Della’s expression didn’t change, Kylie added, “Truthfully, it would be cool to be able to fly like you guys do.”

“It’s very cool,” Della said, her expression softening.

“Anyway,” Kylie continued, “I’ll be happy with whatever I am. I don’t

even care anymore. But right now, I trust what my dad said, and he said I'm a chameleon. Doesn't that make sense to anyone?"

"No," Della said matter-of-factly. "Sorry, but the whole 'I'm a lizard' thing sounds crazy. Maybe you should come to grips with the fact that you're going to end up just being like one of us. A normal supernatural."

Kylie's head was spinning. First, *normal* and *supernatural* didn't fit in the same sentence, but ...

"When have I ever been normal?" she asked. "When has anything connected to me, to my powers and gifts and my forever-changing brain patterns, appeared to be normal?"

Della opened her mouth, to argue no doubt, and then shut it. The pause lasted a whole second. Which for Della was a long time. "Okay, you've made another good point, but..."

"No buts," Kylie said. "I'm either a freak, or maybe, just maybe, I'm some other type of supernatural. Something not very many people have heard of."

Della pursed her lips as if in thought. "And that would be totally cool, wouldn't it? To be something very rare. Of course, you're already super rare because you're a protector. Hey ... maybe that's why your pattern went crazy in the beginning, because you're a protector. And you're the first part-human protector to ever exist. Which, like I said, is cool."

"No, I'm not the first. My dad was a protector." Kylie paused. "And it's not as cool as you think." After a second, Kylie added, "Holiday suggested being a protector could have made my pattern do stupid stuff, but..."

"But you want to be a lizard," Della said.

Kylie just rolled her eyes and gave the woods another glance. She didn't feel anything, but maybe if she stood among the trees and surrounded herself with the foliage, she would feel it. Her grandfather and aunt could be waiting for her. Her answers could be out there waiting for her. "Can we take a short walk?"

"I thought we were supposed to be helping Miranda and Holiday set up the dining room."

"Just a short one."

“Where to?” Della asked.

Kylie motioned to the woods.

“Oh, hell no! Burnett was very, very, very clear on that. You aren’t supposed to go in the woods. He’d have my head on a platter. After he chewed my ass out.”

Kylie looked around to see if anyone was within hearing distance. Super hearing distance. She didn’t see a soul.

She still dipped her head down and spoke in a whisper. “I know who’s out there and I need to talk to them.”

“What...? Who’s out there?”

The sound of a door shutting filled the warm air. “You guys letting Miranda do all the work?” Holiday’s voice came behind them.

Kylie turned around and saw her stepping off the office steps. “Just going in.”

Della leaned in. “Don’t leave me hanging like this.”

“Later,” Kylie said when she saw Holiday walking up.

“Later what?” Holiday asked.

Guilt stirred in Kylie’s chest, but she forced herself to lie. “Later, I’ll tell her my bucket of boyfriend woes.” She forced a smile.

“Yeah, boyfriend woes,” Della said, as if to add validity to Kylie’s lie. “Two guys fighting for her heart.” Della cut her eyes to Kylie, and the message in her friend’s eyes said she’d be pressing Kylie to finish their conversation about the woods ASAP.

“What a bucket of ... woe that is!” Della said with drama. But somewhere in Della’s voice, Kylie heard something else. A bit of envy.

Holiday chuckled. From the camp leader’s expression, Kylie sensed she’d picked up on Della’s emotions as well. And that caused Kylie to worry. How much of Kylie’s woes did Holiday sense? And how long could Kylie keep things from her? Just long enough, Kylie prayed, to know the right way to approach everything.

Holiday shrugged. “From what I hear, she’s not the only one with boy troubles.”

“Yeah,” Della said with sass. “You and Burnett are filling the air with

pheromones.” The vamp waved a hand in front of her nose.

Holiday frowned. “I wasn’t talking about me.” She gave Della a pointed look.

“Me?” Della asked, in total bafflement. “I don’t have a boyfriend, so how could I have boyfriend troubles?”

“You could have a boyfriend if you wanted one,” Kylie muttered, and that remark got her a sharp jab of Della’s elbow in the ribs.

Holiday grinned. “Rumor has it you were the cause of some friction down by the lake.”

“What friction?” Della asked.

“Between Steve and Chris,” Holiday said, and wiggled her brows. Leave it to Holiday to know what someone needed to hear.

Except in Kylie’s case. Kylie needed to know about Holiday’s sister, but getting Holiday to talk about it, without just blurting out that her sister was dead, seemed impossible. But if Kylie didn’t hear from Hannah soon, or Holiday didn’t start talking, then blurting it out might be her only option.

“No.” Della shook her head, sending her shoulder-length black hair swinging. “It wasn’t over me. You just heard it wrong.”

Holiday half grinned and shrugged. “If you say so.” She paused and grinned like she knew something no one else did. “Come on. Let’s get the dining room whipped into shape for the reception.” She draped an arm around each of their shoulders and started walking toward the dining hall.

They took about three steps when Della came to a sudden stop. “Really?” she asked Holiday. “It was over me? Chris and Steve were upset with each other over me?”

“I told you Steve liked you.” Kylie almost chuckled at Della’s shock.

But Della wasn’t listening to Kylie. “You’re not shitting me?” Della continued, focusing on Holiday, her head tilted slightly as if listening to see if she was lying.

“I swear.” Holiday grinned. “My heart won’t lie.”

“They were fighting—?”

“I said friction,” Holiday corrected.

“They’re frictioning over me?” She chuckled and then stopped as if to let

that piece of info sink in. “No. Not me. It has to be a mistake.” But Della’s eyes lit up with a spark of self-confidence.

Kylie grinned—even feeling the weight of all her problems pressing down on her, seeing Della beaming with “boy” pride felt good ... and right. It hadn’t escaped Kylie that Della felt left out with both Miranda and Kylie having boyfriends, but she hadn’t sensed how big of a chunk that took out of Della’s confidence until now. And after the vampire’s heartbreak with Lee, Della deserved to feel “friction worthy.”

Not that all friction was a good thing. The friction between Lucas and Derek sure as hell couldn’t be chalked up as a positive. But for right now, Kylie just wanted to think about Della.

* * *

Five minutes later, Kylie realized Della was right. Miranda was upset. The little witch hardly spoke to her as they whipped the dining hall into shape. Of course, Miranda squealed with glee when Della told her about Chris and Steve having “tension.” Feeling like a third wheel, Kylie finally walked up to Miranda and apologized for ... Well, she wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for, but she said the magic words, “I’m sorry,” and asked Miranda if she’d go over a few spells with her later.

Miranda’s eyes lit up. “I would be delighted. Just decide what spell you want to try. And you can trust me, I can do this.”

The look of sheer contentment on the little witch’s face told Kylie that Miranda’s problem was more about Kylie’s initial refusal of her help and the ding against her ego than believing Kylie didn’t want to be a witch.

While rearranging the tables in the front, Kylie’s phone chimed with an incoming text. It was from Lucas.

Still with Clara. Miss you. I’ll probably be busy introducing Clara to the pack until later. I’m not going to be at the reception. I’ll stop by and see you tonight before you go to bed. Thanks for understanding.

Kylie stared at the phone and sensed she would be seeing a lot less of Lucas now that Clara was here. Kylie inhaled and tried to tell herself that she did understand. That of course he would have to take time with his sister. But

between his pack and now Clara, Kylie wasn't sure where she fit in.

Or *if* she fit in.

Fifteen minutes later, Kylie noticed that Della kept glancing at her. Kylie knew the vamp was chomping at the bit to get Kylie alone so she could finish their conversation about who was in the woods. But frankly, Kylie was having second thoughts about coming clean. Telling Della meant she'd have to tell Miranda. Not that Kylie didn't trust them to keep it a secret, but ... she just didn't want to get anyone in trouble. Then again, considering that she never went anywhere without a shadow these days, she was going to have to trust someone. And she trusted her two roommates more than she trusted anyone else at Shadow Falls.

They were almost finished setting up for the event when Holiday's phone rang. Holiday stepped away to take the call.

Della came moving over so fast that she bumped into Miranda and nearly knocked her down. "Talk and talk fast," Della sputtered at Kylie.

"Talk about what?" Miranda rubbed her shoulder and frowned at Della.

"Shh!" Della held up a finger to silence Miranda and eyed Kylie with persistence. "Talk."

"Don't you shush me!" Miranda bit out.

Kylie exhaled and reached over and touched Miranda's arm, hoping to calm her, then she answered Della's question. "It's my grandfather and aunt. They were the fog."

"They were ... the fog?" Miranda asked, her bad attitude with Della dropping along with her mouth.

When Kylie nodded, Miranda continued. "Then that proves it, you are a witch, because they have to be some dang powerful witches to pull that off."

"Wait. Why would they do that?" Della asked.

Kylie frowned, and looked again at Holiday standing across the dining hall. Kylie noted how the camp leader's gaze kept moving to Kylie and she suspected the phone call had to be about her.

Again.

Great. What was it this time?

"Earth to Kylie," Miranda snapped.

Kylie glanced back at her two roommates. "I'm not sure it proves anything at this point."

"But why would they chase Lucas's sister?" Della asked.

"I don't know." Then suddenly Kylie did know. "To get me to enter the woods. They've been calling me for a few days now but I thought ... I thought it might be Mario and his friends and I didn't go. But I'll bet my grandfather knew if I thought someone was in danger, I'd—"

"Do they even know you're a protector?" Miranda asked.

"I don't know." Kylie's mind raced. "I know that Burnett talked with him, but I don't know what all he told them."

"I'm not buying all that," Della said. "Maybe it is Mario pretending to be your grandfather and aunt. Maybe this is just a trick to get his hands on you."

"I don't think so," Kylie said. "And right now I have to follow my gut. I've got too much going on, and it would be nice to get some answers about something."

"What else is going on?" Concern made Della's brows tighten.

Kylie hesitated. "Ghost issues."

"Which means we're not gonna be any help there," Della countered.

Exactly what Kylie thought, too. When it came to ghost issues, it was either Holiday or she was on her own. She recalled Derek, who'd told her he was willing to help her even though chances were he felt the same way about the spirits as the other supernaturals did.

Della piped up again. "But I thought your grandfather was supposed to come see you tomorrow. Why are they turning themselves into fog and sneaking in to see you if they could just show up tomorrow? And how did you know the fog was them?"

"He was supposed to come," Kylie answered. "But since then he's shut off his phone and hasn't contacted Burnett at all. And right when I left the fog took on human form and..." Kylie wasn't sure how to put it. "I recognized my grandfather and my aunt. I'm sure of it."

Della's expression hardened. "But if you're wrong, and if we go out into the woods and shit happens—"

"Go into the woods?" Miranda blurted out. "Oh, crap, no! Burnett said

she wasn't to go into the woods. To not let her get close to the woods."

"I know," Kylie said. "But if I want answers to what I am, I'm going to have to go to my grandfather, and I don't think he's going to just walk into the camp, not when the FRU is crawling all over Shadow Falls. And after what the FRU did to my grandmother, I can't say I blame him for not trusting them. Heck, even Holiday doesn't trust them."

Miranda bit into her bottom lip. "But if you're wrong..."

"I'm not." And just like that, Kylie realized she couldn't put her two best friends in danger. The guilt she still harbored over Ellie swelled in her chest. "But just in case, I'm going in alone."

"No way!" Della said.

"All I want to do is walk a little ways into the woods. You guys can just stand at the edge. If I don't feel anything, I'll come right back out."

"And if you do feel something?" Miranda asked.

"Then I'll know it's them and I'll meet them."

"Oh, hell no! You are not going in alone," Della declared. "You're a protector. In case you've forgotten, that means you can't protect yourself."

"Della's right," Miranda said. "If you go, we all go."

"I don't think any of us should go!" Della said.

Holiday started walking over and, knowing the fae would be able to read the mood, Kylie looked at her two best friends. "Think happy thoughts. Quick. Before Holiday reads..." She let her words fade as Holiday drew near.

"What's up?" Holiday asked.

"Nothing," the three of them answered at the same time.

Kylie smiled and tried envisioning Lucas to instill a happy emotion, but Derek's image and his loyalty to her ghost issues popped into her mind. And instead of being happy, more angst filled her head.

Holiday quirked an eyebrow that read as disbelief, but she appeared to move past it and said, "That was Burnett. He's not going to make it back until right before the event and has insisted we postpone the trip to the falls until tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

"That's okay," Kylie said.

And it was okay. Maybe now she could take that walk into the woods and

get some answers—if they were still there. She just needed to figure out how to do it without Della and Miranda freaking out.

Chapter Sixteen

Kylie stood on the edge of the path, ignoring Della and Miranda as they argued over who was going into the woods with her and who was staying at the path. Little did they know, neither of them were going.

She couldn't put them in danger. Even if there weren't any danger, if Burnett found out, he'd give them hell. And hell from Burnett felt pretty dangerous. Somehow Kylie was going to have to figure out how to sneak away and do this on her own.

Besides, she wasn't even sure her grandfather and aunt were still there. Maybe moving into the woods would tell her, but not now. Still, she closed her eyes and listened with her heart. When she didn't feel even the slightest yearning to enter, she spoke in her mind.

Are you still out there?

"I'm here."

The words sounded at the same time as Kylie felt the cold. Not recognizing the voice, she snapped her eyes open. Standing in front of her was a blond woman, early twenties, wearing a diner uniform with a tag on it that read CARA M. Kylie's heart thudded faster when she realized this was one of the girls from the vision, the vision of being buried with Holiday's sister.

Letting go of a sigh, Kylie's breath turned to cold vapor.

"Damn!" said Della.

"Damn what?" asked Miranda.

"Kylie's got company," Della said. "White misty shit always snakes up from her lips when she's chatting with the dead."

"Oh!" Miranda took a step back and stared at Kylie. "Man, her aura is

doing some crazy stuff again. This is so damn freaky. I'm so glad I'm not her."

Trying to shut out Della and Miranda, Kylie focused on Cara M. Kylie recalled Derek asking her to describe the uniform so she studied it for details. She snapped a picture of it in her mind—the V neckline, the checkered pattern around the bottom of the skirt—so she could describe it to him later. But why not just ask?

"Where did you work?" Kylie asked.

"I worked at my aunt's voodoo shop," Miranda answered. "Crazy crap happened there."

"She's not talking to you," Della snapped.

"Sorry." Miranda shrugged. "This is so freaky."

"Do you know the name of the diner?" Kylie continued to stare at the spirit.

"I ... *don't know*," Cara M. answered. "*But can you please get us out of there?*"

Kylie frowned. "I want to, but I need to know where you are."

"*But you do know. The other girl took you there. Don't you remember?*"

How could she forget? "I saw you guys and you were under a building of some sort, like a wood floor, but I don't know where that is. What town are you in? Is there an address? Is it close to here?"

"*Yes, it's close. It didn't take much time at all to get here.*"

Kylie considered what she said and asked, "But how did you get here? I mean ... did you walk or ... come spiritually?" Kylie hadn't considered how spirits traveled and she realized how little she knew about the whole ghost-whispering thing.

"*I don't know*," the spirit answered. "*But I can take you back there if you'd like.*"

"No," Kylie blurted out. The thought of being trapped in the grave again was too much. She took a deep breath and remembered to talk mentally. *Can you tell Hannah I need to see her?*

"*Who's Hannah?*"

One of the girls with you. The one with red hair. Kylie could feel Miranda

and Della staring and she purposefully turned her back so she wouldn't be disturbed.

"So her name is Hannah? How do you know her name? She's not wearing a name tag." The spirit glanced down at the name tag attached to her uniform. *"Do you know my name? They call me Cara M., but I don't remember being her. My life is like a vague picture book I once looked at and I can recall flashes of the images on the pages, but they never turn slow enough for me to recognize anything."*

That's not uncommon after death, Kylie assured her, remembering Holiday saying that the more dramatic the death, the less the spirit remembered. The thought of what these girls possibly went through sent real pain skipping through Kylie's limbs. Her heart clutched with the need to help them. To do whatever they needed to help them move on.

"Will I ever remember?" Cara M asked.

The spirit's question came with such sadness that the emotion swelled in Kylie's heart. *I'm not an expert, but from what I've seen, things usually come to you. Spirits generally hang around for a reason and once that's taken care of, they remember things, and then pass over.*

Cara appeared to consider Kylie's words and nodded. *"I think the reason is so we can get our own graves. I've never liked roommates. And it's really cramped in that grave."*

Unfortunately, Kylie could remember just how cramped it was. She shivered, feeling her shoulders pressing against the dead girls' bodies on each side. Pushing the thought aside, Kylie concentrated on the conversation and not the horror of what had happened.

I'm trying to get you guys out. But something told Kylie that while Cara M.'s only need might be to escape the makeshift grave, Hannah wanted something much more. But hopefully while solving Hannah's problem Kylie would help out all three of them.

Cara M. stood there as if deep in thought. *"Is it nice where I'll cross over to?"*

Kylie debated what to say, then went with the truth. *I've never seen it, but I think so.*

The spirit looked around, then slowly floated up a good six or seven feet. She hung in the air, causing a big swirl of fog to appear around her, reminding Kylie of a scary movie. After a few seconds, she glanced down at Kylie with eyes that seemed lost, hurt. *"It's nice here, too."* She floated back down to the ground.

"I think I recognize this place. Are we close to that place with the dinosaur bones?"

Hope stirred in Kylie's tight chest. *So you know about this place? Did you live near here?*

"I ... think so. I see an image of swimming in a lake. There was a lot of laughter there. It must have been fun."

Yes, there's a lake. Can you see anything more? Where you worked? What town?

The spirit frowned. *"I can't."* Darker shadows started appearing beneath her eyes. Shadows that made her look sadder and somehow deader. *"Please get us out of there."* She started to fade.

Wait. Can you tell Hannah I need to see her?

"I can, but I don't know if she'll come. She's upset."

At what? Was Hannah's memory returning, too? The cold began to ebb away.

The ghost completely vanished and the Texas heat replaced the chill, leaving Kylie with even more questions than before.

"Is the ghost gone?" Miranda asked.

"Yes," Kylie sighed.

"Are we going in?" Miranda asked.

"Where?" Kylie asked, confused.

"The woods. Duh."

"Oh, no," Kylie said.

"Thank Gawd!" Della muttered, and all three of them started walking to the cabin. Kylie looked back one more time and wondered if she'd ever find all the answers she needed. In a way, her life was as much of a mystery as a ghost.

* * *

They had one hour before they had to be back at the dining hall for the welcoming reception. While still walking, Della and Miranda jabbered about getting ready for the reception. No doubt Della wanted to spruce up to impress both Chris and Steve. Miranda wanted to wow Perry.

Kylie tried to get into the spruce-up mood with them, but her enthusiasm came up short. Lucas wouldn't even be there, so who would she be trying to impress? A vision of Derek popped into her head and she pushed it back and felt guilty for even thinking it.

Trying not to think about Derek reminded Kylie that she'd told him she'd e-mail him the description of the diner uniform. As Kylie moved to the computer, her mind raced with the details she'd collected about what Cara M. had been wearing.

Kylie opened her web account and saw a whole buttload of e-mails: a few from her mom, a couple from her dad, one from Sara, and some spam, and then a few from accounts she didn't recognize.

Ignoring her incoming mail, she clicked on the button to send a new e-mail, typed in Derek's name, and then started typing the description of the waitress uniform. She recalled all the things she'd learned about Cara M. and found herself wishing she had someone to talk to about them. Then again, she did have someone—the person she was e-mailing. Derek.

Miranda and Della's laughter spilled out of Della's bedroom. Why did hearing them laugh make her feel lonely?

The answer bubbled to the top of her mind. Because they were giddy with the idea of romance, of getting all dolled up to impress guys. Right now, the idea of romance left Kylie feeling befuddled. It felt like Lucas was pulling away and somehow Derek was sneaking closer. And nothing felt right.

But she still felt lonely.

Remembering the e-mail from her mom, Kylie picked up the phone and dialed her number. The phone rang four times before her mom answered.

"Hi, Mom," Kylie said.

"Hey, sweetie," her mom answered, and the sound of her voice had Kylie

feeling homesick. “Is everything okay?” her mom asked.

“It’s fine. Why do you always assume when I call you that something is wrong?”

“I don’t always assume that. Only sometimes. And this is one of those times. I must be psychic. So stop pretending and tell me what’s up.”

Heck. Maybe her mom was a supernatural.

“Nothing,” Kylie said. “I just got an e-mail from you and thought I’d call you. You are always saying I don’t call enough.”

“True.” Her mom paused. “What’s the matter, sweetie?”

Giving in because lying sure as hell didn’t seem to work, Kylie answered, “Just a bad day.”

“You know if you change your mind about staying there for the school year, and want to come home, I could get you enrolled back in school here and—”

“I’m not going to change my mind, Mom. I love it here.” *I belong here.* “I’m allowed to have a bad day, right?”

“Yes, just like I’m allowed to worry about you when you have a bad day.”

“Well, don’t worry too much.” There was a sudden background noise on the line.

“Where are you?” Kylie asked.

“Out to an early dinner.”

“Alone?” Kylie asked, hoping her mom wasn’t out with Smarmy John, who wanted to drag her mom off to England and get her naked and between the sheets.

As soon as the thought came, Kylie tried to push it away.

“Uh, no.” Her mom’s answer came out sounding guilty. “Not alone.”

“With John?” Kylie attempted to keep her disappointment from her voice, but didn’t think she was successful.

The silence lingered a few seconds on the line.

“It’s a yes or no answer, Mom. It shouldn’t take you that long to reply.” Kylie realized she sounded just like her mom, too. But damn, she was certain her mom had used the exact line on her at one time or another.

“Uh ... yes,” her mom’s reply came out.

Kylie closed her eyes. As if her brain were on automatic pilot, the question slipped out. “You’re not having sex with him, are you?” And even before the last word of the inquiry left her lips, she knew she was going to regret it.

Oh, yeah, regret times ten. Kylie felt her face turn red.

Her mom’s breath caught and she started coughing. “Uh...” More hacking.

“Hello, Kylie.” A male voice came on the line. “I think your mom choked on her wine.”

Wine? Her mom was drinking wine at three in the afternoon? Was he planning on getting her drunk and having his way with her?

“Kylie? You there?”

“Yeah.” Kylie heard her mom telling John to give her the phone back. Kylie imagined her mom panicking thinking Kylie might ask John if they were having sex. Not that she would. The fact that she asked her mom was probably going on her most embarrassing moments list.

“Kylie?” Her mom must have snagged the phone back. “We ... should talk later.” Her voice came out squeaky, like a cartoon.

“Yeah. Later.” Kylie disconnected and stared at the phone.

Okay, lesson learned. Her mom not only couldn’t say the word *sex*, she obviously couldn’t hear it, either. Did that mean her mom couldn’t have sex? Gawd, Kylie hoped so. Lesson number two. Talking about sex with her mom made her queasy. Could she possibly suffer from the same affliction as her mom?

Resting her phone by the computer, pushing thoughts of her mom having sex from her mind, Kylie refocused on the computer and tried not to listen to her roommates giggling about something—probably something to do with sex, too. Moaning, she dropped her head down on the table, feeling the blood rushing to her cheeks, hoping the coolness of the wood would chase away the heat.

Her phone, placed beside the computer, chimed with an incoming text. Sitting up, she picked it up to get the message. Her heart did a little jolt when she saw it was from Derek.

His message read: *You ok? What's happening?*

Kylie closed her eyes. Could he sense everything she was feeling now? She dropped her head back on the table again, so hard she probably bruised her forehead. She took a few deep breaths and then sat up and started texting him back.

Fine. E-mailing you the description of the diner uniform now. U going to the reception?

She held her breath and waited to see if he'd answer.

I'll be there. U?

Oh goodness, did he think the question was like an invitation to hang out?

Was it an invitation to hang out?

Yes. Bye. Guilt set in. But at least the guilt replaced the embarrassment of asking her mom if she was having sex.

Kylie stared down at her phone. Why did texting Derek feel wrong? She shouldn't feel that way. They were just ... friends. Heck, Fredericka was with Lucas five times more than Kylie was with Lucas. Ten times more than Kylie was with Derek. And Fredericka and Lucas had been lovers.

Trying to shake off the feeling, she finished the e-mail and hit send.

"Kylie?" Miranda called from the doorway of Della's bedroom. "Did you do it?"

Kylie looked over her shoulder and attempted to focus on Miranda's cheery voice. Frankly, she could use some cheer. Lately, it seemed she'd done nothing but chew on her problems. "Do what?" she asked a smiling Miranda.

"Stuff your bra. Did you do it?" the witch asked.

Kylie bit down on her lip and grinned as the memory filled her head. "Sara talked me into doing it in sixth grade, but I chickened out and hid behind a dumpster and got rid of the tissue before we got to school. She was livid when she saw me and she had super boobs and I didn't."

Miranda chuckled and Kylie could hear Della inside the room laughing as well.

Miranda gazed down at her chest. "I admitted that I did it for a while before I got them for real. But Della swears she never did it, but I can tell

she's lying."

"I'm not lying," Della countered, popping out of her room. "Truth is, I might have done it if I hadn't seen Tillie McCoy bump into the locker with her size Cs and then walk down the hall with a square boob without realizing she'd smashed her boob stuffing." Della held her hand out in front of her chest. "Seriously, she had one boob out to here and one squared off to here. Crazy thing was, the guys still couldn't take their eyes off them. I don't think they cared one was square."

Kylie chuckled but what she really felt was embarrassment for a girl named Tillie whom she'd never met. "That would be awful."

"It was," Della said. "I think tissue sales dropped in town due to it, too. Seriously, the next day, all the girls in seventh grade had lost a couple of cup sizes and the boys were depressed for a month. That day I decided that being a member of the itty bitty titty committee wasn't the worst thing."

They all laughed again.

"You know boys stuff, too," Miranda said.

"Stuff what?" Kylie asked.

Della pointed to her pelvic area.

"Seriously?" Kylie asked.

"Seriously," Della and Miranda said in unison.

"They use socks," Della added.

"Socks? Why?" Kylie asked. "It's not as if we ... check down there."

"They think we do," Della said. "Face it, guys have sex on the brain. Girls have romance on the brain."

"Sometimes I have sex on the brain," Miranda admitted. "Well, I mean, I think about it. Does that make me a slut?"

They laughed harder, Miranda included. Then Kylie shook her head, still trying not to imagine a guy with a sock in his pants. "We all think about it, but ... that is just so ... crazy!"

Della frowned at Miranda and pressed her hands on her temples as if she'd suddenly gotten a migraine. "Damn! Why did you have to bring up the sock thing? Now I'm going to be tempted to look at all the guys' zippers tonight to check for sock bulges."

“You’re right.” Miranda giggled. “It’s like an accident on the side of the road. You don’t want to look, but your eyes go there anyway.” She hit the bottom of her chin with the back of her hand and tilted her head back. “We’ll just have to keep our chins and eyes above the waist the whole time. Whatever we do, no bulge checks.”

They all laughed even harder.

Best of all, the laughter reached down into Kylie’s heart and eased her feeling of impending doom. And for that, she was grateful.

* * *

The dining hall smelled like cupcakes, which Holiday had the kitchen staff fix for the event. A group of campers hung out over by the appetizers, probably saying hello to the new teachers and a few of the new campers who’d come on board at Shadow Falls. Kylie had spotted one or two new faces the last few days, but hadn’t actually met any of them yet. She had to face it; she didn’t excel at meeting new people. But considering the first school year at Shadow Falls started next week, she’d have to meet them soon enough.

Standing beside Miranda, Kylie realized the place wasn’t as crowded as she’d expected it to be. Probably because the reception wasn’t mandatory. Nevertheless, over half the campers were present. Then Kylie noted that none of the weres were here. They’d obviously gone off to do their own thing. Again.

Another sweep of the room told Kylie that Derek hadn’t arrived yet, either. She wondered if he was still doing Internet searches to see if he could find a diner in the area that Cara M. might have worked at before she’d been killed. The fact that he was helping her with a ghost issue filled her chest with something warm and scary. Scary because she couldn’t exactly define the warmth. They were just friends, she told herself again. And she found it harder to believe each time she said it, too.

Helen waved at Kylie from across the room. She had her arm around Jonathon. Kylie admired the relationship the two of them had found with each other. It was sweet and romantic. Kylie grinned and waved back. In

spite of knowing her problems were still here, she felt ... lighter, and the grin felt real, too.

Amazing how a little girlfriend-laughing time could raise your spirits. Though she did have to struggle not to look at guys below the belt to see if she detected any sock wearers. And just thinking about it made Kylie want to giggle. Unfortunately, Miranda spotted Kylie's stifled smile and, as if guessing what had caused it, the witch snorted with laughter. Then meeting Kylie's gaze, she pressed her hand under her chin and mouthed the words *chin up*.

Della, across the room, let out another laugh.

"What's so funny?" Burnett walked up beside Miranda.

"Nothing," Kylie said, then feared Miranda would tell him the truth. Miranda was good at blurting out the wrong thing at the wrong times.

Meeting Burnett's gaze, Kylie recalled he could detect a lie, so she quickly added, "Nothing I can share without..."

"Blushing?" he asked, looking from her face to Miranda, who glowed an embarrassed pink. The color almost matched her hair.

Afraid Burnett would want more of an explanation, Kylie added, "It's girl talk."

He held up a hand. "You don't have to explain. I really don't speak girl talk and every time I tried to learn it, I regretted it." He almost smiled and his expression softened with what looked like concern when he met Kylie's eyes. "Sorry I didn't make it back in time to go to the falls."

"It's okay," Kylie answered, and then, call her paranoid, but she asked, "The thing you had to do at the FRU, it didn't have anything to do with me, did it?"

"No," he assured her, sounding honest.

She nodded and then she went for a second question, although she was pretty certain she knew the answer. "No word from my grandfather?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry." He sighed. "With all the things that have happened lately, I'm glad you're keeping your chin up."

Chin up. The words ran around Kylie's head. Miranda snorted another bit of laughter and faced the opposite direction. Kylie had to bite the inside of

her cheek to keep from laughing. Then Della's chuckle sounded from across the room.

Wrinkling his brow, Burnett looked over at Della, who fell quickly back into vampire mode and wiped all signs of humor from her face. Burnett shook his head and focused on Kylie again. "If you can stop giggling, the new teachers are all eager to meet you."

"Me?" Kylie asked, his comment chasing the grin off her face. She shifted her gaze to the side of the room where the teachers congregated. They were indeed staring at her.

"Why would they want to meet me?" Kylie's I-don't-like-to-be-singled-out phobia reared its ugly head.

"They've heard about you," Burnett said as if it was obvious.

Kylie could only imagine what some of the campers had told them. Then an even worse thought hit. "Heard about me from whom? You mean, since they've been here, right? *Right?*"

Burnett looked uncomfortable with the questions. He glanced around, almost as if searching for an out, or perhaps searching for Holiday to answer the questions for him. When he didn't spot her, he looked back at Kylie. "I ... Well ... news spreads. People talk."

"People? You mean people outside of the camp? People outside of Shadow Falls are talking about me?"

He looked put on the spot, but he nodded. "Just the supernaturals."

Just the supernaturals? "So, the whole supernatural world knows about me?" The thought made Kylie want to find a hole to climb into. It was bad enough knowing the campers were always on "Kylie alert," waiting to see what her wacky brain pattern was going to do next, but to think she was the subject being discussed everywhere made her supernatural butt extremely uncomfortable.

"Perhaps not the whole supernatural world," he said as if trying to console her, and then hesitated as if reconsidering the wisdom of his answer. "I mean, I couldn't say if everyone—"

"Oh, it probably is everyone," Miranda said. "My mom said they were talking about you at Witch Council last week in Italy. And they didn't even

know you were a witch then. You can imagine how they are talking now.”

Kylie didn’t want to imagine. Her chest suddenly felt hollow. “They were talking about me in Italy? You didn’t tell me that.” She bit down on her lip. “I’m such a freak that—”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you,” Miranda said. “I knew you’d get all weird about it. And you’re not a freak,” she added. “You’re a protector. And being a protector is huge. Very newsworthy like a natural disaster. Not that you’re a disaster. I mean, like good news.”

Nothing about this felt good. It felt more like a disaster. Not even a natural one.

“Word of a protector would be something people would talk about. But Miranda’s right, it’s not a bad thing.” Burnett looked at Kylie and obviously read her erratic heartbeat and motioned to the crowd of teachers. “They just want to say hello. Not interrogate you.”

Say hello to the camp’s natural disaster, aka the freak. Kylie’s heart raced.

“It’s not a big deal,” Burnett said.

Right. Only it felt like a big deal to her. Especially when she looked up and noted all three of the teachers gawking at her. Two were even twitching their brows, checking out her pattern—and their actions had encouraged several of the campers to do the same. She could almost hear the roar of thoughts. *Hey, anyone want a good laugh? Check out Kylie’s brain pattern again.*

She heard someone say something about her still being a witch. Kylie supposed she should feel happy she had a pattern to check out—instead of one of those screwball shifting patterns that really freaked people out. But even knowing that didn’t make her anxiety subside. She hated being in the spotlight.

Burnett, looking baffled at Kylie’s emotional dilemma, leaned closer and whispered, “If you really don’t want to meet them—”

“No, I ... I’ll do it.” It was crazy not to. And she felt like an idiot for letting her insecurities be known. It wasn’t that she completely hated meeting people, she just hated meeting people who already had a preconceived notion

about her. And she sure as hell didn't like knowing that people in Italy were talking about her. Probably in Italian, and she couldn't even understand it.

Stiffening her backbone, she plastered a smile on her face, hoping to appear less like a freak than they considered her to be. It was, however, the same fake smile she wore when her mom took her someplace she didn't want to go—like to one of those mother/daughter days at work, or to one of those stuffy volunteer luncheons. What was it that her mom had said about that smile? Oh yeah: *You look like you just swallowed a mosquito.*

Yup, she was going to look like a freak, all right.

Chapter Seventeen

Kylie, practically holding her breath, suffered through Burnett's introduction of all three teachers. First was Hayden Yates, aka Mr. Yates to the students, who gave her a nod and a more than uncomfortable stare. The new half vampire, half fae science teacher shook her hand and held on for a second longer than she'd liked.

Considering his fae half was dominant, she was surprised she didn't feel any emotion-altering warmth from him. And although he didn't strike her as a pervert, something about him gave her just a bit of the creeps. She wasn't sure what it was, but she didn't like it, or him. Odd, because Kylie normally didn't make rash assumptions about people—with the exception of her mom's new boyfriend, of course. But that was a special case. That guy wanted to dirty up the sheets with her mom and that just wasn't okay.

Ava Kane, aka Ms. Kane, wore the title of English teacher. She was half-witch and half-shape-shifter, with shape-shifter being her dominant species. She seemed nice enough, but the way she kept twitching her brows, trying to see something different in Kylie's brain pattern, made Kylie uncomfortable. Exactly what did she think she'd find?

Collin Warren, a half-fae, half-human, was the history teacher and a geologist who came off as the quiet type. Odd, for someone with fae blood, because they usually seemed to have a certain amount of natural charm, but then again, perhaps not all half-fae inherited that talent. Kylie had heard that, on rare occasions, some human supernatural blends tended to be more human than supernatural, so perhaps that was the case with Mr. Warren.

Nevertheless, he smiled, said the proper things—"Nice to meet you"—but

Kylie got the feeling he was as uncomfortable being put on the spot as she was. Which made her wonder why he'd want to be a teacher.

After everyone knew everyone's name, Kylie stood there, her smile still spreading her lips tight, and waited for something to end the awkward moment. Burnett finally intervened. "Well, I'm glad you all met."

Kylie spun around, thinking only of escaping. But one step forward, and she found herself surrounded by six or seven teens she'd never met. Obviously the new students. The blunt stares and open curiosity in their expressions made her catch her breath again. It was one thing to be gawked at by the regular campers, but newbies ... Her heart raced and her palms began to itch. Hives were only a few minutes away.

Her swallowed-a-mosquito smile fell flat. And that mosquito she'd supposedly inhaled buzzed in her stomach. She didn't know if she could handle more brain gaping and uncomfortable introductions.

"Is it true that you didn't even have a pattern at first?" one of the girls, a witch, asked.

Suddenly, an arm fell across her shoulders. Before she looked at the owner of that appendage, she recognized Derek's warm touch. "I'm sorry, but you guys are going to have to meet Kylie later. I need to steal her away."

"Lucky guy," one of the new vampires said.

"Yeah, I am," Derek said, sounding possessive.

He guided her through the circle of new students. Moved her with confidence and with purpose—the purpose being to get her the hell away from the gawkers. But damn, she appreciated Derek being there so much. She leaned against his shoulder and heard him sigh.

"Hang in there," he whispered. "I'll get you out of here."

He glanced over his shoulder and she followed his gaze to see him looking toward Burnett. The vampire nodded as if giving permission for him to take her out.

She didn't breathe again until they walked out the dining hall door.

Derek's arm tightened as they left the building, as if telling her he didn't want to let her go. While she hated admitting it, there was a small part of her that didn't want him to let go either. But knowing what was right, she stepped

away from his side. And then she met his soft green eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?” he asked.

For everything. For feeling things I shouldn’t. “For needing to be rescued. It’s crazy. I should be able to handle it. It’s just that people stare at me like I’m...”

“Special?” He grinned.

“No, like I’m a freak.”

He shook his head. “They don’t think you’re a freak. They’re curious. And that one vamp was totally into you, but I’m sure it’s still hard.”

“Maybe when I know for sure what I am, then it won’t be so hard.” But she did know, didn’t she? She was a chameleon. Was she starting to doubt her heritage like everyone else?

Derek’s eyebrow rose. “You still don’t believe you’re a witch?”

“Not completely,” Kylie said.

He nodded. “Well, that should all be cleared up tomorrow, right? When your grandfather comes.”

That’s when she remembered she hadn’t told Derek about her grandfather cutting off his phone or about him and her great-aunt turning into fog. She started to spill her guts to him when she felt the sudden splash of cold.

The smear of condensation started to materialize next to Derek. The familiar feminine form taking shape told Kylie it was Hannah. But Kylie’s breath caught when she saw the spirit had gone back to her zombie look. The beige dress she wore was in shreds and stained with mud. Her hair hung lifelessly around her shoulders. Part of her cheekbone was exposed where the skin had decayed and hung loose. And worms moved in and out of her ears.

Gross. Instinctually, Kylie took a step back.

“*Not again.*” Panic filled Hannah’s dead-looking eyes.

“What?” Kylie forced herself not to keep backing up. But the worms were falling off her at a rapid rate.

“Huh?” Derek took a step closer and one of the worms fell onto his chest.

Kylie brushed it off and then shook her head.

“Oh.” His eyes widened with understanding. He took a small step back,

not so much out of fear, but as if giving her space.

Kylie refocused on Hannah. But the spirit's gaze stay glued over Kylie's shoulder. She heard the dining hall door open behind them, and the sound of the crowd followed the door. Hannah continued to stare over Kylie's shoulder. Then, suddenly, her expression grew more panicked.

"No," Hannah muttered and her hands, more bone than flesh, grabbed Kylie by the shoulders. Worms went everywhere.

"*Not again! Not again!*" The spirit's touch sent wave after wave of icy tremors coursing through Kylie, who forgot about the worms. Pain shot from every nerve ending and her body stiffened from what felt like a brain freeze to her entire body.

"Is everything okay?" Derek moved in.

The throbbing through Kylie's body locked the air in her lungs. She wanted to scream. But she felt as if someone had her by the throat. Black spots started forming in her vision. She felt her knees start to fold. Derek touched her and just like that, the pain and the dizziness vanished. Blinking, she saw Hannah was still there, standing beside Derek.

Kylie breathed, then forced the words out. "Not again, what?"

Hannah didn't answer, didn't even look at her. Derek did, and he appeared concerned.

"Look, I need to know what it is you need me to do. Please, answer me." But the spirit, her frightened dead gaze locked over Kylie's shoulder, faded into thin air.

Derek brushed his hand down Kylie's arm. "You okay?"

Kylie nodded, savoring the warmth of his touch, and then she turned around to see who'd walked out of the dining hall, wondering if that was what had sent Hannah running. Burnett, the new teachers, and a couple of the new students stood by the door.

"Was that Hannah?" Derek whispered.

"Yeah," Kylie said, still trying to wrap her head around what Holiday's sister had meant by *not again*.

"You really okay?" he asked.

She touched her throat. "Yeah. I just don't know what it is that she needs

me to do.”

“I don’t know if this helps, but I think I know where Cara M. worked.”

“Where?” Kylie asked.

“When you told me that she could possibly be from around here, I Googled all the diners and cafés in the area. I found some photos and this old newspaper article about some place called Cookie’s Café, right outside of Fallen. Have you ever been there?”

“No, I don’t ... Wait. Yes, my mom took me to this restaurant that was really just an old house. That must have been how I recognized the uniform.”

“That’s it. The house was built in the eighteen hundreds.” He smiled as if proud he’d found the answer to at least part of the puzzle.

Kylie almost smiled herself, but then it hit her. What now? Even if all Kylie needed to do was find the bodies, how was knowing where one of the dead girls worked going to help her? Ordinarily, she could talk to Holiday about this but ... she couldn’t do that until she knew exactly what was going on. It would be unbearably cruel to tell Holiday her sister was dead when there was a chance Kylie was misinterpreting the visions.

Then another realization washed over her. She should probably go to the police. But she didn’t have a freaking clue how to explain any of this. Which meant it might be up to her to try to solve the murders.

Not again. Not again. Hannah’s words rang in her head. What was Hannah trying to say?

Oh, holy hell, Kylie didn’t have a clue how to move forward. She wasn’t an investigator. She didn’t even enjoy watching TV shows about detectives. She glanced back up at Derek. “What should I do now?”

“I called the diner, just to ask if there had been a Cara M. working there, but it’s a tourist place and they’re only open on the weekends.”

Kylie’s mind continued to whirl with what she needed to do. “Oh, hell, I’m so out of my league on this.”

“Don’t worry,” Derek said. “I’ll help you. And besides, we have until Saturday to decide what to do next.”

She looked up at him with complete appreciation. “How can I thank you?”

He grinned with pure sex appeal, the gold flecks in his eyes brightening. “I could think of a few ways.”

She frowned.

He held up a hand. “Fine. Just smile a little more. That’ll be payment enough.”

* * *

Thursday morning, Kylie woke up when Socks bumped her chin with his nose. As she blinked away the foggiest of sleep, she stroked Socks’s soft feline fur. The sun spilled through the window and she watched as the day’s brightness and shadows flickered on the ceiling, fighting for space—a war of sorts between light and darkness.

As the battle took place, she felt her mood host a similar conflict. Her life seemed to be a *mêlée* of so many problems and yet so many possibilities. She’d lost Derek, but gained Lucas. She’d lost the bond with her stepdad but found Daniel. She’d lost being human, but was now supernatural.

And today was the day she was supposed to meet her grandfather and discover just what it all meant, but she doubted that would happen. A frown pulled at her lips and the darker side of her mood tried to take over.

Not that she’d let it win. She closed her eyes and tried to think positive thoughts. But her mind went to Hannah and the fact that Kylie shouldn’t postpone telling Holiday any longer that her sister was dead. Just thinking about how that conversation would go took another bite out of Kylie’s disposition.

Then her heart reminded her that Lucas hadn’t shown up last night, despite the fact he’d told her he would. That pretty much made it official. The dark side, the bad mood, had won. Glancing back up at the ceiling, she couldn’t help but notice there were indeed more shadows than sunlight.

For some crazy reason, she remembered Nana telling her to enjoy her childhood because soon enough she’d be an adult. Was this adulthood? To wake up every day and know it would bring both good and bad? To do things you had to do, even if you wished you didn’t have to do them?

Then she recalled another piece of Nana’s advice. *Just remember, sweetie,*

sometimes we can't change what happens, but we can change how we let those things affect us.

“Easier said than done, Nana.” Kylie inhaled a big gulp of frustration and the sweet smell of roses tickled her senses. Turning her head, she saw the single pink rose on her nightstand. The memory of Lucas having robbed his grandmother’s rose garden and filling Kylie’s room with roses sent her bad mood on time-out. Then, seeing the note beside the rose, she sat up and reached for the slip of paper.

Kylie,

Sorry I was late. Something came up and I had to go visit my dad. You were out like a light when I got here. But damn, you are so beautiful when you sleep. If Della hadn't heard me opening your window and poked her head in and shot me the bird for waking her up—she's impossible—I would have climbed in bed with you just to feel you next to me.

You have no idea how much I'd like that. To feel you against me. All of you.

*Sweet dreams,
Lucas*

Kylie reached for the rose and placed it to her nose. The sweet scent made her smile. Maybe the bad mood wasn't going to win after all.

* * *

Kylie reconsidered her positive attitude when a couple of hours later, she batted at the bugs swarming around her as she moved into the woods with Holiday and Burnett. But it wasn't the bugs causing the deterioration of her good mood. It was one certain dark-haired, blue-eyed werewolf.

Kylie should have been excited about going to the falls. She always felt better after a visit. But right now, she didn't want to feel better. She wanted to feel ... mad.

Wait. She didn't *want* to feel it, she did feel mad.

Mad at the rose-leaving, note-writing were.

She'd completely let go of her aggravation about Lucas not showing up last night. She'd tried to set aside the fact that he'd practically told her he had

to keep secrets from her. While she didn't like it, she'd even accepted that Fredericka, his one-time sex buddy, would always be within touching distance of him, when Kylie wasn't anywhere close enough to touch him herself. She had worked at overcoming the fact that his grandmother, his father, and even his entire pack, were against their being together.

She'd done a lot of setting aside, overcoming, and accepting. And after this morning, she realized that it might have been too much—because after not showing up last night, after hardly seeing her yesterday, he'd barely acknowledged her this morning in the cafeteria.

Another mosquito buzzed past and she swiped at the air, sending the pest headfirst into a tree. *Bzzz ... splat!*

Couldn't Lucas have come over and had breakfast with her? She wouldn't have even blamed him if he'd brought Clara with him. But no, all she'd gotten was a smile, and even that smile had seemed somehow purposefully short. Then he'd joined the were table with all his other friends, his pack—people who clearly came before her now and probably always would.

Last night, he'd climbed into her bedroom way after midnight while she'd been asleep. He'd left her a rose and a sweet note, and this morning all she'd gotten from him was a half-assed smile. What was up with that?

She sure as hell didn't know. Who was she kidding? She knew exactly what was up. She wasn't good enough for him, because she wasn't a were.

That stung. Really stung. Then, to make matters worse, when Derek sat beside her, Lucas had the audacity to text her and say he didn't like it.

Right. He didn't like the fact that Derek had sat beside her, but he'd chosen not to sit with her. Instead, his sexy little butt was sandwiched between Fredericka and one of the new female weres, who was all over Lucas to the point that even Fredericka was unhappy about it.

Yeah, Kylie could hear Lucas telling her that he no longer cared about Fredericka. She could hear him saying that he hadn't asked the new girl to sit beside him, and she could hear him saying he had to be loyal to his pack. And maybe Kylie was wrong to feel angry, or maybe she wasn't so much angry as she was just tired of playing second fiddle.

Second fiddle sucked.

Another mosquito bit the dust when she swiped it off her cheek.

“You might want to slow down,” Burnett said, moving up beside her with his long-legged strides.

Kylie glanced at him. He studied her briefly, then shifted his gaze back to the terrain as if expecting something to jump out at them. He’d been acting antsy since they walked into the woods, not that Kylie paid too much attention; her heart had been too busy fiddling with her second fiddle matters to care if Burnett had drunk too much caffeine.

“Seriously, slow down,” Burnett said.

“Why?” Kylie asked.

He briefly glanced over his shoulder again. “As wonderful as faes are, they’re slow.”

Kylie sighed. She hadn’t realized that she was moving at a fast sprint. A non-human sprint. A non-witch sprint, too. Which meant she wasn’t really a witch, right? Glancing back, she saw Holiday power walking to keep up.

“Sorry.” Kylie slowed down and noticed how Burnett kept looking around as if he expected something to jump out at them. Had something happened? And if so, did it have anything to do with her?

Holiday’s footfalls sounded beside Kylie. She glanced from the nervous vampire to Holiday.

“Thanks for slowing down,” Holiday said, sounding a bit breathless. In less than a minute, Burnett lagged behind them, just out of vampire hearing range. Probably at Holiday’s insistence. No doubt she wanted to talk with Kylie, and Holiday didn’t like knowing he’d listen in.

The verdant smells of the forest filled Kylie’s senses. For the first time since she entered the woods she recalled her grandfather and the fog. She immediately tried to listen with her heart to see if she felt the calling sensation from before; it wasn’t there. Then she wondered if somehow the whole fog episode was behind Burnett’s edginess. Or even worse, had they tried to return and set off the alarms? Would Burnett even tell her about it if they had?

Probably not.

She looked back at Burnett. What did the vamp know?

Moving closer to Holiday, Kylie asked, “Can you tell me something and be honest about it?”

Holiday’s footsteps on moist earth made squishy sounds, as if Kylie’s question had added a weight to her step. “I don’t lie to you.”

“By omission you do. Not being up-front about something is as bad as lying.” And then there was the issue of how little Holiday shared about herself. As much as Kylie confided in Holiday, it hurt to realize it wasn’t a two-way street.

“I don’t purposefully keep things from you.” The truth in her tone hung in the damp air. They walked without talking for a few moments.

“What is it you want to know?” Holiday asked.

Kylie fought back her frustration with Holiday, knowing her anger with Lucas was affecting her attitude. “What’s with Burnett? He seems extra alert. Has he ... learned something that concerns me? Does he have news about my grandfather? Today was supposed to be the day he showed and yet ... I don’t think there’s a chance in hell that he’s coming. And no one is even saying anything about it, as if it never happened.”

Holiday frowned. “Because we didn’t think it would happen, we decided to downplay it. But Burnett and I talked earlier about it and he hasn’t heard anything about your grandfather. But ... I agree about him being ... let’s call it on the defensive. I asked about it. He says he’s feeling jittery.” Her tone seemed to say that Holiday didn’t buy it.

And neither did Kylie. Something was up. But what?

As they continued over the rocky path, an unnatural cold seemed to sweep in with every other breeze. Someone, someone dead, was close by. She gave Burnett another glance over her shoulder and remembered their talk about ghosts.

Was that the issue bothering him?

Holiday slowed down and peered back with concern. A slight huff of air leaked from her lips and her expression shifted from concern to annoyance. Not just any kind of annoyance, but the kind that stemmed from the opposite sex.

The mood must have been contagious because Kylie’s own thoughts

ventured to her opposite-sex issues and she wondered if men weren't just created to drive women crazy.

A few more minutes down the path, Holiday spoke up. "Now it's your turn. What's up with you? And don't tell me nothing, because you have anger dripping from you like a leaky faucet."

Kylie frowned, too angry to deny her feelings. "Lucas is what's up."

"Boy trouble, huh?"

"Boy catastrophe is more like it. I'm not sure I can do this."

"Do what?" Concern sounded in Holiday's voice.

"Do Lucas," Kylie said.

Holiday made a funny face and raised one eyebrow.

"Not do him as in ... get naked," Kylie blurted out, realizing what she'd said and thinking this was the cause of Holiday's odd expression.

"I mean, dealing with being the last thing on his to-do list. I mean him treating me as if I'm an afterthought in his life. I mean me feeling as if everyone he knows and cares about thinks I'm not good enough for him because I'm not a were."

Sympathy filled Holiday's eyes. "If it helps, I don't think Lucas shares the old beliefs of the weres. Most of the young weres don't agree with them, but there's pressure from the elders in their society to follow them anyway."

"I know," Kylie said. "And I also know that the only reason he's abiding by the stupid rules is because he needs his father's approval to make the Council so he can change things. But when he won't even smile at me for longer than a second, it hurts!" she seethed. "I guess that makes me a selfish twit for feeling this way." Her words resonated deep inside her and the guilt, like flies on a bad banana, started buzzing around her chest.

"No." Holiday cut her green eyes toward Kylie as they took the bend in the trail. "It doesn't make you selfish. It makes you normal. No one wants to be made to feel as if they aren't good enough."

"But I still feel like a selfish twit," Kylie said. The sound of the falls started playing in her ears, and even from this distance she felt the calming in her mood. "Or I feel selfish when I'm not feeling furious."

Holiday leaned in and brushed shoulders with her. "Your feelings are

valid. Don't feel guilty. Sure, Lucas is making these choices for a reason. It's part of his quest, and we all must pay a price for following our own paths. But..." She paused in thought. "It's not always fair to ask others to pay that price." She glanced back at Burnett again.

Kylie sensed Holiday's words held a personal significance. In the last few days, Kylie suspected the relationship between Burnett and Holiday had gone backward. And she didn't think it was Burnett doing the backtracking.

"I think he'd be willing to pay it," Kylie said.

Holiday frowned. "I was talking about you and Lucas."

"Right," Kylie said. *But you were thinking about you and Burnett.*

They moved off the path and into the alcove of thick trees as they completed the journey to the falls. The moist smell of wet earth perfumed the air, the sound of rushing water played in the symphony of the woodsy sounds, and the serene ambience grew stronger.

Kylie's anger, her frustrations, all seemed lighter with each step. And when they arrived, it was ... surreal. Each time, she seemed to forget how good it felt. They stood on the bank of the creek and stared through the misty air at the spray of water cascading downward.

Kylie heard Holiday draw in a deep, calm breath that matched her own.

"What is it about this place?" Kylie asked.

"Magic. Power." Holiday reached down to remove her shoes and Kylie did the same. "Back in the 1960s, there was actually a supernatural doctor in botany science who came here to prove that all this could be explained by some chemical compounds in some plant life. A natural drug of sorts."

"But how could that be when not everyone experiences it?" Kylie unlaced her shoes.

"Ahh, but those not welcome here generally feel the opposite, an uncomfortable sensation that urges them to flee. Which is why this scientist believed it was a chemical reaction. Meaning, the few supernaturals who experience positive emotions were just genetically inclined to react differently to the plant's compounds. Like how some groups of people react differently to drugs."

"And what did he find?" Kylie asked, intrigued by the subject, but no

more believing it was a drug than she believed in Santa Claus.

Holiday pulled off her shoes and set them beside a rock and stood up, glancing down at Kylie with a slight smile on her lips. “Not a damn thing. After only a few weeks of working in the area, he and his teams suddenly gave up the grant that was going to pay for the project. Rumor was the Death Angels scared them away.”

Kylie moved her gaze around the verdant and beautiful landscape. The mingling of mist and sprays of sunshine beaming down from above the trees spoke of the power and magic that Holiday had mentioned. The ambience that existed here was too reverent to be considered a drug, and the natural splendor too spiritual to be dissected and studied under the microscope.

“I can see how the Death Angels wouldn’t like unbelievers digging around. I’m glad they chased them away.”

“Ditto,” Holiday said.

Standing up, Kylie’s bare feet sank into the moss-covered bank. Wiggling her toes, she bent down and rolled up her jeans.

Right then something swooped down in front of her. She swallowed her scream when she saw it was the blue jay. The bird she’d brought back to life that had somehow imprinted on Kylie and kept stopping in for visits. Hovering right in front of her, it sang as if personally performing a ballad just for her.

“I’m not your mama,” Kylie said. “Go, find your own way. Do what all birds do. Leave the nest, so to speak. Find a hunky blue jay to flutter after.”

“That’s sweet.” Holiday chuckled.

“Maybe, but it’s also weird,” Kylie muttered.

With her jeans rolled up, she took a step into the creek. The cool water lapping around her ankles felt heavenly. Her heart that had moments earlier ached with raw emotion now felt lighter. Things, at least for right now, felt right. Her world felt manageable; her problems solvable. She eagerly embraced the feeling.

Yet if she’d learned anything from her visits to this special place, it was that even a manageable life didn’t mean things would be perfect. A trip to the falls didn’t fix anything. It simply offered one the strength to face the hurdles.

Life could still hurt like a paper cut right across the heart.

And she had a few paper-cut scars to prove it. A vision of Ellie filled her heart. Yet as a breeze carrying the misty coolness brushed Kylie's face, the ache faded into acceptance. Every new day was about opportunities. You couldn't always control life, just your response to it.

Stopping halfway across the creek, she turned to look at Holiday. The camp leader stood gazing back at Burnett, who stood in the trees. The expression on her face held concern, fascination, and something else.

Love. Burnett and Holiday were meant to be together. The feeling came on so strong and with such certainty that there seemed to be a message with it—a message Kylie couldn't quite read. Did it mean she was supposed to help make that happen? Or could she trust that if left alone, love would find a way?

And could she feel the same about her and Lucas?

Not that she was prepared to call it love. Nor had he called it that.

But Derek had. *I'm in love with you, Kylie.*

Kylie closed her eyes and tried not to think about anything other than the calm feeling that the falls provided.

Chapter Eighteen

Time seemed to stop as Kylie and Holiday sat side by side in the alcove of the falls. The wall of water diffused the incoming light; only the briefest rays of yellow sun passed through. And when they did, the light caught in the mist droplets and danced in the air. The water rushed down with a low roar, and tiny molecules of moisture brushed against their faces.

The thought occurred to Kylie that maybe now would be a good time to tell Holiday about her sister. If anything could help curb the sting of the news, it would be the magic of this place. Yet even with the peacefulness embracing her, the idea of telling Holiday about the death of her sister had Kylie's heart hurting.

Then a familiar chill filled the damp air. Hannah materialized, standing in the pool of water. Her green eyes, bright with tears and filled with sadness, focused on Holiday.

Oblivious to her sister's presence, Holiday stared at the wall of water rushing down. She rubbed her arms as though she were chilled, and then turned her head and met Kylie's eyes. "A visitor?"

Kylie nodded, her throat getting tighter with emotion when she glanced again at Hannah's tears.

Holiday shrugged. "That's odd. They normally don't come back here." She leaned back on the rocks and stared up at the cave ceiling, as if giving Kylie space to deal with the spirit.

"*She hates me,*" Hannah said. "*And I don't blame her. What I did was unforgivable.*" Shame now entered Hannah's wet eyes.

Kylie almost asked Hannah what she'd done, but decided to let her be the

one to initiate the conversation. Kylie sat there in silence, feeling the cold of death that somehow seemed to blend with the calm of the falls.

She studied Hannah's emotion-filled expression and she knew the spirit had found her way through the confusion of death enough to communicate.

Enough to remember. Did she recall the moments before her death? The name of her killer perhaps? But all Kylie saw in Hannah's expression was regret.

Watching Hannah took Kylie back to her own near-death experience, to when Mario and his friends had knocked her off the ledge. She'd thought she was about to die. And she would have if Red, Mario's grandson, hadn't saved her and sacrificed himself in the process.

She remembered the regret that consumed her when she thought it was the end. Probably the same emotions Hannah felt now. Wouldn't everyone feel that way? Living, Kylie supposed, meant making mistakes, as well as garnering karma points.

While Kylie had never really defined her job/gift as a ghost whisperer, she supposed it entailed helping the spirits recall the good they'd done as much as helping them absolve any outstanding mistakes. It seemed that when you were alive, you spent most of your time trying to forgive others; upon death, it was yourself you mostly needed to forgive.

I'll bet you two were close, Kylie said. *I imagine you had a lot of fun as sisters.*

Hannah looked up at Kylie. *"We did. I just wish..."*

When Hannah didn't continue, Kylie asked, *What is it that I need to do for you? Is it just telling her about you? Is it getting you and the others out of the mass grave?*

"No, it's more." She paused as if still trying to remember. *"It can't happen again."* Hannah's whisper echoed against the cave's rock walls and the cold of her presence built.

Kylie pulled one knee closer to her chest. *What can't happen again?*

Hannah stepped closer, looking lost in thought. *"I can't look at her without feeling ... I was so wrong. So jealous. I got what I deserved. I deserved to die, but the others didn't. It has to stop."* Even more tears filled

her eyes. The sound of rushing water punctuated by the quietness of the mist-filled air added a strange kind of eeriness to the moment.

“He wants her.” Hannah took another step forward. Desperation filled her eyes. *“And you have to stop him.”*

Kylie’s gaze shifted from the spirit’s face and became captured by the still water that didn’t even stir as Hannah inched forward. Her sad spirit stopped when she stood directly over Holiday, staring down at her with a mixture of love and regret.

Realizing what Hannah had said, Kylie asked, *Who? Stop who from doing what?*

Holiday’s phone rang and Kylie looked over at her. The camp leader sat up, her brows pinched. “Okay, that’s odd, too. Phones don’t usually work in here.” Pulling her phone from her pocket, she eyed the number on the screen.

Kylie heard Holiday’s breath catch at the same time as Hannah’s. The spirit let out a sound of despair and took off running through the falls. Her footfalls, though quick, fell silent on the rock floor.

Right before Hannah’s spirit darted through the wall of water, she glanced back at Holiday, who stared transfixed at the number on the phone. Then she disappeared, taking with her the cold that she’d brought.

“Who is it?” Kylie asked Holiday.

Holiday shook her head. “It’s ... Blake.”

“Who’s Blake?” Kylie asked, somehow certain he was a clue to all this. Was he the one Kylie had to stop from doing something bad to Holiday?

Was Holiday’s life in danger?

The hum of the rushing water was interrupted by the sound of someone running, splashing through the falls. Kylie and Holiday looked up.

Burnett, standing guard outside the falls, shot through the rush of water, his face etched with panic. His clothes were wet, and his dark black hair was scattered across his brow and dripping water down his face. “Where did she go?” He blinked, and then his gaze landed on Holiday. His eyes widened. He shook his head in pure confusion. “You just ... ran out of here. How could you...?”

“What?” Holiday asked.

Burnett just stood there, his complexion paler than its normal olive color, staring as if he'd seen a ghost.

Kylie suddenly realized that was exactly what had just happened. Burnett had seen Hannah.

Oh, shit, Kylie thought. Burnett not only could smell ghosts, he could see them, too.

"How could I run where?" Holiday asked again, tucking her cell phone back in her pocket. "You're not making any sense."

Kylie didn't know what compelled her to do it, but she glanced at Burnett and shook her head, indicating that he shouldn't tell Holiday about what he'd seen.

He opened his mouth and then closed it and studied Kylie. She shook her head slightly again and she knew he'd understood.

He focused on Holiday again. Then, still looking perplexed, he answered, "I misspoke. I thought I heard you call me."

"No," Holiday said. "I didn't."

"Fine," he blurted out, and in a blink of an eye he shot back through the wall of water.

Holiday stared wide-eyed at the spot where he'd stood a flicker of a second earlier. "I know you told me he'd come back here and it's not as if I didn't believe you, but I guess I had to see it to wrap my head around it. I don't ... I've never seen anyone be able to come back here who wasn't blessed."

Kylie's mind raced with what to say, but then she remembered Holiday's phone call and the anguish in Hannah's expression when she'd rushed out. Then Kylie recalled the distinct feeling that whoever that caller was had something to do with Hannah and could be the person the spirit seemed to be so worried about.

"Who's Blake?" Kylie asked again.

* * *

"Don't you have an appointment with one of the new teachers?" Burnett asked Holiday fifteen minutes later as they came to the clearing of the woods

after they walked back from the falls. “Why don’t you head back to the office and I’ll see Kylie to her cabin?”

Kylie cut her eyes up at Burnett and she knew his game plan. He wanted her alone so he could interrogate her about what had happened at the falls. She could tell by his silence and the color of his eyes that the interrogation wasn’t going to go easy.

“I still have half an hour if you have something else to do.” Holiday studied Burnett with open curiosity, probably confused about his change in eye color. On the walk back, she’d come out and asked him about his ability to walk into the falls. He’d shrugged and said he hadn’t given it much thought.

Which was a huge, honking lie. He’d obviously thought about it a lot. And he’d gone back to thinking about it because he didn’t speak again for a while. With silence following them as they made their way through the woods, Kylie had done her own thinking, or worrying. Trying to figure out the mystery of Blake with each step, she’d fretted until she’d chewed her bottom lip sore.

When asked about the caller earlier, Holiday had danced around the truth with her answer: “Someone I used to know.”

That hadn’t told Kylie squat. She’d been tempted to blurt out a list of questions.

Did Blake also know your twin sister that I’m not supposed to know about?

Do you think this Blake character could have done something to your sister, like kill her?

Do I need to tell Burnett about Blake just in case he is the person that I’m supposed to not let hurt you?

Oh yeah, Kylie had a lot to fret over, including the upcoming interrogation from Burnett.

“Nah,” Burnett said. “I’ll see Kylie to her cabin. You go relax.”

Holiday’s brow tightened in a total non-relaxing way and she looked at Kylie as if she might know why the vamp was acting so weird. Kylie shrugged.

“Okay.” Holiday walked toward the office.

Kylie started the trek to her cabin and made a bet with herself on how long it would take Burnett to start hitting her with questions. One minute? Two?

“Start talking!” Burnett ground out less than twenty seconds later.

Okay, so maybe she overestimated his patience.

He stopped walking and looked at her, his expression one big scowl. “Who was that at the falls who looked like Holiday? Did you use your witch powers to do that?”

Kylie hesitated, unsure how to answer him. She remembered how she’d felt learning she’d be spending the rest of her life hanging out with dead people.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Then who was it?” he demanded. “And why did you feel the need to keep this from Holiday?” When she paused, he added, “Now, Kylie! I want answers. And don’t forget that I can tell when you’re lying.”

She exhaled. Understanding his frustration, but ... “It’s Holiday’s twin sister.”

His brows pinched in confusion. “Holiday has a twin?”

Kylie nodded.

Burnett looked off for a second, then back at her. “Why wouldn’t she have ever mentioned this?” He ran a palm over his face, frustration and disappointment filling his eyes. He blurted out his own answer. “Because she doesn’t confide in me about anything.”

His gaze shot back to Kylie. “But wait. How could this twin be in the camp without setting off the alarms? I checked my phone when I went back outside the falls. The alarms hadn’t been triggered and there was no bad weather to make me believe someone could have fooled the system.”

“She didn’t fool the system. She...” There wasn’t an easy way to say this, but she still paused to try and find the right words.

“She must have,” Burnett continued. “How else would—?”

“She’s dead,” Kylie said, feeling the pressure to answer under his intense scowl. “Holiday’s sister is a ghost.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Her twin is dead?” Burnett’s tone rang with empathy. “How? What happened?”

Kylie felt a warmth in knowing that he thought of Holiday first before realizing exactly what this meant—not that she didn’t expect him to see the obvious any minute now.

Or maybe less than a minute. His eyes widened with hints of panic and his mouth became slack.

“No! She can’t be ... because I can’t...” He shook his head. “No.”

“It’s not much different than smelling them. And you already knew that you could do that,” Kylie said, hoping to ease the shock.

“It’s a hell of a lot different.” He raked a hand through his hair. “How could ... I’m vampire and we don’t ... We don’t see spirits.”

“I know. I remember Holiday saying that.” Kylie paused. “What’s even stranger is that you saw her, and normally only the person connected to the spirit sees them. I don’t see Holiday’s ghosts and she doesn’t see mine. So why would you see Hannah?”

“I’m not supposed to see any of them!” he bellowed. “I’m vampire. Very, very few vampires are given this secondary power.”

Kylie twitched her brows at Burnett’s pattern. “Maybe you’re not a hundred percent vampire. Your great-great-grandma could have been a hybrid, and it just kind of popped up now.”

He slapped his forehead. “Does my pattern not look all vampire?”

Kylie shrugged. “Yes.” She looked at him with empathy. “But considering what I’ve been through, I’ve kind of learned not to put a lot of

stock in what someone's pattern shows."

He stared at Kylie as if she'd morphed into something evil. "That only happens to you."

"Yeah. Sometimes it feels that way." She found his comment somewhat humorous. She did another shrug, biting back her smile because she didn't think what little sense of humor Burnett had was functioning right now.

"However," Kylie continued, "we can't deny that something's going on. Your pattern says all vampire, and full-blooded vampires aren't usually ghost whisperers."

"Maybe it's punishment because I went into the falls."

Kylie's first instinct, being a ghost whisperer, was to feel a bit insulted that her gift was viewed as retribution; her second instinct was to remember that in the beginning that's exactly how she'd felt. As if she'd been punished.

"What?" he asked, as if sensing she had something to say.

Put on the spot, she said exactly what came across her mind. "To channel Holiday here, it's a gift, not a punishment."

"It's a punishment to me. Frigging hell!" he muttered.

Kylie still didn't understand how it could happen. Because even Holiday had said that very few vampires had the gift of ghost-whispering. "Seriously, your parents are full-blooded vampires, right?"

He stared at her as if the question required some thought. Looking away, he gazed silently at the sky. After several long seconds he looked back at her. "Okay ... let's forget about my issues with all this." He ran his palm over his face again as if trying to wipe away his confusion. "Why didn't you want Holiday knowing her sister's spirit was here?"

Kylie bit down on the edge of her bottom lip again, then released it when she found it sore. "I don't think Holiday knows. I wanted to figure out exactly—"

"Wait. You don't think Holiday knows what?" he asked, impatient.

"That her sister's dead."

His eyes widened. "She doesn't know? Shit!" He exhaled. "How did her sister die? How long ago?"

Even before she answered, Kylie suspected his reaction. He wasn't going

to like this. “She was murdered. She and two other girls.”

Discontent filled his gaze and his posture hardened. Two points for guessing his reaction, Kylie thought, and tried not to be intimidated by his fury.

“Murdered?” he bit out. “How freaking long have you known this, and why in God’s name are you just now telling me?”

“I ... I’ve been trying to figure it out. Hannah’s just now able to tell me things. And I’m still trying to put it all together.” A small part of her wondered if maybe he was right, and that she’d been wrong to try to deal with this herself. But she hadn’t been doing this alone. She had Derek. Then again, perhaps she should have taken it to Burnett instead of Derek.

Her doubt started to rise and then eased. The calm that lingered from the falls swelled in her chest and somehow she knew she’d been right to follow her instinct. And wasn’t that what Holiday told her to always do?

“Damn it. You should have come to me so I could help do the figuring.”

Kylie held his gaze. “As if you were receptive to hearing about my ghost issues. Besides, I was following what I felt needed to be done.”

Burnett’s stance relaxed as if he’d seen reason in her words. “But if it’s about Holiday, I’m always receptive.”

Kylie saw it in his eyes again. His loyalty to Holiday. Because he loved her, Kylie realized. That realization led her to think about Derek and his willingness to help her with ghosts when no one else would.

Thinking of Derek led her heart back to Lucas. The trip to the falls had lessened her animosity toward him, but not completely. Sooner or later, the two of them needed to talk. She just didn’t know how that talk would end. Or even how it would begin. Was she right to feel angry at him for keeping his distance when she knew why he did it—to prevent issues with his dad so he could get voted on the were Council? Shouldn’t she be more accepting and understanding?

Burnett reached back and squeezed his neck as if to relieve his tension. “Holiday has to be told.”

Kylie dug the toe of her right tennis shoe into the dirt and focused on the problem at hand instead of her Lucas issues. “I know. But I thought maybe if

I knew exactly what it was Hannah wanted, then it would be easier.”

“You think she wants something?”

Kylie nodded. “They always want something. That’s why they haven’t crossed over. That’s why they come to us.”

“Come to you,” he said, and then added, “Do you have any idea what she could need?”

Kylie prepared herself for his reaction again. “I’m not completely sure. At first I thought it could be just to get her and the others from the makeshift grave. Maybe to find out who did this to her. But now ... now I think she feels she has to protect Holiday from something or ... someone.”

His expression darkened, but this time his angst didn’t focus on her. His eyes brightened with an instinctual need to protect Holiday.

“Before you ask, I don’t know who or exactly what poses a danger to Holiday.” Kylie suspected it had to do with a man named Blake, but she wasn’t completely sure she should share that with Burnett right now. The last time she shared some personal information about Holiday with Burnett, Holiday had flipped. If Kylie discovered Blake posed a threat, then she’d tell Burnett everything. But she needed more information. Information that neither Holiday nor Hannah seemed willing to give.

He waved his hands out in front of him in frustration. “Then go find Hannah and tell her you need answers.”

“It doesn’t work that way. You don’t go to the ghost. They come to you.”

His frown tightened. “I don’t like this,” he said. “None of it.”

On that point, Kylie could agree with him.

He stood there, staring out at the trees as if the answers could be plucked from the limbs. She got the feeling he wasn’t accustomed to not being able to get information when he demanded it. If he really was a ghost whisperer, he had a lot to learn about patience. She pitied the poor ghost who showed up first.

Burnett finally looked back at Kylie. “Okay, tell me everything you know. Everything. We’ll figure this out.”

Even before Kylie started talking she had a distinct feeling that getting Burnett involved was going to be a game changer, and she wasn’t sure if that

was going to be a good thing ... or a bad thing.

* * *

That afternoon, Kylie stood in front of the open fridge, staring. Listening to the hum of the appliance and savoring the cool air hitting her face while Miranda and Della sat at the table behind her.

Amazing how cool felt so much better when it wasn't coming from death. Not that she wouldn't like Hannah to drop in for a visit just now. She really needed answers. But if she'd learned anything, it was that you couldn't rush ghosts.

Kylie had somehow managed to convince Burnett to give Hannah a little more time before breaking Holiday's heart and telling her that her sister was dead. For some unknown reason, Kylie sensed that knowing exactly what Hannah needed was important. Not that Kylie didn't worry it might be her own desire to postpone hurting Holiday that encouraged this decision.

Burnett also agreed that going to the café to check and see if they could get any information about Cara M. would be a good thing. He was going to arrange for them to go out there Saturday morning with Derek. Burnett wanted Derek to go because when she'd told Burnett about what Derek had uncovered so far, Burnett was impressed at Derek's investigative skills.

Never mind that Lucas was going to have a shit fit when he found out Burnett had asked Derek to join them. But who knew, he might not even find out. With as little face time as she had with Lucas lately, he might never know. Or care.

She closed her eyes. He cared. He just cared more about other things right now.

Nipping at her lip, she remembered she still hadn't answered any of Lucas's texts today. She didn't know how to answer them because she didn't know how she felt anymore. One minute she was mad, the next she was contemplating if being angry with him was fair.

"What's wrong?" Miranda asked.

Kylie opened her eyes, focusing on what was in front of her and not what was going on inside her. "We're out of soda."

“Why don’t you just zap us some?”

Kylie looked back at Miranda. “Zap as in...?”

“Zap,” Miranda said, and held up her pinky.

“Uh, why don’t *you* just zap us some?” Kylie asked, and saw Della’s eyes widen.

“Because you need to become a zapper,” Miranda said matter-of-factly. “You need to embrace your inner Wiccan spirit.”

Kylie had somehow avoided any zapping since the whole paperweight to Burnett’s crotch incident. And she’d like to continue avoiding it, but from the look in Miranda’s eyes, she knew that wasn’t going to be feasible. Well, not without hurting the witch’s feelings.

And Kylie hated hurting anyone’s feelings. Especially Miranda’s.

“Okay ... how do I do it?” She shut the fridge and inhaled. “Without endangering any of our lives.”

Miranda squealed and wiggled her butt in her chair with excitement.

Della shot Kylie a look of approval as if to say she’d done the right thing. “I like the part about not endangering our lives,” Della added with a smile.

“Take some very deep breaths,” Miranda said. “Relax. Concentrate. Then envision a frosty six-pack and wiggle your pinky.”

A frosty six-pack. Kylie inhaled. She held out her pinky, and right then Della chimed in. “We are talking a six-pack of soda and not a cold guy with good-looking abs, right?”

There was a strange kind of sizzle in the air. And suddenly appearing in front of the refrigerator was a shirtless, shivering guy with great abs. His dark hair hung over his brow and his blue eyes studied the three of them in complete bafflement.

“What the...!” he muttered.

Kylie gasped.

Miranda giggled.

Della snorted with laughter.

“Go away!” Kylie screamed, her face blood red as she wiggled her pinky at the hot guy. He was gone as quickly as he appeared. Kylie looked back at her two best friends, who were now in fits of laughter. She slapped her hand

over her heart, which was racing.

“Don’t ever talk me into doing that again!” she screeched.

“Wasn’t that ... oh, what’s his name? Zac something?” Della asked. “The actor, I mean.”

“Oh my Gawd, it was!” Miranda said.

“I always thought he looks a little like Steve, don’t you think?” Della asked.

“Oh, crap!” Kylie buried her face in her hands. “I didn’t hurt him, did I? It won’t, like, give him cancer or anything?”

“No,” Miranda answered, a giggle still sounding in her voice.

“Good,” Della said, rubbing her hands together. “Then bring him back. I want to see if he really looks like Steve.”

“Are you freaking nuts?” Kylie asked Della. Then she focused on Miranda. “Will he remember this? Will he think he lost his mind?”

“It happened so fast, he’ll probably think he imagined it. Besides, it’s not your fault.” Miranda giggled again. “It’s Della’s.” Miranda pointed at the accused.

“Oh, right. Blame the vampire!” Della bellowed.

Miranda rolled her eyes. “Della put the image in your thoughts and for some reason you just envisioned Zac.” Miranda smiled again. “You are obviously attracted to him.”

Kylie started to deny it, but couldn’t.

“I’m still not taking the hit on this one,” Della said.

Miranda looked at Della. “I guess I should have told you to be quiet. Sorry.” She covered her mouth when she snickered again. Then she sat up straighter. “But ... wow. I have to tell you I’m shocked. Only the most powerful witches can transport human beings. Even my mom can’t do that.”

“Don’t you guys think he looks like Steve?” Della asked again.

Kylie dropped into the chair. “I don’t care who he looks like. I’m not doing it again. I have no control and no knowledge. I’m sure to screw up.”

“That’s why you need practice. Besides, nothing bad happened,” Miranda said.

“Seriously? I brought a half-naked movie star into our cabin!”

“And what part of that is bad?” Della asked. “I mean ... I hate to say this, but for the first time I’m seeing that it might be cool to be a witch.”

“Thank you!” Miranda sat up straighter.

“I mean, can you just zap yourself anything you want? A hot guy? A cup of O-negative blood? A new pair of jeans?” Della asked.

“Please, you can’t do that,” Miranda said. “It’s totally against the rules.”

“But...” Kylie stared at Miranda. “You just had me do it.”

“Yeah, but you’re a newbie. It doesn’t count.” Miranda looked back at Della. “That’s not to say I can’t do anything. If it’s for a greater good, it’ll be okay. If it’s for one’s own benefit, well, it has to be within reason. If I’m given a tuna sandwich and want turkey, that’s not a big deal. It’s swapping one meat for another. But if I even do it too much, I’d get called on it.”

“By who?” Della asked. “The meat gods?”

Miranda frowned as if to say this was serious and Kylie couldn’t agree more. “By the Wicca society.”

“Wait,” Kylie said. “You mean, they know what I do?”

Della cleared her throat as if in warning, but Kylie didn’t understand the warning. She was too concerned about the Wicca society knowing her stupid mistakes to pay attention.

“Yeah,” Miranda said. “They’re like Santa Claus with their magic crystal balls. They know if you’ve been naughty or good.”

“Great! So someone’s looking into a magic ball right now and knows I conjured up a half-naked hot actor?” Kylie asked.

“You did what?” the deep male voice asked from behind Kylie.

Kylie froze, worried that Zac had returned. The fact that she wasn’t even the least bit happy about it said a lot about her disposition, too. Then she ran the voice through her head again and recognized the dark tenor.

Crap. She was in trouble now.

Chapter Twenty

Kylie turned in her chair and faced a puzzled-looking Lucas. He wore a pair of black jeans and a solid light blue T-shirt. The shirt fit just tight enough that she knew his abs could compete with Zac's.

He continued to stare. "Did you just say—?"

"It was ... a spell gone bad. I zapped a guy here for a couple of seconds." Normally, she'd be blushing, but her emotional dilemma with him chased away the embarrassment.

She stood. She felt antsy just sitting there. Her chest swelled with both joy at seeing him, and angst over her unresolved anger toward him. She wanted to kiss him, but she also wanted to let it all out and cry.

"Oh." He looked pointedly at Della and Miranda. Before he put the question into words, they got up—Miranda moved nonchalantly, Della's stance exuded a bad attitude.

"We'll be on the porch." The vamp's tone matched her body language.

"Thanks." While Kylie hadn't confided her most recent misgivings about Lucas to them, she knew they suspected. Just like she knew what went on in their lives. She watched as her two best friends left to give her privacy.

Kylie's gaze stayed fixed on Lucas and his deep blue eyes stayed on her until the door closed. She turned and faced the refrigerator and tried to decide how she felt ... besides hurt. Just to give herself something to do, she opened the appliance.

"You want something to drink?" she asked, not that there was anything but pickle juice in an otherwise empty jar of pickles and a bottle of Della's blood.

“I texted you three times and e-mailed and you haven’t responded.” He sounded hurt.

Closing her eyes, she tried to push away the wiggle of guilt tightening her stomach. “I haven’t checked my e-mail.” She shut the fridge and moved over to the computer desk.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Checking my e-mail. You said you e-mailed me.” It sounded stupid. Okay, it didn’t just sound stupid, it was stupid, but she needed a few minutes to think.

Was she wrong to be angry?

Or right?

She dropped into the chair. With the computer on, it took one mouse click to land on her e-mail. One downward scan of her eyes to see Lucas’s name.

The subject on all three of his e-mails was the same: *miss you*.

A knot formed in her throat.

“Are you mad at me for something?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her gaze moved back to the screen and it felt as if her heart started swelling—big, then bigger—until it felt as if it was outgrowing her chest. The ache was real and made it hard to breathe.

She swallowed. “No.”

“Is it yes or no? Are you mad or not?” He sounded hurt. Or angry. Maybe both.

She closed her eyes and while she didn’t hear him, she sensed he’d moved closer. His scent, a wonderfully earthy smell, seemed to take up residence in her cabin.

She inhaled. “Maybe.”

“Hmm.” He did indeed sound closer. Too close. Right behind her close. Touchable close.

As tempting as it was to turn around, she didn’t. She stared at the screen and held her breath.

“Is this what they mean by a woman having the prerogative to change her mind?” A slight sound of humor rang in his voice.

“It could be,” she muttered.

“Is this about me not showing up last night? I left a note. You were asleep.”

“It’s not about that.” Her gaze stayed fixed on the computer screen. She spotted three e-mails from her dad. Another emotionally hard thing she needed to deal with. Knowing her mom was dating, knowing that her stepdad and mom probably would never get back together, would make seeing him even harder.

She blinked.

“Then what’s it about?” His hand pressed down softly on her shoulder. Warm sensations flowed from his palm. “Because right now, I’d really like to kiss you and I don’t know if that’s possible. If you really are mad at me, I mean.”

Inhaling, her heart raced at the thought of him kissing her. Of feeling his chest against hers.

“It’s about you avoiding me,” she said. “You’re pulling away.”

His other hand breezed across her shoulder. “Just until my father gives his approval for me to join the Council. I know it’s hard, and yes, being together is going to be even harder with Clara here, but ... I need his approval. I don’t think it will be much longer.”

She blinked again, and that’s when she saw it. Four ... no, five e-mails all with the word *fog* in the subject line. Could it be...?

“Oh, shit!” She saw another e-mail from the same address with a subject line that read *talk*.

“Oh, shit what?” he asked.

She opened her mouth to tell him, but shut it at the same time she shut off her e-mail. She hadn’t told him her grandfather had been what chased his sister—hadn’t told him because it didn’t feel right. Telling him now felt even less right.

If she decided to meet her grandfather without Burnett, Lucas wouldn’t approve. He’d be overprotective and insist on telling Burnett.

Kylie couldn’t let Lucas tell Burnett, because Burnett would not want her to meet her grandfather without his being present. And it appeared as if her grandfather wasn’t keen on meeting with Burnett.

She had to meet her grandfather—with or without Burnett. He had answers, and discovering those answers was her quest. How many times had Holiday told her that following your quest was about listening to your heart? And her heart said this was the right thing to do. Lucas would just have to understand.

And just like that, it hit her. Lucas's quest was to get on that Council. And to do that, he had to pretend in front of his pack and Clara that she wasn't that important to him. How could she be angry with him when ... she had her own agenda that was equally important to her?

Which meant she had to be more understanding. If his quest meant that they couldn't sit together at meals or he had to pretend they weren't boyfriend and girlfriend, she would accept that. Just like she expected him to accept that she had to follow her own quest.

She stood and turned around and faced him. "I'm sorry. I was overreacting." She placed her hands on his chest.

He stared at her, appearing even more puzzled. "You're not mad?"

She offered him a smile that came from deep within. The thought that her grandfather hadn't given up on seeing her filled her chest with a light bubbly feeling. She cut her gaze toward the computer and then met Lucas's gaze. "It hurt to feel that I came second after everyone else, but—"

"You don't come second. When I get on the Council, I'll have the power to put a stop to all this crap. The younger werewolves are clamoring to have someone on the Council to voice their opinion. I'll get their support and the elders won't be able to tell anyone who they should see or share their lives with. They won't hold anyone responsible for the sins of their parents. Please give me a little time."

"I will. And I'm sorry I was a bitch."

"I never said you were a bitch." He pulled her a bit closer. So close that the warmth of his body sent a wave of pleasure through her.

"I know," Kylie said. "And I get it now." She met his gaze and moistened her lips with her tongue. "Didn't you say something about kissing me?"

His brow wrinkled, but with a smile. "I don't think I'll ever understand girls."

“Then stop trying.” She lifted up on her tiptoes. She wanted to kiss Lucas senseless, and then she wanted to send him on his way so she could find out what her grandfather said in his e-mails. But the moment Lucas’s lips found hers, when his warm chest pressed against her breasts and his hands slipped up under her shirt to fit against the naked curve of her waist, she decided that the e-mails could wait a little longer.

This ... this was magic. The kind she could do without screwing up.

* * *

That night, Kylie lay in her bed with her clothes on, waiting to hear Miranda come in from her nightly outing with Perry. Their evenings were getting later and later. Not that Kylie could blame them. Pulling away from Lucas after their little make-out session had been hard—even with her grandfather’s e-mail waiting for her.

Lucas had been humming with desire, and she’d been humming right along with him. The ability that male weres had to seduce their mate had bitten into her heart and soul. His touch had felt so good, she hadn’t wanted to stop. It was getting harder not to give in. And yet ... she did stop.

Maybe because of the e-mails.

Maybe because she didn’t want the hint of any unresolved issues to be involved with her first time. And while she understood that Lucas was following his quest, deep inside, it still stung.

Then again, probably the biggest reason she hadn’t given in was because Della and Miranda had been sitting outside on the porch. Yup, that was for certain the biggest reason she’d found the willpower to stop things from going any farther than they had.

The fact that she and Lucas had ended up lying on the sofa, kissing, while her two best friends were on the porch, had her blushing when she’d faced the two of them after Lucas had left. Making it worse was knowing Della could smell the pheromones they’d put out.

However, that blush and those pheromones were, hopefully, going to help make tonight’s plan work. The plan Kylie had come up with as soon as she’d read her grandfather’s e-mail requesting that she meet him—alone—at Fallen

Cemetery.

Had her grandfather learned the truth? That until recently his wife, Kylie's grandmother, had been buried there in a mismarked grave?

Her e-mail back to him had been brief: *I'll do everything possible to be there at 1 AM.* The fact that she hadn't heard back from him bothered her very little. He'd asked. She'd answered. What more was to be said? But it hadn't stopped her from checking her inbox every fifteen minutes.

The biggest downside to this whole thing was the lie she'd have to tell her roommates. A lie that was only going to work if Della wasn't automatically tuned in to hear Kylie's heart beat fast at the white lie. If Kylie could state the untruth and Della automatically believed it, she might not even check Kylie's heartbeat. Or at least Kylie prayed it would work that way.

A few minutes later, Kylie heard Miranda and Perry on the porch. Kylie got out of bed. Quietly, she moved into the living room, waiting for Miranda to come inside. Kylie knew Della was probably already aware that she'd risen from bed.

The door opened. When Miranda saw her she gasped.

"It's just me," Kylie said.

"What are you doing up?"

Not chancing lying twice, she commenced with her plan. "Did you see him?" Kylie asked.

"See who?" Miranda studied her. "Are you having one of those weird vision things again?"

"No. Did you see Lucas? He's supposed to meet me and we're ... going somewhere to be alone." Shooting to the window, she glanced out. "I see him," Kylie lied, and felt the guilt. "Gotta go."

Miranda grabbed her elbow. "Are you going to...?"

Perhaps it was Kylie's imagination, but she could swear she heard Della getting out of bed.

"Tell Della for me. Tell her I want to be with Lucas. Tell her I said to please let us have this time." If Della was listening now with her sensitive hearing, she'd recognize that as the truth. Kylie did want to be with Lucas.

Knowing it was imperative she leave before Della arrived, Kylie skirted

out into the darkness, leaving Miranda standing there with her mouth slightly agape.

The late August air held a hint of coolness as Kylie bolted off the porch and ran as fast as she could away from the cabin.

Please let this work. Please let me make it. She repeated the words like a litany. Her body tingled with the knowledge that she followed her heart.

With each footfall that took her farther away, her confidence built. Even hearing Burnett's warning of never entering the woods alone, she knew that route offered the quickest escape, and she took it. Moving between the trees, she accepted the risk. Mario, or someone on his side, could be waiting.

But it was a risk worth taking, she told herself, and ignored the sensation of being followed. Ignored the wiggle of guilt she felt for lying to her two best friends.

She had to lie. This was her quest. And the risk should belong to her, not one of her friends who felt compelled to join her. She wouldn't put anyone else in Mario's path.

Suddenly, the phone in her pocket dinged with an incoming text. She slowed down enough to check the message.

Derek.

"Damn," she muttered, her voice whispering in the night air.

No doubt Derek had sensed her emotions and was concerned. But if she told him, like Della or Miranda, he'd think he had to come with her. She pocketed her phone and then pushed herself to move faster.

As she dodged limbs and jumped over thorn bushes, she listened to the night noises—finding peace in knowing that the darkness hadn't fallen silent. If Della had followed, she would have been here by now. Kylie could only surmise that her plan had worked. Della had relented to Kylie's wish to be with Lucas.

Aware of how far she'd gone, she knew she drew near the fence where the Shadow Falls property ended. Her heart knotted with fear that this was where her plan would get upended. Burnett could come running.

However, she'd heard rumors that someone was constantly breaking the rules. Perry, who never liked being limited when he transformed himself into

some other creature. Then, Lucas and his pack constantly being called to visit their elders, who didn't respect Shadow Falls's rules.

Maybe, just maybe, Burnett wouldn't guess that the person slipping out of the property was Kylie.

The fence became visible. It loomed in front of her, a good eight feet in height. Kylie's breath hitched. She pushed to move faster, praying she could leap over the metal barrier.

Her body felt weightless as she moved into the air, higher. Higher. Her feet cleared the fence and she came down on the other side, avoiding a bad landing—and serious injuries. She hit hard and rolled a good seven feet.

She picked herself up and brushed her hand over her elbow that had found earth before the rest of her. The pain dulled, coming in second to her sense of success. She was doing it. She was going to make it.

The stickiness of blood met her palm. The berry scent filled her nose. Who knew her own blood could smell this good? She continued moving, fast, then faster, putting distance between her and the fence.

The sounds of the night continued to sing around her. No vampires making the night go silent. She was alone.

She crossed the road and moved into the trees lining the road as she continued onward. If she estimated correctly, she was only a few miles from the cemetery.

She was finally going to meet her grandfather and learn the truth. The mystery of just what she was—of what being a chameleon meant—was about to be solved. A smile widened her mouth.

The sensation of victory filled her chest and gave her speed, agility, and courage.

Or it did until a male voice called out, "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Blood throbbed in her ears and she didn't recognize the voice at first—except that she knew it wasn't Burnett. It didn't matter. She didn't care who it was, because no one was welcome right now. She had a mission and didn't want company. And that was exactly what she planned on telling the intruder, too.

She came to a sudden stop—or as sudden as she could when traveling at a manic, inhuman speed. Her knees buckled. She wrapped her arms around a tree, catching herself from a bad fall.

Still unsure of the identity of the intruder behind her, still clinging to the tree for dear life, another voice, a different one from the first, spoke up. “I was about to ask the same question.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Disappointment shot through her limbs. She had two intruders instead of just one. She wanted to scream, but air locked in her lungs and not one sound came out. Angry, she swung around and confronted the owners of the two voices. She could be proud of one thing: she'd been right. There were no vampires in the woods.

Just a smart-mouthed shape-shifter, in bird form, and a very pissed-off werewolf.

She gulped down a mouthful of air. Still unable to catch her breath, she bent at the waist and with her hands on her knees she waited for her lungs to open up. When oxygen finally flowed to her brain, her thoughts came clearer.

And one thought stood out. She wasn't going to let them stop her.

Straightening, she met Perry's gaze with sheer determination. Then she shifted the same glare to Lucas. "I'm following my quest. Leave and let me do what I have to do."

"Have you lost your frigging mind?" Perry asked.

"What's going on, Kylie?" Lucas demanded.

Kylie stared at the were. "Just what I said. I'm following my quest. I need for you to leave. It's important and I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. Leave me alone!"

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. Any minute now she waited for the night to go silent and Burnett to show up. For some reason, she felt capable of standing up to Lucas and Perry, but bucking authority never came easy for her. And Burnett was authority with a badass attitude.

Before she considered how it would sound, she asked, "Does Burnett

know?”

Lucas ground his mouth shut and continued to stare at her with anger, and perhaps shock, at her behavior.

“How did you find me?” she asked the shape-shifter as tiny bubbles of electricity started forming around him.

A second later, Perry appeared in human form. “I was flying around after I left Miranda and saw you jump the property fence.”

She glared back at Lucas. “And you?”

His eyes brightened with anger, his frown increased, but he started talking. “Burnett thought I was the one who’d set off the alarm. He called me, and I had a strong feeling that I needed to make sure everything was okay. Then I saw Big Bird here flying—”

“Big Bird?” Perry’s voice deepened with frustration.

“Whatever,” Lucas continued. “I saw him and thought I’d check and see what he was up to.”

“You’re checking on *me*?” Perry’s eyes turned the same orange as Lucas’s.

“Not like that.” Lucas’s posture became less defensive. “I thought you might have spotted someone breaking in.” His gaze shot back to Kylie. “To hurt the very person who broke out.” His scowl deepened; his focus and his frustration were now directed at Kylie. “But that’s not important. What’s important is why you’re putting yourself at risk. You know better. So let’s get back before Burnett figures it out.”

That was exactly why Kylie had to stop yakking with them and get a move on. If Burnett discovered she was missing, there would be hell to pay.

She glanced at her watch. Five minutes till one. Time ran out. She didn’t envision her grandfather as being someone who appreciated tardiness.

Remembering she wasn’t powerless, she wiggled her right pinky against her ring finger. However, the idea of using it didn’t sit well with her.

“Okay,” she offered. “Short explanation. I have to meet someone. So we can either do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“Meet who?” Lucas and Perry asked at the same time.

“My grandfather. He contacted me and—”

“How?” Lucas asked.

“E-mail,” Kylie answered, unsure why she thought telling them the truth would work, but her other option didn’t feel right—especially considering she really didn’t know what she was doing when it came to casting spells. Just ask poor Zac.

“Don’t be stupid,” Perry said. “How do you know it was really from him?”

“I know,” Kylie said with confidence, and pushed back the knowledge that Perry could be right. All this could be a trick. But every instinct she had said differently. If wrong, she might pay the price with her life. If right, she’d find the answers she’d been seeking since the first day she’d arrived at Shadow Falls.

Risky? Maybe. But a risk she was willing to take. “And here’s the thing,” Kylie continued. “You two can either agree to let me go, or—”

“No.” Lucas’s shoulders grew tighter. “You are not—”

She didn’t wait any longer. She twitched her pinky and envisioned a big net falling from the sky, snaring the two of them together, and preventing them from following her.

She saw it rushing down from above and barely escaped being caught herself. “Sorry,” she called out, and took off running. With every ounce of power she owned, she focused on getting away before they got loose.

* * *

Kylie ran. No, that wasn’t right. Because she realized at some point she wasn’t running, she was flying. If she hadn’t been in such a hurry, she’d have taken the time to appreciate the new addition to her gifts. Ah, but no time. She needed to get far enough away that Perry and Lucas couldn’t follow her.

Finally, she spotted the rusty cemetery gates jutting out from the earth like sharp weapons that could take a life. The night appeared to grow darker as she drew nearer. Her chest tightened as she remembered Perry’s question. *How do you know it was really from him?*

She didn’t. She’d come on blind faith. Was that enough?

Slowing down, her feet came back to the ground. She came to an abrupt

stop a few feet from the old iron gates. She went to step forward but a sudden movement behind the gate stopped her. Her heart stopped, too. Her last breath felt trapped in her lungs as she took in the view.

Faces, dozens upon dozens of faces, peered at her through the creaky bars. Their lifeless gazes soulfully stared at her with eyes that begged her for help. If only she could help them all. If only one sweep of her hand or wiggle of her pinky could take care of whatever issue kept them chained to this life, when another awaited them.

Then another thought hit. Were any of these ghosts hell-bound spirits? Those who wanted to take her to hell with them in an attempt to soften their own sentence? Great! Why did she have to think about that lovely possibility now?

She forced herself to take a step closer. The idea that she was going to have to step through those gates and move past the hundred or more spirits ripped at her courage. She remembered how it felt last time when she'd come here and had been touched by so many ghosts—the pain was similar to a brain freeze, but one that happened to the entire body.

But it would be worth it if her grandfather waited inside because she'd get some answers. Definitely worth it. Besides, it wasn't as if she hadn't done this before; she'd come here twice. But not in the dark or the dead of night. Something about the blackness, with only the moon's silver glow making the spirits' gazes visible, made the place look so much more ... haunted.

Which it was. As if to prove the fact, the cold from the spirits surrounded her and made her skin crawl. She looked up and saw a couple of spirits had moved outside the gate and were slowly easing toward her. Stiffening her spine, accepting she had to do it, she took another step closer, planning to just walk inside. Sort of like jumping into the deep end of a freezing pool and getting it over with. Yet as her foot shifted one more time, a voice, a close-to-her voice—too close—whispered in her ear. *"I wouldn't go in there."*

She yelped and jumped back six feet before she recognized the voice. Taking a breath to calm her nerves, she moved up beside Hannah. Then Kylie recalled what the spirit had said. Did Hannah know something Kylie didn't? Was she wrong and it wasn't her grandfather waiting for her inside?

“Why shouldn’t I go in?” Kylie asked, her nerves no longer calm.

Hannah leaned in and whispered again. *“There are ghosts in there.”*

Kylie looked at her agape. “But—”

“*I know I’m dead,*” Hannah blurted out, reading Kylie’s thoughts. “*Just like my grave buddies. But seeing all of them*”—she motioned to the gate—“*it still scares the crap out of me.*”

Kylie looked from the gate to her watch again; she had two minutes. She had to go in. But she needed to get Hannah to talk. “Look, someone’s waiting on me, but I need to know. What is it that you need me to do?”

Hannah closed her eyes, but not before Kylie saw panic fill her gaze.

“Don’t run off,” Kylie said in a hurry when she felt the cold begin to ebb. “I need to know. It’s why you’re here. I know it’s hard to talk about things, but sometimes we have to do things that scare us. Sometimes it helps. Sort of like me walking into the cemetery.” She glanced back at the gate and the hundred dead faces peering back at her.

Hannah opened her eyes; the panic made her pupils large and black. “*He’s close by.*” Her voice weakened.

“Who’s close? What did he do?” When Hannah didn’t continue, Kylie took a guess. “Is it that Blake guy? The one who called Holiday when she was at the falls?”

Hannah looked down at her hands finger-locked in front of her. “*She loved him. She got everything she wanted. I just wanted to know what it would feel like to be that happy. I’d had too much to drink. He’d had too much to drink. It was wrong.*”

Kylie started putting the pieces together, but she wasn’t completely sure, so she asked, “Was Blake the man Holiday was supposed to marry?”

Hannah nodded, and when she looked up, tears and shame filled her eyes.

“Is he the one who killed you?” Kylie asked.

Hannah put her hand over her mouth as if the thought sickened her.

“Is he?” Kylie asked again.

When she moved her hands from her lips, they were trembling. “*I ... I don’t know if it was Blake.*” Her eyes filled with terror and sadness at the same time. “*I guess it could have been. I don’t remember how it happened.*”

She paused. *"I only recall ... his aura."* Pain filled her eyes. *"Details I can't remember, I can't put a name on him, or a face, but the evilness of him as he took my life ... that I can't forget. And I've felt it since. He sometimes comes back to where he buried us. I hear him walking on the floor above. The three of us cling to each other in death and pretend our souls are already gone."*

Hannah hugged herself as if the memory was too much. *"He disguises his aura most of the time. He has the power to appear normal. But when he's not pretending, he's evil and dark."*

"When he's pretending, is his aura the same as Blake's?" Kylie asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I guess it could be. I never paid attention to that aura. It's the other that ... haunts me." She paused as if in thought. *"There seems to be a small part of me that says I knew the man who did it."* She paused as if her thoughts went in another direction, and from her expression, it wasn't a good direction. *"He thinks killing brings him power—that's why he does it. And the day I was at Shadow Falls, I sensed he was close. I felt him and I knew. I knew I went to Shadow Falls because of him. He's not happy with just killing me. He wants Holiday."* Her words seemed to linger in the night air when she snapped her head back and looked up at the dark sky.

"What is it?" Kylie asked, fearing the killer was close again.

"I think it's that strange shape-shifter from the Shadow Falls camp. The blond kid with eyes that change colors all the time."

The fear Kylie had felt for Hannah and from a murdering evil being faded, and Kylie's own concern rose. If Perry had found her, Lucas wouldn't be far behind. And then probably Burnett. Hoping she'd be less visible, she moved closer to the gate. She looked again at the dead faces appearing as guards of the cemetery. She didn't know if they recognized her from before. She wasn't sure if they even knew she could see them yet. But one thing was clear: if she didn't go in now, she might miss her grandfather.

Kylie looked at Hannah still glancing up at the sky. "Did he see us?" Kylie reached for the gate to open it.

"It's her. I told you it was her," one of the spirits behind the gate said. Then the spirits' arms started reaching through the bars to touch her. Kylie's

vision filled with nothing but the arms coming out between the rusty bars of the gate. The cold shot through her skin and stung all the way to the bone. She bit down on her lip, fighting the pain and panic as she pushed open the gate.

“He can’t see me. I don’t know if he saw you.” Hannah’s voice echoed from behind her. With the gate open, Kylie pulled her hand free. The ghosts scattered, but the moment she moved a few feet inside the cemetery, they surrounded her. The cold of their spirits crowding around her coated her lips with ice. The pain nearly brought her to her knees. She forced herself to move a few feet away; the reprieve was instant, even if she knew it wouldn’t last.

She looked back at Hannah. Fear filled her gaze—a gaze that was just as dead as those from the cemetery, who were now growing closer.

“I can’t come in,” Hannah said. *“One of them might be a death angel. If they want to send me to hell for my sins, they can. I deserve it, but not until I know Holiday is safe.”*

“I don’t think they’ll send you to...” Kylie stopped talking when Hannah started to disappear.

“Save her for me, Kylie. Please save my sister!” Hannah’s words rang in the dark.

The cold from the spirits drew closer. “Please,” Kylie said, her gaze moving from one ashen face to another. “Give me some space.”

They scurried back a few feet. Kylie looked over her shoulder, hoping she might see someone who walked in this world. Her hopes were futile. Everywhere she looked, she saw only death.

But then the darkness cloaking the tombstone terrain limited her vision. Kylie knew from the few times she’d been here that the cemetery was immense. Would her grandfather know she was here? The thought that it might not be her grandfather waiting for her, that it hadn’t been him sending the e-mails, stirred deep in her chest, but she pushed it back.

She took a few more steps, then, remembering Hannah’s concern over Holiday, Kylie grabbed her phone from her pocket and dialed the one person she knew would help her.

“Are you okay?” Derek answered on the first ring.

“I don’t have a lot of time, but I need you to do me a favor. Go check on Holiday. Stay there. Don’t wake her up. Don’t let her know you’re watching her, but don’t leave her until I get there.”

“Shit! What’s happening, Kylie?” Derek asked.

“I can’t explain right now. Just please. Do it.”

“Where are you?” he asked. “I know you aren’t at your cabin.”

She bit down on her lip so hard she tasted blood. “Please.” The word came out with desperation.

He finally answered. “Holiday is fine. Burnett’s watching her place.”

“Why? How do you know? Did something happen?”

“No, I felt you were in trouble and I was walking to check on you when I came across Burnett standing outside Holiday’s cabin. He said because of what we knew about Hannah and the other girls, he wasn’t taking any chances.”

“Good.” She wondered if that was why Burnett had called Lucas and not left to check the gate when the alarm went off.

“I can feel you’re scared out of your wits, Kylie. Tell me—”

“I have to go.” She cut the phone off. Then she glanced at the crowd of spirits, shifting from foot to foot, reminding her of hungry zombies waiting for the right moment to move in and feed. Pushing that fear-inducing, insane thought away, she remembered they were just people. Lost souls robbed of life, chained to this world by some unfortunate circumstance.

Looking around again, she asked, “Is someone else here?”

“*I’m here,*” one spirit said.

“*I’m here.*” A barrage of the same words spoken by each of the dead filled Kylie’s ears like thunder. They all wanted to be counted. To be acknowledged.

Emotion filled Kylie’s chest. “Is there anyone alive here, besides me?”

“*No one else is here who can see us,*” one of the spirits spoke up, sounding desperate.

“But someone else is here?” she asked. Again she wondered why her grandfather had chosen the cemetery as a meeting place.

“In the back of the property,” the spirit of a young girl answered, and she pointed toward the darkest area in the cemetery. *“I saw them under the oak trees, hiding in the shadows.”*

“Thanks,” she said, glancing up one more time, hoping she didn’t spot a pissed-off shape-shifter circling in the dark sky. The clouds must have blocked out the moon, because only a few stars stared back at her from the heavens. She started moving. With each step she prayed that in the deepest, darkest part of the graveyard under the trees, she’d find her grandfather. And with him she’d find her answers.

Chapter Twenty-two

The rear of the cemetery stood eerily quiet. Even more statues stood guard over the graves. Most were covered in dead vines. Some were dilapidated, others decapitated by vandals or the passage of time, their heads resting on the ground. Still, they all seemed to watch her as her feet crunched upon the gravel path. Suddenly feeling alone, she looked back and realized that the chill of the dead had subsided. She was truly alone.

The spirits hadn't followed. Why? Fear knotted in her throat. Did they know something she didn't? Even as panic built inside her chest, she kept walking, praying that coming here had been the right thing.

She saw the trees ahead of her; beneath the alcove of gnarled limbs hung shadows—black shadows that could hide anything, or anyone.

Moving closer, she could hear herself breathe, and in the distance a few birds called out as if in warning. She stopped a few feet from the trees. Their heavy limbs seemed to be reaching out for the cracked tombstones nearby.

“Hello?” Her voice seemed to be swallowed by the night.

“You came,” answered a voice, deep and serious.

Breath held, she saw a figure move out of the shadows. Malcolm Summers, her grandfather. He looked younger than he'd appeared at her camp; obviously he'd dressed to play the part of Mr. Brighten. She recalled Della telling her that supernaturals didn't age as quickly as humans.

His gaze met hers, and even in the darkness his light blue eyes stood out. Kylie realized they were her exact color. She studied his face and saw the features of her dad, features that she, too, exhibited.

She suddenly felt insecure, unsure how to behave around him. Her chest

ached. Should she hug him, not hug him?

“I’m sorry,” Kylie blurted out.

“For what?” her grandfather asked.

“For ... not being able to talk to you that day in the forest.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” someone else said. Kylie’s great-aunt eased out of the shadows and stood beside Malcolm. The woman smiled. Before Kylie realized it, she’d been caught in an embrace. The strength and warmth in her aunt’s touch surprised Kylie—the woman felt hot.

When the hug ended, Kylie realized that, like her grandfather, the fragileness her aunt had displayed on the the day she’d come to Shadow Falls had disappeared. Kylie did a quick calculation in her head. The woman had to be in her seventies or eighties, but she didn’t look older than fifty.

Chameleons must have a long life expectancy. She tucked that info away for future contemplation.

“Look at you,” her aunt said. “So beautiful.” She glanced back at her grandfather. “What’s wrong with you, Malcolm? Give your granddaughter a hug.”

He moved in hesitantly. “I’m not much of a hugger, but I guess the moment merits it.” He embraced her. And like her aunt, he felt hot to the touch. The embrace was short, but sweet, and reflective of the ones she’d savored from Daniel, and even her stepfather before their relationship had gone bad.

“You’re good at it,” Kylie said.

“What?” he asked.

“Hugging.” Tears stung her eyes when she saw emotion in his expression. A smile welled up inside her. “You look like my father.”

“I noticed that, too, in the pictures.”

“I have so many questions,” Kylie said.

“I’m sure you do.”

“We’re chameleons, right?” She held her breath, waiting for him to confirm what her father had told her. Or was Holiday right, that chameleon meant something different? Would Kylie be accepting her role as a witch after tonight?

The look on her grandfather's face shifted from tenderness to concern. "Where did you learn this?"

"My father," Kylie said. Doubt filled her. Had her father been wrong? "He said—"

Malcolm stilled. "But he's dead."

"She's a ghost whisperer." Her aunt clutched the man's arm in excitement. "I told you I sensed a spirit present when we were at the camp." Her gaze shifted to Kylie. "Your great-grandmother had that gift. She would be so proud."

"So it's true? We're chameleons?" Kylie asked again.

"Yes," they said at the same time.

Kylie's chest swelled with victory. She finally knew. Knew for certain. But no sooner had the feeling hit than questions started forming. Deep down, she sensed her real victory would come when they answered those questions.

She stood trying to assess everything they'd said so she could learn more. Her great-grandmother had been a ghost whisperer, but the two of them weren't. So one chameleon didn't have the same gifts as another one. How did that work?

"My father, he was a ghost whisperer as well," Kylie said, realizing she hadn't checked out their patterns. She tightened her brows. Surprise filled her when she saw they were both humans. Then again, she'd also worn the human pattern not too long ago. Exactly what did being a chameleon mean?

"So you've seen him?" Sadness rang in her grandfather's tone.

"And my grandmother." She looked at her grandfather's forehead again. "Can I ask you—?"

"Heidi?" He said the name with such love that Kylie's chest tightened.

"Yes. Actually, she was the one to tell my father that we were chameleons. But no one at Shadow Falls knows what it is."

Her aunt and grandfather gazed at each other. Her aunt nodded. "Tell her."

"I will," he said. "But you must come with us."

Kylie hesitated. "Why can't we talk here?"

"Not just to talk." He rested his hand on her shoulder. The warmth from

his touch was familiar. And Kylie recognized it to be similar to Holiday's and Derek's touches. Did that mean ... Her grandfather continued. "You must come and live with your own kind."

"Live?" *Live? Leave Shadow Falls?* Kylie shook her head. "I can't. I'm going to Shadow Falls boarding school."

"You don't understand the danger you are in, child," he said.

"From ... Mario?" Kylie asked.

His brow wrinkled. "Is Mario part of the FRU?"

"No." Kylie hesitated to get into a conversation about the FRU. "He's part of a rogue organization."

"The organization you need to fear is the FRU. They are affiliated with your camp, but they are not what they seem. I have reasons to believe they are responsible for your grandmother's death."

Unwilling to lie, Kylie nodded. "I know."

His expression hardened. "You know what?" When she didn't immediately answer, he continued, "Did she tell you something about it?" His tone matched his expression—serious, demanding.

Unsure if confiding in him was best, but sensing it would be wrong to keep it from him, she nodded. "She was paralyzed from the operation. The one they did on both of you. They killed her."

His blue eyes filled with rage and his hands tightened into fists. "Murdering bastards! Only over my dead body will you return to that school!"

Kylie tried not to react to his threat. But yes, she saw it as a threat. She inhaled a breath to calm herself. "I understand how you feel. I was outraged myself. But Burnett assures me—"

"Burnett works for them!" her grandfather roared, and even the trees seemed to cringe at his fury.

Kylie's aunt moved in and rested her hand on his arm. Kylie recalled how the woman's touch had been so warm the day they'd shown up, pretending to be the Brightens. Was the woman fae? Part fae, perhaps?

"Yes," Kylie said. "Burnett works for the FRU, but he assures me that the people who did that are no longer with the organization. And—"

“And you trust them knowing what you know? Trust him, knowing who he answers to?”

“I don’t trust the FRU, but I trust Burnett,” Kylie said. “He’s on our side. And even more, I trust Holiday.”

“You are naïve and young. You don’t know what’s best for you.”

She tried not to take offense. “Young yes, but not so naïve,” Kylie said. “I’m following my heart.”

“Your heart will mislead you,” he said. “Mine did. I trusted them. I was blinded to what they really were. Heidi knew ... or she suspected, but I didn’t listen to her.”

“I’m sorry,” Kylie said, “but I can’t—”

“You can,” he demanded.

“No, Malcolm! The child must make up her own mind.” Her aunt spoke to Kylie’s grandfather, but looked at Kylie. The woman didn’t look angry, but disappointment gripped her expression. Kylie’s chest tightened at the thought of hurting these people, but giving in wasn’t an option.

Her grandfather swung around and stared back at the tree. His sorrow, his anger, his loss filled the darkness like a living, breathing thing. Kylie went to him. Even frightened, she needed to offer comfort.

“The last thing I want to do is to hurt you. You have been hurt too much. I’m sorry that I can’t do what you want, but I have to follow the path I believe is right.” Some slight movement in the sky caught the corner of Kylie’s vision; she didn’t look up, but she suspected that speck answered to the name of Perry. He’d obviously found her. Her time was running out.

“And what if you are wrong and I’m forced to face another death in my own family? One whom I didn’t even get to know?”

“I don’t think that’ll happen,” Kylie pleaded.

He stared at the ground as if in defeat.

Feeling certain her time ran short, Kylie continued. “I still have so many questions. Please help me understand what I am.”

He looked up. The fury faded from his eyes. “It is impossible to teach you what you want to know in a few minutes, hours, or even weeks. It could take years.”

“Then I will be coming to you for years with my questions,” she said. “But please, answer me this. What does it mean that I’m a chameleon?”

Her aunt came forward. “Like the chameleon lizard, we can change how we appear to the world. And for our own protection, we have had to hide ourselves to avoid persecution.”

“Hide from the FRU?” Kylie asked.

“Sadly, from everyone,” her aunt said. “The few who did not hide were viewed as outcasts, freaks, and not belonging to any one kind. At first they thought we had brain tumors and then they just assumed we were insane.”

Kylie couldn’t deny that she related. Though like most prejudices, it had probably been worse in earlier years. While sometimes she felt like a freak, for the most part, she was accepted at Shadow Falls.

“The FRU studied us like lab rats,” her grandfather added. “The elders and Councils of all the species viewed us as mutants. Some were forced to work as slaves for other supernaturals.”

The truth stung, but she needed to know it, know all of it. “But what are we? A new species?”

“Not really,” her aunt answered. “Normally when supernaturals produce offspring, the dominant DNA is passed on. The child will generally have weaker powers than those who were born from parents of the same species. Chameleons maintain the DNA of both parents and those of their forefathers. Chameleons carry a blend from all species.”

Her grandfather met her eyes. “My father was vampire and were. My mother fae, witch, and shape-shifter.”

“Wait,” Kylie said. “Are you saying that I have the gifts of all species?”

“When you wear that pattern you do. Except...” His expression showed concern. “If the rule of protector is the same with a chameleon as the others, then you wouldn’t be able to use any of these powers to protect yourself.”

She shook her head, trying to soak it all in. “But your pattern shows human,” Kylie said.

“It is safer to pretend to be one of them,” her aunt answered.

“But I’m half-human,” Kylie said. “So how could I be that special blend?”

“At first, it didn’t make sense,” her aunt said. “But when we studied your mother’s family history, we found that she came from—”

“An American Indian tribe,” Kylie finished for her. And suddenly a thought hit. “Does that mean that my mother’s supernatural?”

“Not supernatural, just gifted,” her aunt said.

“Like how?” Kylie asked.

“She may be psychic. Or an empath,” her grandfather said. “It is believed that those from this tribe can distinguish supernaturals from humans—sometimes they aren’t even aware of it, but are simply drawn to them. There are more gifted humans married to supernaturals than regular humans, even though they are much less in the world population.”

He tightened his brows and stared at Kylie’s pattern. “Your brain has developed quickly. Most chameleons aren’t able to bring forth one pattern and utilize those powers until they are in their early twenties.”

“I may be developed, but I’m clueless. I don’t know how to do it—how to change my pattern or how to control it.”

“Which is why you must come with us.” He frowned.

“I can’t, but I still need to understand.” She looked up and this time she knew it was Perry. “A while back, I showed a human pattern and then I’m sending paperweights around a room and ... Well, it’s not good. But maybe I developed early because I’m a protector. Or they think I am. The truth is they don’t know what to think of me.”

Her aunt smiled. “We heard rumors that you were a protector. That is a huge honor.”

“I guess.” Kylie wasn’t sure how any of this was going to work out.

Her grandfather stared at her forehead again. “If you aren’t in control of it, then you must be forming patterns instinctually. Normally, it’s a learned talent that can take years to master. I would assume you needed the power of speed and intuitively you initiated the change.”

“Speed?” Kylie asked, confused. “It wasn’t about speed. My friend kept messing up her spell and—”

“Spell?” he asked.

“I’m a witch right now.” Kylie said the obvious.

“Not anymore you’re not,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-three

“You’re vampire,” her grandfather said.

Kylie’s first impulse was denial. She couldn’t be vampire. But why would he lie? She touched her arm to check for the lack of heat. She didn’t feel cold, but if her core temperature had changed, she wouldn’t feel it. Then she remembered how hot the two of them had felt.

Then came another realization. She’d literally flown to the cemetery after casting a net onto Perry and Lucas.

Lucas!

Her next breath shuddered as it went into her lungs. What would Lucas say about her new pattern? He hadn’t been exactly pleased when he thought she was a witch. If he thought she were a vampire ...

“Is something wrong, dear?” her aunt asked.

Kylie stood frozen, trying to come to terms with being vampire. Trying to imagine, or rather, trying not to imagine how Lucas would react. Then she wondered if she’d have to start drinking blood.

At just that thought, her mouth started watering. The tangy, ripe, sweet flavor was tattooed in her memory.

“Dear?” her aunt asked again. “Maybe you should sit down. You look pale.”

“Am I?” Was that another sign of vampirism? Instantly, she ran her tongue across her teeth and nearly cut her tongue on her sharp canines. Oh, crap! She was vampire!

Even as the fear of change tumbled around inside her like tennis shoes in a dryer, she remembered how cool it had been to fly through the forest. She

supposed that kind of power could be addictive. But what good was a power if you couldn't control it? It would be like her sensitive hearing—neat to have, but if you couldn't call upon it when you needed it, it was virtually useless.

She didn't want to be useless.

"How do I control this?" Kylie asked. "Explain it to me."

Her grandfather sighed. "It's not that easy. You have to train your mind. It isn't something I can tell you how to do; it's something that must be learned over time. It could take years. And until then, you could be a danger even to yourself."

"I will be okay at Shadow Falls."

A frown brightened his eyes. He lifted his head into the air as if to catch a scent. He made a sound, a low growl. The growl and even the way he sniffed at the air reminded her of Lucas.

"Someone came with you." He sounded disappointed in her.

"They tried to follow me. I lost them, but it's possible they've found me now."

His expression grew concerned. "Come with us. We'll help you understand everything. You need to learn who and what you are, Kylie. You can't do this alone."

She slowly shook her head. "I can't come with you."

"But you are one of us. We share the same blood. A chameleon alone will not survive. Look at your father. His death was so unnecessary. Do you think your father would not want you to come and know who you are?"

She inhaled. "I think my father would tell me to follow my heart. And right now, my heart says that Shadow Falls is the right place for me."

His frown deepened and he looked at her aunt. "We must go. Someone is coming." He turned to Kylie. "Do not speak of being a chameleon. Let them think what they may. The less we are talked about, the less we are persecuted."

"Wait," Kylie said. "How can I get in touch with you? I still have so many questions."

"I'll contact you," her great-aunt said, and joined hands with Malcolm.

“How?” Kylie asked. “How will you—?”

Her aunt never answered. It was like Perry had said the day he’d followed them. They just went *poof*.

Kylie stood there, in both frustration and in awe. How would her aunt contact her? How had they done the *poof* thing? Could she do that? She heard fast footfalls from behind, someone running toward her. She swung around, expecting to see Burnett. But it was even worse.

Lucas slowed down. He exhibited a tightness to his gait, a sense of anger, and an even greater sense of unease.

When he got closer she noticed his eyes shined bright orange. Of course he would be furious at her for tossing a net over him and Perry. She looked behind him, expecting to see Burnett appear. Expecting to get a tongue-lashing from the vamp.

Then she remembered she was also a vampire. She swung away from Lucas, afraid of what he might say, afraid to see distaste for her in his gaze.

“That was foolish,” he ground out.

She knew what he meant. “Not so foolish.” She kept her gaze away. “It was my grandfather.”

“And?” he asked.

“And I got some of the answers I needed.” She started walking. He moved beside her.

“Do you distrust me so much that you couldn’t tell me you were coming here?” he asked.

She shrugged but didn’t meet his gaze. “I trust that you’d have tried to stop me. And you proved me right.”

“You could have reasoned with me, instead of casting a stupid net.” His words came out with a light growl.

“I didn’t have time to reason.”

“Which is why you should have told me earlier. The idea that you didn’t trust me infuriates me.”

Like he didn’t trust her. “I know exactly how you feel,” she said, letting him figure out what she meant.

“It’s different,” he answered, his figuring-things-out ability right on

target.

“No, it isn’t.” A knot rose in her throat. She still refused to look at him, afraid he’d check her pattern and be repulsed by what he found. And God help her, but she didn’t think she could deal with that.

“You told me you understood. You said you overreacted yesterday when you were mad, or not mad, or maybe a little mad. Aw, hell, you confuse me!”

“I did tell you that,” she admitted. “And I do understand, or I’m trying to, but when you can’t seem to offer me the same courtesy, I’m reconsidering my understanding.”

“So we’re back to you being a woman and having the right to change your mind,” he bit out.

“Yeah!” Tears stung her eyes and she moved faster.

They passed a couple of dilapidated statues with missing arms. She saw Lucas glance at them. How much had it cost him to come into the cemetery? He, like ninety percent of all supernaturals, hated cemeteries. Was that why her grandfather had asked to meet her here? He knew very few supernaturals would enter this place.

But Lucas had. He cared about her more than he cared about his fear of spirits. Would he have entered if he knew that she was vampire? Would he still care about her if she turned to him right now and let him see her pattern?

The question, or rather the fear of his answer, drove her to move faster. She wanted to be alone. Alone to contemplate every word her grandfather had said.

Alone to revel in the knowledge that she’d finally gotten the truth.

Alone to figure out what it all meant.

She was a chameleon. However, for now, she was vampire. But for how long? How long before she could control this crazy thing that was happening to her?

The spirits waited for her at the front gate. Lucas grew tenser, as if he sensed them. Slowing down only long enough to push open the creaky gate, she offered the dead reaching out for her one promise: *I’ll be back.*

As soon as the icy wind blew the gate closed behind her, she picked up her pace, running. One foot hit the earth and then the other. She moved with

purpose. She wanted to be home. She wanted to be at Shadow Falls.

You are one of us. We share the same blood. A chameleon alone will not survive. She heard her grandfather's warning ring in her ears, but she refused to believe it. The mere thought of leaving Shadow Falls sent a wave of pain shooting across her heart. She couldn't leave.

Yet even as she ran to the one place in her life that felt right, the place she felt the safest, she knew that the answers she sought were not at Shadow Falls, but with her grandfather.

The knowledge caused a sharp pain in the very center of her heart. Tears welled up in her eyes and slipped from her lashes. She felt them hot against her cold vampire skin. Air shuddered in her chest from the emotion when she realized that before she could retreat to her cabin, she'd probably have to face Burnett's fury.

"Slow down," Lucas demanded.

She ran faster. Burnett's wrath was nothing compared to facing Lucas. His prejudice against vampires right now would hurt more than she could stand.

* * *

The gate to Shadow Falls loomed just ahead. Her heart thumped in her chest. She prayed Burnett's tongue-lashing wouldn't take too long. While her body didn't feel the least bit tired, her heart did.

"Damn it, Kylie," Lucas muttered again. Everything from his breathless tone to the stomp of his feet hitting the earth told her he was pushing himself to his limits.

"I said stop!" He sounded closer this time.

Just when she was about to take the leap over the fence, she felt him grab her around her waist. They went down. Hard. He wrapped his arms around her to protect her from the fall and they rolled several times.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

She ended up on top of him, his hot body reminding her that she was vampire. He stared up at her face. She tried to get up.

He caught her.

“What’s the matter?” he asked again.

He rolled her over and landed on top of her. Afraid he’d see her brain pattern, she turned her head and stared at the underbrush. Tears stung her eyes again.

“Hey.” His voice came out more tender this time. He’d obviously noticed her tears. “Look at me.”

She didn’t. She couldn’t. “I just want to get this over with,” she snapped.

“Get what over with?” His chest moved up and down on top of her as he breathed.

“Facing Burnett.”

“He doesn’t know, but if you leap over the fence right now, he will.”

She looked back him. “He doesn’t know?”

“No. I got out without being detected. And if you’ll listen to me, I think I can get you in without him knowing, too. Or you can jump over the fence and go head-on with his wrath.”

Realizing she was facing Lucas again, she turned her head. The underbrush against her back felt like soft moss, but the emotion in her chest was scratchy.

“Is that what this is all about? Damn it, Kylie. I already know.”

She looked back at him, unsure what he meant. “Know what?”

He scowled. “That you’re vampire. I ... smelled you when I first walked into the cemetery.”

His insult hit hard. Emotion had her lips trembling. “If I smelled that bad, then why did you bother to come in?”

His expression darkened. “I came in because I thought you were in danger.” He exhaled loudly. “I’m not going to lie. I don’t like it, and it’s going to complicate things with my pack even more, but...” He looked into her eyes. “But what’s important to me isn’t what’s up here.” He touched her forehead. “It’s what’s in here.” He rested his hand on her chest, on the upper swell of her right breast.

She felt her heart race. His touch hadn’t been meant to be intimate, but it felt that way.

“You mesmerized me from the moment I first saw you when we were

kids. I didn't know what you were, and yes, I hoped you were werewolf, but it didn't matter. You ensnared me."

The dampness of her tears spilled out on her cheeks. Suddenly, the soft verdant scent filled her nose. She knew it was both Lucas's natural scent and that of the woods.

"I'm still ensnared." He wiped a tear from her cheek. "I don't care if you're part witch and part vampire."

"I'm not just that," she said.

He looked a bit confused. "Okay. Then what are you?"

She smiled through her tears. "I'm a chameleon. Which means I have a little of everything in me." She recalled what her grandfather had told her about not telling anyone. But Lucas wasn't just anyone.

"Even werewolf?" he asked.

She nodded. "I just don't yet know how to control the shifts from one thing to another." She sighed. "Does that make me even more of a freak?"

"It makes you freaking amazing," he said. "Even when you're a vampire." He leaned down and pressed his lips against hers. The kiss tasted of innocence. And odd as it was, she suddenly remembered him kissing her like this before, but way before. Like before she'd ever come to Shadow Falls. She touched his cheek, and when he pulled back, she asked, "Did you ever ... climb into my window when you lived beside me?"

He looked guilty, but not much. "Just once. I swear, you left the window open. And I didn't ... I just—"

"Kissed me?" she asked. The idea didn't make her angry; it made her feel cherished.

"You were ... my first kiss," he said.

She grinned, and then his mouth lowered to hers again. She barely felt the warmth from his lips when he pulled back. "But I'm still pissed at you for throwing that net on me." He exhaled. "Not that I can stay mad at you."

He kissed her again. Only this kiss wasn't so innocent. Not that she complained. He tasted like passion, like raw, sweet passion. His weight came against her in all the right places and she felt differences in what made him male and her female. His vibration, his humming seduction, entered her every

place his hard body now touched hers.

She met his kiss with desperation, wanting to feel it, wanting to savor how he made her feel. His hand resting at her waist, warm against her naked skin, slipped farther under her shirt, and his palm cupped her breast. She moaned with the sweetness of his touch and ached for more.

His kiss moved from her lips to her neck. The feel of his warm kisses made her feel liquid inside. Need, want, desire, she felt it all.

When his hand moved to her back to unhook her bra, she rose up to make it easier. When his hand came back around to her bare breast, she trembled with the pleasure.

He slipped the tank top over her head, discarding the bra at the same time, and his eyes shifted downward to what he'd uncovered. She'd thought she'd feel embarrassed. But it wasn't embarrassment stirring inside her. She felt ...

"You're so beautiful," he said hoarsely.

That was it. That's how he made her feel. Beautiful. Cherished.

He inhaled sharply. "We probably shouldn't—"

She pressed a finger to his lips. "I want this." She moved her hand behind his neck, threaded her fingers in his thick black hair, and brought his mouth back to hers. And in seconds, they were both lost in each other.

Chapter Twenty-four

The kiss went from hot to smoldering in a vampire's heartbeat. She wasn't even aware that he'd removed his shirt until she felt the wonder of his bare chest against her breasts. She shivered with pleasure. His kisses moved down to her neck and then lower. The sensation had her arching her back and saying his name.

And then his phone rang.

His growl, deep and low, came against her bare shoulder. He raised his head. His eyes were bright, the blue irises hot with desire. "I hate ... *hate* modern technology."

She grinned.

He rolled over to his back and reached into his pocket for his phone. As he studied the little screen, a frown chased away the passion from his expression.

"It's Burnett." He closed his eyes, then opened them. "I should ... take it." He looked at her with an apology in his eyes.

"I know," she said, and then, suddenly aware of her lack of clothes, she crossed her arms.

His gaze lowered briefly to her covered chest. He reached for her bra and shirt beside him and handed them to her.

She clutched them to her front to cover herself. Their gazes met again. There was a sense of rightness at stopping things before they went any further. And while she accepted that letting it go this far had been risky, she knew she'd savor the memory.

"I don't regret it," she said.

“Good.” He looked so darn sexy without a shirt, but wearing a kiss-me grin. “Because I don’t, either.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” He frowned at the ringing phone.

“For going into the cemetery even when ... you hate spirits.” *For not hating me because I’m vampire.*

A seriousness filled his eyes. “I’d go to hell to keep you safe, Kylie Galen.”

She believed him, too.

He answered Burnett’s call.

* * *

Kylie spent the rest of the night mostly tossing and turning, unable to sleep. The call from Burnett had just been to check if Lucas had found anything suspicious when he’d looked around after the alarm had gone off. Then Lucas and Kylie jumped over the gate holding on to each other so it would appear only one person had entered. How he’d figured it out, Kylie didn’t know and hadn’t asked. However, the idea that Lucas had tied, and that Perry might also have to lie for her, didn’t sit well with her.

Fretting, she stared at the ceiling while mentally juggling everything she’d learned. She was a chameleon. A rare type of supernatural. But at the moment she was a vampire. And that explained why, in spite of how hard she’d tried to dreamscape to Lucas, she’d failed. Vampires couldn’t dreamscape. Rolling over again, she thought about everyone seeing her new pattern.

Her great-aunt’s words flowed through her head. *The few who did not hide were viewed as outcasts, freaks, and not belonging to any one kind.*

She could already imagine the campers whispering behind her back again. *Look at Kylie. You’ll never guess what she is now.*

Not that whispering was going to do them any good. Her sensitive hearing was in tip-top shape. She’d not only heard Miranda and Della each time they’d rolled over in their beds, but she heard some baby birds crying for their mama to hurry up and chew up the worms and regurgitate them back into their mouths. Regurgitating worms was not a pretty sound, either.

Her mind did another U-turn and she remembered her and Lucas's time together. She grabbed her extra pillow and hugged it. A smile worked its way to her lips. Not just because of how sinfully good things had been, but because ... because now she believed he cared for her. And accepted her. That was huge. It changed things. She just didn't know how yet.

Recalling his touches, she felt her face grow warm. Probably not really warm, considering her core body temperature was extra low, vampire low, but she'd bet her cheeks were red.

Her brain did another veering off the subject and landed on words her grandfather had said. *You are one of us. We share the same blood.*

Her need to get to know her grandfather, to learn everything about her heritage, sat heavy on her heart. But to leave Shadow Falls...?

That wasn't an option. Even with some of the campers not completely accepting her, she belonged here.

As the night continued, she tried to decide what, if anything, she was going to tell Holiday and Burnett, and even Della and Miranda and Derek ... She couldn't lie to them all. Could she?

A chameleon alone will not survive. His warning stirred in her already heavy chest.

Pulling the pillow tighter, she sat up. She wasn't alone. She had Holiday and Burnett, and everyone here in her circle. And she'd just have to play it by ear on what, if anything, she'd tell the people close to her.

The sound of her stomach rumbling with hunger filled the silent room. She got up and went into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, she reached for the orange juice, but her hand stilled when she saw Della's blood.

Della would kill her, but ...

* * *

"Where's my blood?" Della's voice vibrated through the entire cabin.

Kylie cringed, stepped out of the shower, and debated between the red or the white towel. She chose the white, for purity. If Della killed her, she'd at least be wearing white.

"Did you spill it again?" Della bellowed, no doubt screaming at Miranda.

“I didn’t do anything with your blood,” came Miranda’s offended reply. “I wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole.”

Kylie tightened the towel around herself.

“Fess up, witch!” Della snapped.

“I told the truth,” Miranda shot back. “Clean the stinky vamp wax out of your ears and listen to my heartbeat.”

Okay, now their insults were getting to the ugly stage.

Hurrying, Kylie stepped out of the misty warm bathroom right into the middle of the warpath.

“My ears aren’t dirty,” Della said, snarling. “I’m not the one letting some shape-shifter suck on my earlobe.”

“That’s enough.” Kylie held up her hands

“I’m never telling you anything else.” Miranda sounded so hurt.

“Thank Gawd!” Della spewed. “You think I want to hear about you having your earlobes sucked?”

“Bitch!” Miranda seethed.

“Stop!” Kylie yelled.

“I never said he sucked them,” Miranda spit out. “I said he nibbled on them.” She started walking toward Della, her pinky held out like a weapon.

Della bared her canines and started forward. “Same thing. Equally gross!”

“Cut it out!” Kylie shot between her two best friends.

“She poured out my blood!” Della accused.

“Did not!” Miranda mouthed back.

“She’s telling the truth.” Kylie looked at Della. “I ... I did it.”

“You poured out my blood?” Della asked.

“No. I ... drank it. And I’m sorry.” Kylie held out her wrist, exposing her vein. “Here, have some of mine.”

Della stared at her, her brows creased, and then her mouth dropped open. “Holy shit! You’re a vampire!”

“She’s a witch,” Miranda said proudly, standing at Kylie’s back.

“Not anymore,” Della said. “Use your eyes, Miss Smarty Pants, and see for yourself. Or did Perry lick them, too?”

Not wanting to draw this out, Kylie faced Miranda. It wasn’t as if she

could hide it.

“Crap!” Miranda gasped. “What happened? Did having sex with Lucas turn you into a vampire?”

“No,” Kylie said.

Della slapped a hand on her hip. “Why would having sex with a werewolf turn someone into a vampire?”

“I don’t know,” Miranda said. “Maybe it was really bad sex.”

Della shot Miranda a bird and then focused on Kylie. “Did you have sex with Lucas?”

“No.” Kylie tugged on her drooping towel. “We just ... made out.”

“How far did you get?” Della wiggled her brows.

“Thought you didn’t like hearing about it,” Miranda said in an angry voice.

“Not about earlobe sucking. That’s gross.”

“Bitch!” Miranda charged at Della; Della charged back at Miranda.

Kylie caught Miranda by the shirt with one hand and Della by the arm with her other hand. Right then, her towel fell to the floor. Naked as a jaybird, and suddenly furious, she stomped her foot. “I said stop!”

Della and Miranda both giggled. No doubt she looked funny naked and furious.

Kylie released them, and then snatched up her towel. “Look, I have some things to share, but if you don’t stop arguing, I’m going to walk away and just let you kill each other.”

“You tried that line once before,” Della said. “We let you down. We didn’t kill each other.” She snarled at Miranda. “Of course, it could change this time.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “Are you going to stop arguing or not?”

“Maybe,” Miranda said. “Especially if you can explain how the freaking hell you can change your pattern. Oh, and if you give us details about last night with Lucas.”

Kylie looked at Della. “Truce?”

“Yeah,” Della said. “Besides, it’s you I’m pissed at now for drinking my blood. You thieving vamp.” She showed her canines, but a smile came with

it. “And Miranda’s right. We want details on both counts.”

* * *

An hour later, after Kylie had given all the details—or at least all the details she planned on giving—the three of them walked toward the office. Kylie had confessed about going to the cemetery. She’d known Della would be pissed that she’d been tricked, and Kylie had been right. But telling them seemed important, and not just to clear her conscience. If she needed to meet her grandfather in the future, she’d need allies. Della and Miranda were her best allies.

As well as her best friends.

And a big part of the reason Kylie couldn’t do what her grandfather wanted: to go live with him. A detail Kylie had omitted from the conversation.

“Are you going to tell Burnett and Holiday?” Miranda asked as they neared the office.

“I don’t know.” Kylie looked up at the porch and listened to someone breathing inside. What if they went berserk and forbid her to see her grandfather and aunt again?

Would Holiday do that?

Probably not. But she could see Burnett doing it. Or trying to do it.

Kylie’s heart grew heavy when she remembered she wasn’t here to just talk about her grandfather. It was time. Time to tell Holiday about her sister. But first, she hoped to talk to Burnett about what all she’d learned about Hannah. He needed to know so he could look into this Blake character.

But damn, Kylie wasn’t looking forward to having either of those chats.

“Shit!” Della caught Kylie’s arm. “If you tell Burnett about meeting your grandfather, then I’ll get my ass in a sling because I let you go. He won’t care that I thought you were going to go get lucky with Lucas.”

“He’ll blame me, too.” Miranda frowned.

“He won’t blame you two,” Kylie said. “It’s all on me.”

“Right, like Burnett’s reasonable,” Della said.

“Well, what do you expect? He’s vampire,” Miranda smarted off.

Kylie ignored their squabbling this time to stare at the window in Holiday's office. She tuned her ears to see if she could hear Burnett inside.

All Kylie heard was someone punching buttons on Holiday's keyboard.

Kylie moved up on the porch. She hadn't yet gotten to the door when suddenly she recognized the scent and the cadence of breathing coming from Holiday's office. It wasn't Holiday.

Or Burnett.

What was *he* doing in Holiday's office?

She waved at her two friends and moved in to stand by Holiday's door. Derek, completely immersed in whatever it was on the computer screen, hadn't heard her. She studied him and remembered calling him from the cemetery, feeling as if he was the only one she could count on.

Sighing, she also recalled him telling her he loved her. She even remembered when it was with him that she would have shared those hot wonderful kisses. Not anymore.

"Hey." Kylie pushed back her crazy feelings.

He literally jumped out of the chair.

"Damn." He ran a hand over his face. "You ... startled me." Guilt filled his eyes.

"What were you doing?"

"Something I shouldn't be." A groan spilled from his lips. "Holiday asked me to man the office. When I sat down, her computer woke up. It was on her personal e-mail account, and..."

Kylie arched an eyebrow in accusation. "You were reading her personal e-mails?"

"Only because it involved Hannah." He motioned for her to shut the door.

She did and stepped into the room. Suddenly, she felt a little guilty, too, but if the information could help them ... "What did you find out?"

"The e-mail was from a private investigator. Holiday hired him to find her sister."

"Did he find out anything?" Kylie dropped into the chair facing the desk.

"No. But I didn't know that until I opened it." He pushed a hand over his face again. "Which I shouldn't have done. I saw it and I thought it might

answer everything.”

“I’d probably have done the same the thing,” she said, not sure if it was the truth, but saying it for his benefit. “Where is Holiday?”

“She said something about seeing Burnett.”

Kylie heard heavy footsteps, and then the door swung open. “It’s not me she’s seeing.” Burnett’s gaze zeroed in on Kylie. “Who’s Blake?”

Kylie recalled Hannah saying that it could have been Blake who killed her. Kylie got a bad feeling. “Why?”

“Because that’s who Holiday’s with.”

“That’s not good.” Kylie popped out of the chair. “Where’s she at?”

“Who the hell is Blake?” Burnett asked, blocking Kylie’s path.

“He’s her ex-fiancé.”

Jealously flashed in Burnett’s eyes.

“And, he might also be the person who killed her sister and the other girls.”

Protectiveness replaced the jealousy in his eyes. His fangs dropped down a quarter of an inch from his top lip. He swung around and in a flash was gone.

It took a fraction of a second before she remembered she could flash just like Burnett. She glanced at Derek, and only when his eyes widened did she realize her own canines were elongated. No time to explain, she lit out of the room and the fizzle that she always felt in her veins when she went into protective mode started to buzz.

Kylie just prayed that the buzz was premature and Holiday wasn’t in danger.

Chapter Twenty-five

Kylie caught Burnett's scent and in no time she flew beside him. They didn't stop until they came to a small restaurant on Main Street in downtown Fallen, Texas. Holiday's car was parked in front.

As soon as Burnett had his footing, he twitched his brows to check Kylie's pattern. He didn't say anything, but she saw the shock in his eyes before he turned back to the restaurant.

They rushed to the large front window. "In the back corner," Kylie said, her panic lessening at the sight of Holiday, alive, but not looking happy. Then again, she didn't appear in danger either. The man sitting across from her wore jeans and a light blue shirt. He was tall, dark, and ...

Kylie almost thought handsome, but stopped herself from going there.

"How did you know she was here?" she asked.

"When I saw she was gone, I called her. She said she was at the café, and when someone walked up, I heard her say his name."

Kylie looked back at the window and tuned her ears to hear Holiday's conversation.

"I just came here to ask you if you've seen her," Holiday said.

"And I came here to try to explain what happened," Blake countered. "I made a mistake. It's been over two years, and I haven't stopped loving you."

Burnett growled and moved for the door. Kylie caught his elbow. Dressed in all black today, he looked fierce.

"Wait," Kylie said.

"For what?" Burnett's nostrils flared.

"We need a plan."

"I've got one." His eyes grew brighter when Blake touched Holiday's arm.

"One that doesn't include murder," Kylie muttered, and then added, "You can't just storm in like a jealous boyfriend."

"I'm not jealous," he said.

Kylie heard his heart skip beats. *Oh, that was so cool.*

"Really?" Kylie arched a knowing brow at him.

"He killed her sister," Burnett defended himself.

"I said he might be the one who killed her."

"That's good enough for me." He reached for the door again. Kylie stopped him again.

"Do you really want this to be the way Holiday finds out her sister is dead? In public?"

He stepped back, his eyes telling her he'd seen reason. "Okay, what's your plan?"

She didn't have one, but said, "We hang back and watch."

He frowned. "He could pull a knife and kill her before I could save her."

"In public?" Kylie asked.

"It's not the smartest move, but this guy screwed up and lost Holiday. That tells me he's an idiot." Burnett never looked away from the window as he spoke. His eyes turned a brighter green. A low growl came from his lips. "He's touching her again."

"That's not why I called you, Blake." Holiday pulled her hand back. Her red hair hung loose and stood out against the pale yellow sundress that she wore. "I just want to find Hannah."

"But she's not letting him touch her," Kylie said. "Let's move before she spots us."

Too late.

Holiday looked up, and her eyes widened at the sight of them standing outside the glass door.

"You got a new plan?" Burnett asked. "Because I'm fresh out of ideas, and she looks pissed."

Kylie almost smiled at the fear she heard in the big, bad vampire's voice.

“Don’t tell her anything until we get her back to camp,” Kylie said quickly.

The door swung open as Holiday stepped out. She looked at Burnett, then Kylie. “What’s wrong?”

“I needed to talk to you,” Kylie said, improvising.

“About what?” When no one answered, Holiday spoke up again. “What happened?”

Burnett started to answer. Afraid he might tell Holiday the truth, Kylie blurted out, “I happened.” She pointed to her forehead.

Holiday tightened her brows and her eyes widened. “Oh, my.”

The bell from the restaurant doors chimed behind them and Blake walked out. He stopped beside Holiday. “Is everything okay?” He cut his gaze to Burnett.

Burnett, eyes ablaze, pulled Holiday to his side.

“That depends,” said Burnett, “on how quickly you get your ass away from here.”

* * *

Thankfully, Blake had simply offered Holiday a good-bye nod and left without incident.

Kylie couldn’t help but wonder if it was because he was suspicious that they knew the truth. Burnett seemed to share the same thought when he watched Blake walk away. The low growl coming from his chest left no question that Burnett planned on seeing the man again. And probably sooner than later.

Burnett and Kylie rode back with Holiday. Holiday peppered Kylie with questions as she drove. “When did you turn into a vampire? Have you experienced any pain? Have your powers changed?” Then Burnett started in with his line-up of questions about Kylie’s newly acquired pattern.

Kylie answered as vaguely as she could, not wanting to talk about her grandfather. She accepted she’d have to come clean, eventually, but considering what other news she had to give Holiday, Kylie didn’t want to add anything else for the camp leader to worry about just yet.

Back in the office, Holiday tossed her purse on the sofa and looked at

both Burnett and Kylie with her “tell the truth or die” stare. Kylie wondered if her mom hadn’t taught it to Holiday, because it sure did look familiar.

“Now, explain to me what’s really going on,” Holiday snapped. “I can sense there’s more.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. Burnett took a step forward. He squared his shoulders, empathy filling his eyes. He took a deep, apparently heartfelt breath and looked at Kylie. She nodded at him as if giving him the lead. He looked back at Holiday and, in a deep voice, said, “Kylie has something to tell you.”

Kylie’s mouth fell open and right then she knew it was official: Men sucked at verbal communication, especially where anything emotional was concerned.

Holiday’s gaze shot back to Kylie, and her chest swelled with grief. Grief she knew Holiday was going to feel. An emotion Kylie had personally visited and revisited too often lately. Losing Nana, losing her stepfather—even if it wasn’t in death, it still felt that way—losing her real father, Daniel, because his visits had been cut off. Then there was Ellie. Kylie had even found herself grieving over Red, aka Roberto.

Inhaling, Kylie motioned for Holiday to sit down. The camp leader studied Kylie’s face and probably read every one of her emotions. Stepping to her desk, she sank in the chair. The cushions sighed from her weight. It seemed to be the only noise in the room.

“What is it?” Holiday asked again.

Emotion lumped in Kylie’s throat. “I didn’t tell you because you told me that ... you wouldn’t want to know. The whole live for today and tomorrow speech. Because at first I thought it was you.”

Holiday leaned forward, gripping the side of her desk. “I don’t understand.”

“The face of the spirit that I told you I recognized. I thought it was you. But it wasn’t ... you.”

Holiday’s green eyes filled with tears and Kylie knew that Holiday had already put the pieces together. Burnett, much to his credit, moved behind her and tenderly pressed a hand on her shoulder.

“She’s dead?” Holiday’s next breath shuddered as she pulled it into her lungs. Tears slipped from her lashes and leaked onto her cheeks. “Why ... didn’t she come to me?”

Kylie wiped her own wet cheeks. “I think because she was ashamed of what happened.”

“She told you about ... that?”

“Yeah.” Kylie’s voice barely came out as a whisper. Burnett looked at her as if wondering what all she hadn’t told him.

Grief filled the room. “What happened?” Holiday finally asked. “Was she mountain climbing? I told her it was dangerous to go alone.”

Kylie shook her head. “It wasn’t an accident.”

Anger tightened Holiday’s expression. “She was killed? By whom?”

“We don’t know for sure.” Burnett sat down on the edge of Holiday’s desk. The way he looked at the camp leader warmed Kylie’s heart. He cared. She just hoped this whole Blake issue didn’t push them farther apart.

“But Blake is the prime suspect,” Burnett said.

“Blake?” Holiday breathed in. “No, I don’t believe...” She stopped as if having second thoughts. She swiped at her face again to clear the tears, and then she looked at Kylie. “Okay, tell me everything you know. And don’t leave anything out.”

* * *

That afternoon, at her cabin, Kylie sat at her kitchen table.

Lunch had been so much fun that day—not—that Kylie had decided to skip dinner. There hadn’t been one person who hadn’t stared, mouth agape, at her or made some wisecrack about Kylie’s new vampire pattern.

Okay, that was a lie. Her close friends hadn’t stared—or at least they tried not to. Jonathon and Helen had been taken off guard and before they could stop themselves, they’d done their share of ogling. Of course, then Jonathon had come over and welcomed her to vampire society and suggested she join them at their table.

She had declined. She could tell from a few of the vamps’ expressions that she wouldn’t be welcomed by all.

When Perry walked into the dining room, he'd checked her out, and then sent her a thumbs-up. Obviously, he'd decided not to be mad at her about the whole net thing. Then Kylie noticed all three of the new teachers eyeballing her. For some reason, she just assumed they'd have better manners, but nope, they found her just as entertaining as the others.

However, there had been one thing that made the whole meal ordeal worthwhile. When a smirking Fredericka pointed her out to Lucas, he'd just shrugged and said, "Yeah, I heard." Then he'd glanced at Kylie, not to stare, but to smile.

That smile, with a devilish twinkle in his eyes, had all sorts of meaning, too. Kylie found herself blushing and caring a little less that she was the freak show while everyone downed their burgers and fries. Of course, that lasted for only a few minutes. Then someone else made some smart-mouthed comment about Kylie's mind being off-the-chart weird.

For all the times she wished her sensitive hearing would stay turned on, she now wished she could cut it off—permanently. One only assumed you wanted to hear what was being whispered behind your back.

Staring at her hands resting on the table, she knew part of her bad mood was due to her hurting for Holiday. Kylie wanted to help her, but Holiday insisted on being alone.

The computer dinged with an incoming e-mail. Kylie rushed over, praying it would be from her grandfather or great-aunt. She'd been checking obsessively, especially since her earlier e-mail had bounced back ... meaning the address she had for them was no longer active.

She dropped into the desk chair, her breath held, as she opened the screen.

Not from her grandfather or aunt.

She stared at her stepdad's e-mail address and accidentally clicked it open. Then she accidentally read it.

Hey, princess, I'm looking forward to seeing you Saturday. Miss you. Miss your mom.

All the emotions over her mom and dad's divorce came hurtling back. She jumped up so fast the chair slammed against the floor and broke into four different pieces. "Screw it!" she bellowed. Throat tightening with emotion,

she stomped over and yanked open the fridge. She waited to feel the cool air hit her face.

It didn't feel cold, because she was too cold. She was a freaking vampire!

She swatted a tear from her cheek and looked back to the computer. What if her stepdad started asking questions about her mom again? Kylie sure as heck didn't want to be the one to drop the bomb that her mom was dating.

Then again, he was probably going to find out Saturday anyway. She'd already gotten an e-mail from Mom asking Kylie if she minded if Creepy Guy—the one who wanted to take her mom to England and bang her senseless—came to parent day.

Kylie had been a breath away from e-mailing her mom back and saying, *Hell yes, I mind.*

But was it fair to rain on her mom's parade? Shouldn't Kylie be content that her mom was happy? Kylie just wished her mom could be happy back with her stepdad. Wished life could go back to the way things were before.

For a second, she remembered how things had been. Her thinking she was nothing but human, her not knowing things such as vampires and werewolves existed.

Her having never known Derek. Her never reconnecting with Lucas.

Her, without Della or Miranda.

Suddenly, Kylie Galen's world before Shadow Falls didn't seem so desirable. Well, except having her mom and stepdad together.

Kylie heard Della's mattress shift and her footsteps pad against the floor. Kylie did another swipe of her face, hoping to hide the watery evidence. Vampires didn't cry.

"There's some B-positive blood that I brought you behind the milk," Della said.

"Thanks."

"How are you feeling?" Della asked.

"Fine. Why?"

Della moved in some more. "Because usually when someone starts ripping apart furniture, they don't feel so well."

Kylie stared at the broken chair and didn't reply.

“Actually, I’m just surprised that you didn’t have any symptoms during the turning stage. I’m glad you didn’t, because believe me, it’s not fun.”

Kylie reached for the blood. “You know, this probably won’t last.”

“The blood?” Della asked. “I can get more.”

“No, me being vampire. I’m not really vampire. I mean, I’m only part vampire.”

“You look full-blooded,” Della said, and then, “How do you change it?” She moved to the kitchen table.

Kylie opened the bottle and suddenly the idea of drinking the blood turned her stomach. Had she already changed into something else? Oh, great! If so, she couldn’t wait until breakfast when everyone would have another field day making fun of her.

Closing the cap, attempting to hide her nausea from Della, she said, “I don’t understand how it works. How to make it happen, how to make it *not* happen.”

She faced Della. “Am I still vampire?”

Della nodded, and Kylie saw from the girl’s expression that she could tell Kylie had been crying.

“Go ahead and say it,” Kylie said. “I’m supposed to be a badass now that I’m a vamp.”

“I don’t care if you’re badass,” Della said with sincerity.

Frustration welled up inside Kylie because she was being a bitch, because Della was being nice, but mostly because she couldn’t go running to Holiday for answers this time.

Holiday didn’t have the answers. And the people who did, her grandfather and aunt, didn’t want anything to do with Shadow Falls and were now “undeliverable.”

A chameleon alone will not survive.

And right now, Kylie felt very alone.

More tears flowed and Kylie swiped at her cheeks. “I hate feeling like a freak,” Kylie bellowed out. “I hate feeling as if I have no control over my own body.”

Her thoughts went to Hannah. And to Hannah’s concern that someone

was out to hurt Holiday. *And I'm tired of people dying.*

"Your grandfather didn't tell you how to ... handle it?"

Kylie let go of a deep sigh. "He said it would take years for me to learn."

"So you're going to go around changing from thing to thing without being able to control it?"

"That's the way he made it sound. I don't know." Kylie dropped into a chair.

After a pregnant pause, Della asked, "What did you think of your grandfather?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you like him, not like him? Was he some old fart with one foot in the grave?"

"No, he wasn't ... that old. And he seemed nice. He looked like my dad. But reminded me a little of Burnett, serious and stern."

"But?" Della said, making it sound like a question.

"I didn't say 'but.'"

"Yeah, but you looked like you were thinking it."

Kylie exhaled. "If I tell you something, will you not say anything ... to anyone?"

"Cross my cold heart," Della said. "And promise not to cry. Especially if I look half as bad as you do when I do it," she said, as if attempting to coax a smile out of Kylie.

Kylie didn't smile. She couldn't. "He wants me to go live with them."

Della's eyes widened and the humor quickly faded. "You're not going to do it, are you?"

"No," Kylie said. "I don't think so."

Right then, she heard her grandfather's voice again. *Come with us. We'll help you understand everything. You need to learn who and what you are, Kylie.*

"Don't think so?" Della repeated Kylie's words. "That sounds like you're considering it."

"No," Kylie said.

And she wasn't, she told herself. She really wasn't.

Although she might not have much of a choice ...

Chapter Twenty-six

Kylie slipped into bed early that night. Having hardly slept the night before, she'd hoped she'd sleep like the dead. Well, not like the dead, but sleep like a hungry vampire, slightly turned off by the idea of drinking blood, who was mentally frazzled.

No such luck. She lay staring at the ceiling, petting the purring Socks, and worrying about Holiday and wishing Lucas would call. Right then, Socks crawled up on her chest and started giving her kitty kisses on her chin.

Kylie stared at the kitten. "If and when I turn into a werewolf, are you still going to love me? Remember I loved you when you were a skunk."

The kitten meowed with what Kylie hoped was a yes.

"Do you think Holiday knows we love her?" Kylie asked.

Talking to Socks did little to ease the worry from her heart. Giving in, she reached for the phone. She wasn't even sure who she was going to call, Lucas or Holiday.

Holiday answered on the third ring. "Hey, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm ... worried about you, thought maybe I could come over for a while."

The line went silent. "I ... appreciate it, but I think I need to be alone."

"That's fine," she assured Holiday, although she'd ached to hug Holiday and offer her some comfort.

"Has she come to see you again?" Holiday asked.

"No." Kylie ran her finger under Socks's chin.

"If she does ... tell her to come see me? Tell her I'm not mad anymore, I just ... need to see her." There was so much grief in Holiday's voice that

tears stung Kylie's eyes.

"I'll do that." Silence, painful silence, filled the line. The only thing Kylie could hear was Holiday's grief. "Holiday..."

"Yes?" Holiday's voice shook just a little.

"I love you. I know that sounds sappy, but you and Shadow Falls mean so much to me. I don't know if you understand how much good you do for everyone who comes here."

You are one of us. We share the same blood. A chameleon alone will not survive. Her grandfather's words echoed in her heart again.

"I belong at Shadow Falls," Kylie said, and then flinched when she realized she'd spoken her thought aloud.

"Of course you do." Holiday sounded confused. "Are ... you okay?"

"Fine," she lied. "Just worried about you."

"Don't worry," Holiday said. "And Kylie, I love you, too. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?"

Holiday hung up. Five minutes later, melancholy still had her in its grips when Burnett called and asked if she'd spoken with Holiday. "I did," Kylie said. "I asked if I could come over, but she said she wanted to be alone."

"She told me the same thing," he muttered.

"Then we should respect her wishes," Kylie said.

Burnett exhaled. "Do you think she still loves him?"

While the question was a complete conversational U-turn, Kylie followed it perfectly. The fact that Burnett trusted her enough to show his vulnerability surprised her. The realization made her feel slightly guilty for keeping things from him. But she didn't have a choice, did she?

"No," she said, certain that Holiday loved Burnett. But it wasn't Kylie's place to say it.

"I'm going to have to bring him in to interview him," Burnett said.

"I know," Kylie said. "But you can't mistreat him or assume he's guilty just because he used to be with Holiday."

"You think I'd do that?" Burnett asked.

"Yeah," she said honestly. "I saw the way you looked at him this morning."

He remained quiet for a second. "Have you spoken with Hannah again?"

"Not yet."

"It would be *helpful* if she could tell us more," he bit out.

As if Kylie didn't realize it. "It's a shame they don't always cooperate."

"If she shows up, ask her to ... come talk to me."

"Are you sure?" Kylie recalled how he'd reacted to the whole ghost issue.

"Hell, no, but I'll do it if it will help Holiday." The line went silent again.

"Before I forget, Derek's going to come to your cabin and walk you to the office at six in the morning. We'll go to the café ... to see if we can find anything out on Cara M. I've checked and there isn't a Cara M. listed as missing. Do you think maybe you read it wrong?"

"No, I've seen it several times."

"Okay," he said. "We'll go and see what we can find first thing in the morning. Then we'll have to rush back here before the parents start showing up."

Oh, joy, Kylie thought. She had almost forgotten that was tomorrow.

As soon as Kylie hung up with Burnett, she heard a tap at her bedroom window. She expected the blue jay, but was wonderfully surprised when she saw Lucas pushing open her window.

"Why can't you people use a door?" Della called out from the living room.

"'Cause I didn't come to see you," Lucas called out, and smiled at Kylie.

His smile did all kinds of wonderful things to her mood. He moved in, sat on the edge of the bed, and then leaned down and kissed her. It was warm, soft, and, she sensed, purposely short.

"I can't stay long." His gaze lingered on her lips. "No matter how much I want to."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"My dad summoned me again."

She frowned. "I don't like your dad," she said, and then felt bad for having said it. "Sorry, I didn't—"

He put a finger over her lips. "I don't like him very much, either." Then he smiled. "I have to go, but ... maybe later, you can dream of me." A sexy

twinkle filled his eyes.

She frowned. “I tried last night and couldn’t. I think it’s because I’m vampire.”

He frowned. “I knew being a vamp would be the pits.”

Kylie rolled her eyes.

“I heard that,” Della shouted.

“Can you hear this?” Lucas shot a bird toward the door.

Kylie jerked his hand down. “Don’t get her started,” she muttered to Lucas, and then called out, “Go to bed, Della.”

Lucas exhaled. “I need to go.” He leaned down and kissed her again.

The kiss was the last thing Kylie thought about when she drifted off to sleep. She tried again to dreamscape, but nothing happened. So instead, she just dreamed. Dreamed how it could be when she understood everything about who and what she was. Dreamed of when Lucas was free of trying to appease his pack.

* * *

Kylie woke up the next morning around 4 AM. The room was cold, so she knew someone else was here, but they never manifested, which was just rude—like playing Peeping Tom. Sitting up, she whispered, “Hannah, is that you?”

No one answered, but the cold somehow felt different.

A shiver ran down Kylie’s spine. She pulled the blanket up around her shoulders and sat there, breathing in the cold air. Was this one of the girls buried with Hannah, or was this someone new? It felt new—unfamiliar. Had someone from the graveyard followed her back? As always, when a new spirit appeared, Kylie pretty much went back to feeling anti-ghost.

Kylie listened to her clock mark off two minutes before the cold faded. Socks moved from under the bed and leapt up onto the mattress and curled up into a tight little knot on her lap. “You’re a little anti-ghost, too, aren’t you?”

The kitten let out a muffled meow that seemed to say, *Hell, yes.*

Kylie pulled Socks closer and then settled back into the pillows, half hoping to fall back asleep, half trying to dreamscape again. No such luck.

Her mind ran from seeing her mom, stepdad, and mom's new boyfriend to Hannah and the trip to the café she'd be making in a few hours. Would they learn who Cara M. was? Would that help them figure out who killed them?

Sitting there, Kylie recalled how Hannah had gone all weird on her when the new teachers had walked into the dining hall yesterday. Did that mean anything? "Hannah, if you can come for a chat, I'd appreciate it. And your sister wants to talk to you and so does Burnett. You're a very popular ghost."

The room remained silent and warm. Realizing if she stayed in bed she'd just let herself get caught up in angst, she tossed back the covers and got up.

Maybe Holiday was already at the office. And hopefully, Della wouldn't bite her head off for wanting to head out early. She'd have to call Derek and let him know she was already at the office.

* * *

It was still pitch-dark when Kylie and Della stepped out of the cabin. The temperature was down and there was a fall-like feeling in the black morning air. Della hadn't bitten her head off when she told her she wanted to go see if Holiday was at the office, not literally anyway. But Kylie could tell she wanted to.

No doubt, playing shadow was finally getting to Della. Kylie didn't blame the vamp. Maybe it was time Kylie talked with Burnett about putting a stop to it. Mario hadn't been around in a while. She sensed Mario had backed off and even Miranda said she didn't feel a thing. Kylie could only hope he'd gone forever.

"Too damn early," Della muttered.

"If you don't want to go, I'll be fine."

Della kept walking, but not bitching. "I guess it proves it," Della hissed.

"Proves what?" Kylie asked.

"That you're really not a vampire. I mean, we sleep the best during the AM."

"I told you I wasn't all vampire. I..." Kylie went silent when she heard the footfalls coming down the path. Della's eyes widened at the same time, then motioned for them to move into the edge of the woods. They hid behind

a bush, waited, and watched—watched as a dark figure moved down the trail.

He wore a dark sweater, one with a hood that partially concealed his face. Kylie didn't recognize his shape or his gait. If it was one of the regular campers, she would have, wouldn't she?

Della sniffed the air. "I don't recognize his scent," she whispered.

"What's the plan?" Kylie asked.

"This?" Della leapt out of the woods, canines showing, eyes a bright green, and landed with a thud in front of the stranger.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Kylie, taken by surprise by Della's aggressive move, stood there a second before she realized Della could be in danger. With the vamp a few feet in front of the man, Kylie bolted out of the woods and stopped about three feet behind him.

Della took a defensive step toward the man. He jumped back and slammed right into Kylie. He swung around, a growl escaping his lips, but the hood still obscured his face and prevented Kylie from knowing who and what she was up against.

"Who are you?" Kylie asked. Feeling the sizzle of protective power, she went to yank off the hood from his head.

He ducked and moved a few feet backward—closer to Della. "Stop this!" he demanded.

"You stop," Della ordered.

He pulled off the hood of his sweater. "Is this the way you treat your teachers?" Hayden Yates asked.

Della, being Della, didn't back down. "If they go sneaking around in the shadows, dressing like some criminal, then yeah, that's the way we treat 'em."

Kylie held up her hand to Della, hoping to calm her, not that Kylie felt all that calm. Her power was on full alert, her adrenaline set on high.

"Since when is taking a walk sneaking?" He used his teacher's voice.

"Since you sneaked up on us," Della smarted off.

Logic lessened Kylie's adrenaline. "I ... we ... You scared us," Kylie said.

“I wasn’t scared,” Della snapped.

Mr. Yates frowned. “Next time, try saying hello instead of attacking when someone walks up.”

“That *was* hello,” Della said. “If we’d attacked, you’d be bleeding ... or dead.”

“We overreacted,” Kylie intervened, and then remembered that she didn’t particularly like this guy. He seemed to be somehow secretive and his dark clothes and concealed face seemed to confirm it. However, Kylie’s manners and respect for authority mandated she behave a certain way. “We apologize.”

“We do?” Della asked sarcastically.

Kylie motioned for Della to start walking.

Della shot the teacher another frown before turning around. And the moment they were several feet ahead, Della whispered, “I don’t like him.”

“Me either,” Kylie said, yet she couldn’t put her finger on why.

“You think he’s working with Mario?” Della asked.

“No. I ... don’t know,” Kylie said. “Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

They arrived at the clearing where the office and dining hall stood. Kylie noticed the lights were on in Holiday’s office. Then she noticed the dead silence. Not a bird or even the wind dared to make a sound. The fact that Della had stopped walking and her eyes glowed bright green told Kylie she wasn’t imagining the sense of danger. Someone was here.

“Everything’s fine,” a voice, a strange voice, spoke behind them.

Both Kylie and Della swung around. The man, in his early thirties, wore a black suit. A quick check of his pattern told Kylie he was vampire. The way he held out his hands, palms exposed, told her he wasn’t looking for trouble. Then again, he was a stranger and on Shadow Falls property. Who the hell was he?

“It’s okay.” His at-peace stance had little effect on Kylie, and even less on Della.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” The glow from Della’s green eyes spotlighted her extended fangs.

The man pulled his suit coat back and flashed the badge attached to his

belt. "I'm Agent Houston, FRU, a friend of Burnett's." The way he said "friend" seemed to mean something, though Kylie wasn't really sure what. "Burnett asked me to stand in for him while he went to pick up a suspect."

"Stand in for him for what? Suspect for what?" Della asked, or more like demanded.

The agent's gaze shifted to Kylie, as if he knew she'd understand. And she did. Burnett had brought his man to watch over Holiday, and obviously he'd gone looking for Blake. But understanding didn't make this stranger her ally. Sure she trusted Burnett, but the badge Agent Houston had just proudly flashed did him more harm than good when it came to her.

"I can't go into details," he said, "but you're going to have to trust me. Kylie knows."

Trust? Not likely, Kylie thought, but when his heartbeat didn't appear to be lying, Kylie looked at Della. "He's telling the truth."

"I know," Della said as if annoyed, but the color change in her eyes said she'd backed down. Or she had until she had Kylie alone, and then no doubt she'd verbally bludgeon Kylie for information. Della didn't like to be in the dark.

"I'm going in to see Holiday." Kylie looked at Della.

"She's popular this morning," Agent Houston said.

Kylie looked to the window and saw a male figure. "Who's in there?"

"One of the new teachers," Agent Houston answered.

Kylie tensed. "Hayden Yates?" She looked at Della. How had he gotten ahead of them? Della's expression matched Kylie's.

"No," the man said. "A Collin Warren. He said he was the new history teacher. Is there a problem with him?" The agent's voice deepened as he took a small step toward the office.

"No," Kylie said. "He's fine." But right then, footsteps echoed from down the path.

"You expecting someone?" the agent asked.

"Not really," Kylie said, but she suspected who it might be.

And she was right.

Hayden Yates, his hood back to covering his head, stepped into the

clearing. “Good morning.” He lifted his chin, his gaze on the tall FRU agent standing defensively.

“You know him?” the agent asked Kylie.

Mr. Yates squared his shoulders as if insulted.

“He’s a new teacher,” Della said, but her tone said more. It said she didn’t like him, and the agent picked up on it. He took another step toward Mr. Yates.

Mr. Yates didn’t back away. He held his ground, and she thought they might come to blows. Then Hayden’s gaze shifted to her as if reconsidering his stance. “I mean no harm, just taking a walk,” he told the agent in a resigned voice.

Kylie still felt something ... something not right, something not honest about the man.

Hannah’s warning rang in Kylie’s ears. *And the day I was at Shadow Falls, I sensed he was close. I felt him and I knew. I knew I went to Shadow Falls because of him.*

Could Hayden Yates be Hannah’s killer? Could he have applied for the job here just to get to Holiday? It seemed unlikely, but Kylie wasn’t taking any chances. And as soon as Burnett got back, she planned on sharing her concerns.

* * *

Kylie waited in the office’s entrance for Mr. Warren to finish his conversation with Holiday. In a few minutes, both he and Holiday stepped out. Mr. Warren nodded politely and offered her a soft-spoken “Good morning.”

“Morning.” Kylie sensed again that he was as shy and unsure of himself as she was. Maybe even more. Sort of a male version of Helen. And yet he’d chosen to teach. No doubt his love of history pushed him down this path. For that, she had to admire him.

When he left, Kylie looked at Holiday and instantly went in for a hug.

They held on to each other for a second longer than normal.

“You okay?” Kylie asked.

“I will be in time,” Holiday said.

Kylie heard Mr. Warren speaking to the agent outside. “Is this his first year teaching?” She nodded toward the window.

“How did you guess?” Holiday sighed. “He was recommended by a friend of a friend. He’s not so bad when it’s one on one. I hope you guys don’t chew him up and spit him out.”

Kylie grinned. “Perry might consider it.”

Holiday frowned. “Promise me you’ll not let that happen. He really seems like a nice guy and I think he’ll make an excellent teacher. I’d appreciate it if you’d sort of take him under your wing.”

Kylie chuckled. “Again, Perry might do that.”

Holiday’s grin, while a little forced, surfaced. She glanced at the clock on the wall. “You’re up way early.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Kylie said.

“Did Hannah come by?” Grief snuck into Holiday’s voice and Kylie’s own chest swelled with the emotion.

“No. Sorry.” There was a pause. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Yeah, I ... normally don’t drink it, but this morning I figured I could use it. Grab a cup, and then I want to hear how the whole vampire transformation happened.”

Oh, crap, Kylie thought as she went to collect her coffee. It was either time to come clean or to get busy burying herself in lies. She could probably come up with a story that Holiday would believe—a story that didn’t include her sneaking out of Shadow Falls to meet her grandfather. But lying to Holiday of all people felt wrong.

* * *

“You did what?” Holiday asked, setting her coffee on her desk when Kylie started her explanation a few minutes later. “How many times do I have to explain to you that as a protector, you have no powers—zero—to protect yourself? You didn’t even know the e-mail was from him.”

“I knew,” Kylie said.

“How?” Holiday leaned forward.

Kylie bit into her lip. "He was the fog."

"He was what?"

"My grandfather and my great-aunt, they were the fog. They somehow transformed themselves into fog."

"How..." She let go of a deep breath and let the confusion settle around her, and then said, "You still can't just disobey rules."

"I was following the main rule. The one you've told me dozens of times." She paused. "To follow my heart."

Holiday stared at Kylie as if debating the issue. "You could have asked someone to go with you."

"They wouldn't have met me."

"You don't know that," Holiday said.

"Yes, I do. They left when Lucas showed up."

"Wait, Lucas went with you? He knew about this?" There was a reprimand to her voice.

"No. He and Perry followed me, but I ... detained them and took off. When Lucas caught up with me, my grandfather and aunt disappeared. They don't trust anyone here because of the FRU involvement with the camp. Considering everything that's happened, you can't blame them for that."

"I can blame them if they encourage you to put your life in danger." Holiday fell back into her chair with frustration.

"They don't even know about Mario. And look at me. Nothing happened. I had to go. I had to know the truth."

Holiday closed her eyes and kept them closed. When her lids finally fluttered open, Kylie saw most of her frustration had faded.

Her shoulders relaxed. "And what's the truth, Kylie? What did they tell you?"

"My dad was right. I'm a chameleon."

"And what, exactly, is that?" Holiday asked.

"I have a blend of all the supernaturals and I maintain the DNA from all."

Holiday shook her head. "But that's not possible. The dominant parent's is the only DNA that passes to the child."

"That's what makes us different."

Holiday leaned back in her chair, her expression one of bafflement. “That’s ... huge.” She tweaked her brows at Kylie’s forehead. “So what constitutes the pattern you show?”

“I don’t know ... exactly. He said it usually took years before a chameleon learned to control it. That it takes a while to learn to do it. But then he said something that led me to believe that I can change it according to the powers I need.”

“So he changed you into a vampire?”

“No, I ... he said I must have done it instinctively. When I was trying to get away from Lucas and Perry, I just kept telling myself to move faster. So maybe that’s how it happened.”

“Have you tried to change it again?” Holiday arched a brow in curiosity.

“No.” Kylie shook her head. “The last time you had me try to do something that I wasn’t sure how to do, Burnett nearly wound up sterile.”

Holiday chuckled. Seeing Holiday smile was so good that Kylie smiled back.

“What else did your grandfather say?” Holiday asked.

Kylie’s heart gripped. If Holiday was vampire, she’d hear the lie forming on her lips. Telling Holiday that Kylie’s grandfather wanted her to leave Shadow Falls seemed like giving Holiday a reason to dislike him—a reason to insist Kylie stay away from him. And she couldn’t stay away.

Taking a breath, she fought the guilt swelling inside her, because Holiday might not hear the lie in her heartbeat, but she could read her emotions. Squaring her shoulders, she met Holiday’s eyes. “Not much else. Lucas showed up and ... they left.”

“Who left?” Burnett asked.

Kylie inwardly flinched. She’d been so busy trying not to feel guilty, she hadn’t heard him approach.

“Did you find him?” Holiday sat up, tension pulling at her shoulders.

Kylie had suspected Burnett had been looking for Blake, but it surprised her that he’d told Holiday. “Find who?” Kylie asked, to be sure she’d been right.

“Blake,” Burnett answered. “And no.” He looked at Holiday. “I’ve left

messages at both his work and cell that we need to talk.”

“Should I call him?” Holiday asked.

“No,” Burnett clipped. Shifting his shoulders as if to push off the stress, he looked back at Kylie. “Who were you speaking of when I walked in? Who left?”

Holiday glanced at Kylie and she could see the message in the camp leader’s eyes. She left it up to Kylie whether to tell him ... or not.

She appreciated that, and when she imagined Burnett’s reaction to her disregard for the rules, Kylie almost went with the “not.” But realizing the position she was putting Holiday in by lying to Burnett, Kylie reconsidered. She didn’t want to be the one to cause even a ripple of discontent between them. Not when her goal was to get them together.

“You’re going to be upset,” Kylie said.

“How upset?” He frowned.

* * *

It turned out Burnett had been quite upset. Kylie had been relieved when, an hour later, Derek showed up and the four of them left for the café to see if they could find out anything about Cara M.

When Burnett and Holiday walked into Cookie’s Café, Derek held her back and let the door close. “Is everything okay?”

He’d obviously picked up on Burnett’s *cheerful* mood. Although Kylie didn’t know if it had everything to do with her, or the fact that he’d been unable to run down Blake.

Looking up at the glass door and seeing Burnett staring back at them, she recalled some of their earlier conversation.

“The FRU is not the enemy,” he’d insisted, when Kylie reminded him her grandfather had a reason to distrust Shadow Falls.

“You’re not the enemy,” Kylie had said. “But I’m still not sure about the FRU. And while I know you don’t want to admit it, you wouldn’t have hidden my grandmother’s body and wouldn’t be keeping some facts from them if you completely trusted them.”

Burnett hadn’t argued with that, but Kylie pointing it out hadn’t done

much to improve his mood. He was obviously torn between his loyalty to Shadow Falls and his loyalty to the FRU. Not that Kylie worried. She trusted him. Getting her grandfather and aunt to trust him was another matter.

Derek cleared his throat to get her attention. He wore his favorite jeans and dusty green T-shirt. “Did something happen?”

“Not really,” Kylie whispered to Derek, slightly bothered by how close he leaned into her, brushing her shoulder with his. Or was she bothered by how aware of his touch she was? Pushing that thought aside, she reached for the glass door.

But she got the craziest feeling that someone was watching her. She swung around, but Derek blocked her view of the street.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No.” She still shifted to see around him. But the brief sensation she’d gotten was gone. Were her grandfather and aunt close by? She glanced all around, left and right. The old houses lining the street had been turned into gift shops, and an old red caboose now served as a concession stand. What she didn’t see was anyone peering back at her. No one. Nothing.

So she turned back and walked inside the café packed with a chattering crowd.

The smell of bacon flavored the air in the old house that served as a café. She didn’t find the smell the least bit tempting. The downside of being a vamp. The room held wall-to-wall tables, filled with hungry people who looked like vacationers. The sound of forks clinking against plates echoed with the voices.

Only one table stood empty and Holiday led the way. A server came out of the back, carrying a tray of food that smelled like cinnamon rolls.

“Is that the same uniform?” Derek asked as they sat down.

“Yeah.” Kylie’s heart lightened with hope that this would lead them to the killer.

Another waitress, Chris G., according to her name tag, stopped in front of their table.

“You guys ready to order?” Before they spoke, she waved at another table. “One minute.”

“Actually,” Burnett spoke up, “we’re here hoping to get some info on a Cara M., a waitress who—”

“Oh.” She walked away.

“Oh, what?” Burnett frowned as she took off. She stuck her head through the door and called out, “Hey, Cara, someone wants to talk to you.”

Burnett, Holiday, and Derek all turned and looked at Kylie.

“She can’t be alive,” Kylie said. “Trust me. She’s dead.”

Then a pretty blond, with a name tag that read CARA M., walked out of the back. “She looks alive to me,” Derek said. “And even kind of hot.” He blushed.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Kylie opened her mouth to speak, but didn't have a clue what to say. Or do, for that matter.

"Hi, Cara," Derek spoke up, glancing at Burnett as if making sure it was okay to take the lead. Burnett nodded and Derek continued. "We wanted information on a Cara M."

She pointed to her name tag. "I'm Cara M. M for Muller."

Kylie studied the waitress's face and tried to compare it to the spirit. It wasn't her. Was it? Kylie played emergency recall in her memory but could only envision her long blond hair and blue eyes. Which this girl had, but ...

"I'm sorry," Derek said. "We were under the impression that Cara M. no longer worked here."

"Well, I'm still here. Been here since I was fifteen, over two years. Why?"

"Is there another Cara M. who worked here?" Kylie tried not to stare, but feeling desperate to discover the truth, she couldn't stop herself.

"No." The girl looked at Kylie. "What's this about?"

Kylie noticed that the waitress's name tag had come unpinned and barely clung on the uniform. "What happens if you lose your name tag?"

Cara cut her eyes toward the back of the restaurant. "The manager has a freaking cow."

"And what would you do to prevent him from having a cow?" Kylie leaned forward.

"What do you mean?" Cara asked.

"She means, do you ever loan your name tag to one of the other girls?"

Derek asked.

The waitress leaned closer as if afraid someone might hear. “The boss hardly notices. But I don’t understand why you want to know this.” She smiled at Derek as if ... well, as if he was some cute guy and she was some cute blonde. Which she was. Which he was. A frown pulled at Kylie’s lips.

Holiday touched the girl’s arm. No doubt to send her some calming emotion in hopes of encouraging her to answer. “Have any of your waitresses just ... disappeared?”

Kylie saw Burnett tilt his head, listening for a lie, and Kylie did it as well.

“They quit all the time. The owner can be a real jerk.” Cara spoke the truth.

“Has anyone just left? Never officially quit?” Holiday asked.

Cara paused. “Yeah, there was a girl like that. A Cindy something. Can’t remember her last name.”

“Did Cindy ever borrow your name tag?” Burnett added his voice to the conversation.

“Was Cindy a blonde?” Kylie tossed out her own question.

“Yes,” Cara said to Burnett, and then focused on Kylie. “And yes. Why?”

Between Holiday’s casual touches on the girl’s wrist and Derek’s flirty smiles, the girl answered all their questions about Cindy. Before she walked off, Burnett asked if her manager or the owner of the restaurant was here.

Cara grew nervous. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Burnett assured her. “But can you let her know I need to talk to her?” He pulled out his wallet and flashed his badge. Kylie wasn’t even sure what the badge meant to humans, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Cara’s color paled. “Oh, shit. Did something happen to Cindy?”

Yeah, Kylie thought. Something happened. Something really bad, too.

* * *

Before leaving, Burnett had the name Cindy Shaffer and a copy of the resume she’d filled out with her emergency contacts. When he sent the info to FRU via his phone and asked for the driver’s license, they answered within a few minutes. When he showed Kylie the image of a smiling young blonde, tears

filled Kylie's eyes. It was her. And Cindy Shaffer would never smile like that again.

While Burnett spouted orders over the phone for someone at the FRU to contact the Shaffer family, Holiday ordered some cinnamon rolls. They arrived, hot and covered with gooey white icing. Derek ate two, Holiday nibbled on one. Kylie and Burnett picked at their pastries with even less enthusiasm. Even with Kylie's stomach grumbling, she couldn't stomach the taste. That, and she kept seeing the image of the smiling Cindy.

"Are you drinking your meals?" Holiday asked Kylie in a low voice.

"Not regularly, but I'll start." She didn't look forward to it.

Burnett paid for the breakfast. As they walked toward the car, Kylie got the feeling again that someone was watching her. She swung around and saw a male figure disappear inside one of the stores. She'd barely gotten a glimpse of a shoulder and arm, but she recognized those appendages.

Kylie shot across the street.

"What is it?" Burnett's feet ate up the pavement right beside her.

Kylie stopped in front of the store. Her gaze flew to the large carved wooden sign that read PALM READER. She reached for the door. "I thought I saw someone."

Burnett grabbed her, his eyes now green in protective mode. "Who?"

Kylie heard Derek call her name from the other side of the street. "Let me find out." She rushed inside the store.

Burnett rushed in with her.

The first thing Kylie noticed was a voodoo doll hanging from the ceiling with pins in it. The second was a foul odor. She slapped her hand over her mouth and nose. Even while wanting to gag, she searched the room for the man she'd seen enter the building. When the place looked empty, she glanced back at Burnett.

"Garlic." He frowned. "Just breathe it in; the reaction will fade. It doesn't kill us."

"Can I help you?" a voice asked from behind a counter in the corner of the room.

Kylie forced herself to pull her hand from her mouth and looked at the

woman dressed in a brightly colored, loose-fitting dress that had con-artist-pretending-to-be-a-clairvoyant written all over it. But just to confirm her assessment, Kylie checked her brain pattern. Human—but shady looking. Definitely a con artist.

Kylie tilted her head to the side to hear if anyone else was in the old house. Not a sound. No one breathed inside these walls but the three of them, and Kylie still wished she didn't have to breathe. The smell crawled down her throat. She focused on the door. Where had the man gone that she'd spotted rushing inside? Noting that the backdoor stood slightly ajar, she tuned her ears to listen for anything outside. If he'd left out the backdoor, he was gone now.

"Uh..." Kylie pushed words around her gag reflex, but before the words spilled out, she noted the hand-painted sign hanging over the register.

NO SHOES, NO SHIRT, NO SERVICE. AND UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, NO COLD-HEARTED VAMPIRES.

She glanced at Burnett and back at the sign.

He frowned.

"You need a reading?" the woman asked.

"No." Kylie ignored her desire to heave. "A man just walked in. I thought I knew him."

"Yeah. The bell rang, but I was in the back; when I got here the person had vanished. Probably a spirit. I get them all the time."

Kylie put out her feelers for ghosts. No deadly cold filled the space. And who could blame them? The stench of garlic probably scared them off, too. She eyed the woman again, who Kylie now had down as a complete nutcase. A stupid nutcase if she thought a sign and some garlic would actually keep vampires away.

The woman noticed Kylie's attention to the sign. "Don't be too quick to judge. I see them around here all the time. They have a different smell about them."

"Seriously?" Burnett asked in mock disbelief. "You believe in vampires?"

"You aren't the only non-believers," she said. "But I have proof. The Native Americans drew pictures of them on the cave walls on my

grandmother's property."

"Interesting stuff for fairy tales." Burnett glanced at Kylie. "You ready?"

As soon as they walked out, he bit out, "Who the hell did you think you saw?"

She didn't consider keeping it from him. She'd been going to tell him, she just hadn't had the time. "What do you know about Hayden Yates?"

"The new teacher?"

She nodded.

"I personally did an extensive check on all the new employees. Why? Do you think I missed something?"

"I think he gives me bad vibes."

"Bad vibes?" Burnett asked.

Kylie nodded. "And this morning before the sun came up, Della walked me to Holiday's office and we caught him following us." She stopped talking, realizing that wasn't altogether true. "Maybe not exactly following us, but he was walking around. And Hannah insists whoever killed her is close to the camp."

"And that's who you think you saw?"

She nodded.

He frowned. "But Blake, Holiday's ex, has been in the area, too. Hannah could have meant him."

Burnett wanted Blake to be guilty, and Kylie wasn't sure he wasn't, but ... "I know, but I'm just ... Maybe I'm making more out of it than I should."

"Or not." Burnett snatched his phone from his pocket and dialed. "Della," he said into his phone. "Find Hayden Yates at the camp."

"Can I whup his ass, too?" Della's voice echoed from the phone.

"No, don't let him know you're checking on him. I just want to know if he's there. And do it now!"

"I'm already on my way," she smarted back.

The line went silent for a second. "Okay ... I'm at his place, peering through his window. He's reading the paper, sitting on the sofa. You sure you don't want me to kick his ass? Did Kylie tell you we think he was following

us?”

“Yes.”

“Is that an affirmative on whupping his ass?” Della chuckled.

“No,” Burnett said, missing the humor. “Thanks.” He hung up and met Kylie’s gaze.

“I don’t think he could have made it back to the camp in that time,” Burnett said.

“I know,” Kylie said. “So maybe it wasn’t him.”

Burnett frowned. “But to be safe, I’ll do another rundown on him.”

Kylie appreciated that.

“Where the hell did you guys go?” Derek stopped beside them.

“I thought I saw someone.” Kylie spotted Holiday moving across the street.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Kylie thought she recognized someone.” Burnett motioned for them to cross the street. “We should get back to the camp before the parents start showing up.”

Oh, great! Now Kylie had the whole parent issue to deal with.

Holiday looked at her watch. “We’d better hurry.”

They moved across the street to get in the car. All *five* of them.

Yes, five.

Burnett hit the clicker to unlock the doors. Holiday popped in the front seat. Kylie stood by the back door when Hannah leaned in and whispered, “*I call window seat.*”

Hannah, Derek, and Kylie climbed in. As soon as Burnett got settled behind the wheel, his shoulders stiffened and he swung around. The look, the sheer panic in his gaze, told Kylie she wasn’t the only one hearing and, more than likely, seeing Hannah.

* * *

Burnett drove in silence, but kept looking back in the rearview mirror. Kylie shivered from the chill of Hannah’s presence.

Have you figured out anything else? Kylie spoke in her mind.

Hannah ignored Kylie's question. Instead, she stared at Derek. "*He's cute.*"

"Damn, it's cold in this car." Derek draped his arm around Kylie. The warmth of his arm did feel good, and being this close, close enough to get a good whiff of his natural scent to chase away the scent of garlic, didn't feel so bad, either. And for that reason, she shifted away and cut him a warning look that said, "Don't push your luck."

Sometimes she thought he forgot she wasn't really with him anymore. Not that it wasn't easy for him to forget, with Lucas never hanging around her ...

"*You should definitely choose him.*" Hannah leaned into Kylie's shoulder. The icy feel of her touch caused Kylie's spine to stiffen. "*And speaking of romance, the bozo in the front seat better watch himself. If he hurts my sister —*"

"I won't," Burnett muttered.

"Won't what?" Holiday and Derek asked at the same time.

"Nothing." Burnett slammed his jaw so tight he had to have cracked a few teeth.

Hannah leaned forward and stared at Burnett in the rearview mirror. The mirror frosted over. "*If you break her heart, I swear, I'll neuter you in your sleep.*"

Burnett's jaw tightened some more. Holiday gaped at the rearview mirror and then stared wide-eyed at Burnett. A second later, she swung around and gave Kylie the befuddled look. "Is it her? Is Hannah here?"

Kylie froze, literally from Hannah's icy presence, but also from not knowing what to say.

When Kylie didn't answer, Holiday stared back at Burnett. "Can you see her? Can you see ghosts? How can you do that?"

"We've got a ghost in the car?" Derek's voice rang a bit high-pitched.

"*Had a ghost in the car,*" Hannah said. Her teary-eyed gaze stared at Holiday, and then she vanished, leaving the saddest of sad moods to fill the car like smoke.

* * *

The moment Kylie spied her mom and John, her mom's creepy new boyfriend, walking into the dining hall, holding on to each other like a couple of horny teenagers, Kylie found herself envying Hannah's ability to vanish. Why did her mom think bringing John was a good idea? And if she had to bring him, couldn't she keep her hands off his butt while she was here?

Yup, Kylie's mom had her right hand tucked into the back of John's jeans pocket. And frankly, the man didn't even have a nice ass!

Surely her mom wasn't getting serious about him and felt these visits were needed for Kylie to get to know him—before ... before they did something stupid, like get married.

The thought scared the crap out of Kylie. Inhaling, she told herself she was overreacting; as Nana would have said, she was making a mountain out of a molehill.

Then again, her mom hadn't answered Kylie's question about them having sex. And chances were, her mom wasn't about to answer that inquiry today, either.

Kylie's mom turned around and spotted her on the other side of the dining hall and smiled. Kylie waved, hoping her mom would do the same, freeing her hand from John's ass, but nope.

Taking a deep breath, Kylie faked a smile.

Her mom grinned up at John, and the man swooped down and kissed her. Kissed her ... with tongue, and right there in front of all of Kylie's campmates.

"Just shoot me," Kylie muttered.

"I think they're cute." Holiday leaned into Kylie as if reading her emotional overload.

"And I think I'm going to puke." Kylie swore she was going to have a sit-down, serious chat with her mom and find out exactly what was going on. When the kiss kept going, Kylie decided again that yup, she'd love to vanish. Just up and disappear.

"Take some deep breaths and calm down," Holiday said. "You're

exploding with panic.”

Kylie looked at Holiday. “My mom’s French-kissing a guy in front of everyone,” she muttered. “Of course I’m panicking!”

“Shit!” Holiday snapped.

“Shit, what?” Kylie asked, alarmed at the panic in Holiday’s voice.

“Oh, Kylie,” Holiday murmured. And then she looked across the room and waved down Burnett, her arm motions serious.

“What is it?” Kylie looked to the door, thinking someone unwanted, possibly Mario, had walked in.

No Mario.

“Damn it to hell and back!” Holiday whispered. “Kylie, where did you go?”

“What do you mean? I’m right here. Standing right next to you.” Kylie looked down at her feet, but she saw only the floor. No sneakers, no legs. No Kylie.

“Oh, shit!” she muttered, and while she hadn’t thought about it in quite a while, she remembered her dad telling her that they would work things out together. Was this it? Was this what dying felt like?

Chapter Twenty-nine

Wait, Kylie thought. If she was dead, wouldn't she be on the floor in a crumpled, lifeless heap?

"Oh, crap!" Kylie muttered when her mom, a dumbfounded look on her face, walked up to Holiday.

"Where's Kylie?" her mom asked.

"She ran to ... to the bathroom, I think, but ... I'm not sure." Holiday's voice sounded an octave too high.

Burnett stopped at her mom's side, his serious gaze trying to read Holiday. "Something wrong?" His calm front almost sounded convincing, but Kylie saw the stress tightening his jawline.

"Uh, Kylie ... she ... disappeared. I thought maybe you could find her."

Disappeared? So, she'd just disappeared. She wasn't dead.

"Disappeared?" All sorts of questions filled his eyes.

Holiday nodded and didn't break eye contact as if mentally telling him it was serious.

And hell yeah, it was serious. She was freakin' invisible.

"It's crazy." Her mom sounded confused. "She was here and then ... she vanished."

Vanished? Kylie suddenly remembered wishing she could vanish. Vanish like a ghost.

Damn! Damn! Damn! If there was ever a lesson in the old adage of be careful for what you wish for, this was it.

Questions flashed across her mind. Was she still a vampire? Had she turned back into a witch and accidentally wiggled her pinky when she made

the declaration? Or was this completely connected to her being a chameleon? That's when she recalled that her great-aunt and grandfather had gone *poof*, both from the car the first day they'd shown up at Shadow Falls, and at the cemetery. Was *poof* the same thing as vanishing?

Her grandfather's words echoed in her head. *Come with us. We'll help you understand everything. You need to learn who and what you are.*

More than ever, and maybe not even for the first time, Kylie wondered if he was right.

* * *

"You've lost her daughter?" John snapped. "What kind of place loses kids?"

"We haven't lost her," Holiday said, but Kylie saw fresh panic flash in her eyes. "I'm sure she'll show up any minute."

Her mom seemed to relax, but Kylie didn't get a warm fuzzy feeling from Holiday's tone. And when Kylie listened closely, she heard the camp leader's heart beating to the tune of a lie.

Crap! Crap! Crap! Kylie tried to think. She had to get herself out of this because ... well, apparently she'd gotten herself into it.

"I can do this," she said, needing a little encouragement even if it was as fake as a mall Santa.

She tried to rationalize. If she'd gotten this way by wishing it, maybe she could un-wish it. She started un-wishing, if you could call begging to everything holy in her mind to change her back as un-wishing. She closed her eyes and realized that if it worked, she'd magically appear. That would freak everyone out even more. "Go somewhere else," she muttered to herself. "Somewhere private." She dashed toward the bathrooms.

Hurrying into the room, she heard voices but ignored them, and stormed into an empty stall. Breathing in, then breathing out, she closed her eyes, closed them really tight. "I wish ... I wish I was visible." She opened her eyes. Her gaze shot to her feet. Or to the space where her feet should have been, but weren't.

A knot formed in her throat; fear bounced around her chest like bumper cars. What if she stayed like this? What if ... No! She'd been in worse

situations. Heck, she'd been kidnapped and chained to a chair and survived. She'd been tossed off a cliff and came through it. All of a sudden, she questioned again if this was Wicca related. She wiggled her pinky. "Turn me visible. Turn me visible."

Nothing happened.

"What the hell have I done?" The knot in her throat doubled in size. She started to cry. "Somebody help me, please?" She leaned against the bathroom stall door. "Daniel." She whispered her father's name, even though she knew the likelihood of him showing up was slim to none. "Can you please, please help me?"

"Think yourself there," a voice said.

Her breath caught when she realized it wasn't just any voice, but Daniel's. She pulled away from the door and saw the vague apparition of him, crowded between the toilet and the stall wall. "Think it. Make it so in your head."

"How?"

"Think it. In your heart. You have the power—" He faded.

"No," she begged, but he was gone.

Wiping her tears, she did what he said. She concentrated on being visible. On being there, physically.

Closing her eyes again, with no faith but desperate enough to try, she concentrated. She opened one eye and peered down. Her feet had never looked so beautiful in all her life.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"For what?" someone asked in the stall beside her, but Kylie barely listened, too excited that she wasn't invisible anymore.

She walked out of the stall and came to an abrupt stop when she saw Steve and Perry both standing in front of urinals, their jeans hanging low on their butts. The sound of urine hitting ceramic filled her ears. It wasn't a pretty sound.

Her face heated to a nice shade of red.

The stall door behind her swished open. "What are you doing in the boy's restroom?" someone asked.

Steve, pants still down, swung around. Completely around. Kylie slapped

her hands over her eyes.

“I didn’t see a thing. I swear.” Okay, maybe she did, which had her face turning hotter.

“What the hell?” Steve growled. Along with Perry’s laughter, she heard the sound of zippers being pulled up.

“I’m sorry.” Hands over her eyes, she moved in the direction of the door, but she hit a wall instead.

Perry laughed again. “Our friends are all put up. You can open your eyes now.”

She did, but refused to look at anyone. *Their friends!* She darted out, wishing she had a minute to get her head together before ...

Too late.

Holiday spotted her. And so did her mom and John. All three came hurrying over.

Holiday stared at her wide-eyed with questions flashing in her eyes. Questions Kylie didn’t have answers to.

“Was that the boy’s bathroom you just walked out of?” her mom asked, sounding a bit annoyed, but mostly worried. John moved in and slipped his hand around her waist. Something about the way he touched her had Kylie envisioning them naked together. Oh, Gawd. They were having sex. She knew it.

Then she saw it. Saw it in her head. And it was not pretty!

“Are you okay?” her mom asked. “You’re beet red.”

“Yeah.” Kylie squeaked. She pushed away the image of them naked before she wanted to vanish again.

“You were right there,” her mom said in a mildly scolding voice. “I turned my head and you were gone when I looked back.”

Kylie opened her mouth to say something, to apologize, or maybe to say something mundane like *beautiful weather isn’t it*, but those weren’t the words to leave her lips.

“You didn’t turn your head. You were sucking face with that idiot.” She inhaled, clamping her mouth shut, but it just flew back open. “You’re sleeping with him, aren’t you? Have you even read the sex pamphlets you

gave me all those years?”

Her mom gasped and her face brightened. So that was where Kylie got her ability to blush. Her mom opened her mouth, obviously to scold Kylie, but nothing came out. Not a word.

John cleared his throat in a scolding tone. What in holy hell gave him the right to clear his throat at her? “Now, Kylie, that wasn’t nice.”

“You mean the kiss?” Kylie asked. “Because, frankly, I didn’t say it was nice. It was actually quite embarrassing.”

That’s when Holiday cleared her throat. Kylie could handle Holiday’s intervention, but not this bozo’s, who was doing the dirty with her mom.

“I really think we should go outside,” Holiday said.

“I think the girl needs a firm talking-to,” John said.

Kylie’s spine went ramrod straight. And damn if she didn’t feel her canine teeth grow a little longer. She had emotions racing through her so fast she couldn’t even begin to define how she felt. Except hungry. For blood. How dare he feel he had the right to correct her?

“I hope you’re rich, because that’s the only reason I can think my mom might like you.”

Her mom gasped, and so did Kylie. Why was she saying these things? Oh, shit, she needed to shut up. What was wrong with her? Had going invisible addled her brain? Or was being vampire making her as ballsy as Della?

“You’re being quite rude, young lady.” John looked at Kylie’s mom.

“She’s not being rude!” a deep voice sounded behind Kylie.

The voice rang all kinds of familiar bells, but Kylie couldn’t think straight to know who it was, so she turned around to put a face to the voice.

Oh, shit! Could this get any worse?

“I happened to witness it as well. And frankly I agree with my daughter. It was inappropriate.” Her stepdad shot her mom a stern look.

Her mom’s face turned even redder, but Kylie recognized that red-faced expression, and it wasn’t embarrassment. She was pissed!

“How dare you tell me what’s appropriate!” her mom snapped.

Shame filled her stepdad’s expression. He looked at Kylie. “I didn’t know Kylie was there. I wouldn’t have done it if I had. I’ve apologized a hundred

times. But two wrongs—”

“Let’s all take a walk,” Holiday said again. But no one took a step.

It took Kylie about a second to realize what her stepdad meant. She opened her mouth to say something, but what? *Don’t worry, Dad, Mom doesn’t know that I watched your young skank rub herself all over you and practically give you a handjob in the middle of downtown Fallen?*

Nope, that didn’t sound like the right thing to say. So she ceremoniously shut her mouth and started praying for a miracle, because it would take one right now to fix this mess.

“You wouldn’t have done what?” her mom asked, and when her stepdad didn’t answer, her mom’s fury focused on Kylie.

“What did you see?” she asked in her speak-or-be-grounded tone.

And grounded sounded like the best option.

Guilt fluttered in Kylie’s chest. But for what? she asked the unwelcome emotion. Not telling her mom had to be the right thing, didn’t it?

“Why don’t we walk outside,” Holiday piped up again, and put a hand on Kylie’s mom’s shoulder.

Her mom’s expression softened. Thank God for Holiday’s emotion-altering touch. The panic blossoming in Kylie’s gut lessened. Leave it to Holiday to save the day.

But then Kylie saw the way John stared at her stepdad. And when he opened his mouth, Kylie questioned if Holiday could pull off a miracle.

It didn’t help matters when Lucas came to a sudden stop beside Kylie, his eyes glowing a shade of pale protective orange. Not that she didn’t love that he cared enough to protect her, but the last thing she wanted to have to do was explain his eye color to her stepdad, her mom, and the man who was having sex with her mom. And thinking about that had Kylie’s eyes stinging. Shit! Were they glowing now?

“You have no right to judge her after what *you* did.” John took a defensive step toward Kylie’s stepdad and her own protective instincts sparked to life.

“No wonder your daughter lacks respect,” John quipped.

Lacks respect? Kylie felt her fangs grow a little longer, and she was so

mad, she'd missed Derek joining the crowd, but Lucas hadn't missed it, because he growled.

Holiday moved in, and keeping one hand on Kylie's mom, she rested her other palm on John's shoulder. For a second, the tense energy sucking up oxygen diminished.

Kylie sent up a silent prayer of thanks. Then she noted the expression on her stepdad's face. And she immediately recanted her gratitude.

"Who the hell do you think are? Don't you dare insult my daughter," her stepdad said. Holiday looked from her mom to John and back to her stepdad. Poor Holiday had only two hands. Before anyone could stop it, her stepdad's fist made contact with John's nose. Blood poured. All the vampires in the room, including herself, breathed in the sweet scent.

Lucas tried to move her back, but she wasn't budging. Kylie's mom screamed. John started swinging his fists at her stepdad, missed, but knocked Holiday over in the process.

Burnett flew across the room and tossed John to the floor. And everyone ... everyone in the room, all the campers, all the campers' parents, all the new teachers, especially Hayden Yates, stared at the foolhardy chaos that was her life.

Refocusing on the mess before her, she felt as if she were the star on some new reality show: *Parents Behaving Badly*. She watched in complete mortification as the scene continued.

John rose to his feet and apologized to Holiday.

Her mom seethed.

Her dad tried to talk to her seething mom.

Holiday tried to touch everyone.

Burnett continued to glare green daggers at John, proving how hard it was for a vampire to accept an apology. Not that she blamed him. Kill him. Kill him. She cheered the vampire on.

Lucas hadn't stopped scowling at Derek and Derek hadn't stopped ignoring Lucas.

Everyone reacted in one manner or another. Everyone except Kylie. She didn't move, not even to breathe. She stood frozen in the same spot, and

concentrated ... concentrated really hard on *not* wishing she could vanish—
because down deep, that's exactly what she wanted to do.

Chapter Thirty

Burnett ushered everyone involved in the dispute out of the dining hall. Kylie moved with him like a robot, one foot in front of the other, still not wanting to let her emotions rise to the surface for fear of what might happen. Meaning, she'd either start again with the wiseass comments—channeling Della's attitude—or she'd vanish. Both could cause irreparable damage.

Right as she stepped out the door, followed by Lucas and Derek, she heard someone's parent say, "Wouldn't you know, it's always humans causing shit."

Inhaling the sunshine-filled air, trying not to be insulted for her mom and stepdad, and trying to control the mortification of it all, she watched Holiday guide her mom and John into the office building. Burnett waited a second, then in an unsympathetic voice, he ordered her stepdad to follow him inside—obviously into different rooms. Kylie sensed they were all going to get a stern talking-to. Not that they didn't deserve it, but ... she felt odd being the one watching her parents getting pulled into the "principal's office" instead of the other way around.

Remembering some of the things she'd said to her mom and John, Kylie suspected her stern talking-to was probably just around the corner.

Once the office door closed behind Burnett and her stepdad, Kylie swung around with the intention of throwing herself into Lucas's arms. She needed a little TLC—someone to lean on. But Lucas wasn't there. She looked back at the dining hall and saw him moving inside, no doubt heading back to his pack. God forbid his pack believe his assistance in stopping the disruption was anything more than a good deed, or because he actually cared about her.

Right or wrong, her heart broke right then. Derek, however, suddenly appeared beside her. Her eyes stung, her throat knotted, and the next thing she knew she was in his arms. Warm, strong arms that were so good at holding her and offering comfort.

It was wrong. So wrong. She needed to stop this. Stop relying on Derek.

“Quit feeling guilty,” Derek whispered in her ear, reading her emotion right on cue. “I’m just a friend, helping out another friend.”

No, she thought. He was a friend who used to be more, a friend who’d told her he loved her and wanted to be more again. He was someone that on odd occasions she still thought about having more with, too—someone she knew she could turn to for help. And yet, it wasn’t his arms she longed for, it wasn’t him she needed to hold her.

* * *

A while later, Holiday stepped out onto the office’s porch and motioned her over. Great, now it was Kylie’s time to get her punishment. Accepting she deserved it, she stiffened her spine and went to face the music.

But the look on Holiday’s face wasn’t one of reprimand. She immediately embraced Kylie. “Dear Lord, child. Please tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” Kylie lied.

Holiday exhaled. “You scared the life out of me. What...? What happened?”

When Kylie met the camp leader’s green, caring gaze, the air in Kylie’s lungs shuddered. “I scared the life out of me, too. I ... just vanished. I could see and hear you, but you didn’t know I was there. I ... I went poof.” *Just like my grandfather and aunt had.*

Holiday touched Kylie’s forearm to offer calm. “Okay, we need to talk about it, figure it out, but first let’s deal with your parents and get them on their way.”

Kylie’s chest tightened with the realization that as much as Holiday tried, she wouldn’t be able to help Kylie figure this out. She needed her grandfather and aunt. *A chameleon alone will not survive. Come with us. You need to learn who and what you are.*

Realizing Holiday was studying her, Kylie blurted out, “I said terrible things. I don’t like John.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, right now, neither do I.” Holiday pressed a palm to each of Kylie’s shoulders. “Just go talk to them. I think they’re all in agreement that they’re the ones in the wrong. Your dad’s in my office and your mom and John are in the conference room. Can you do this?”

Kylie nodded.

As she walked away, Holiday pulled her back for another hug. “It’s going to be fine, okay? There’s nothing we can’t figure out.”

If only that were true.

* * *

Kylie stepped into Holiday’s office. Her dad, sitting on the sofa, rose and met her face-to-face. And his face showed his emotions. Remorse. Sadness. A lot of sadness.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I behaved like an idiot. It won’t happen again, I promise you.”

Kylie nodded. “Everything just got out of hand.”

He nodded. “But it wasn’t all in vain. It forced me to face the truth. I needed that.”

Did his voice just shake, or was she imagining it? “What truth?”

“I’m giving your mom her divorce. She wants it; she’s got it.”

Defeat filled her stepdad’s eyes. Defeat, like she could never recall seeing before. One word came to her mind. *Broken*. He was a broken man. Seeing it hurt so damn much!

“Dad, I think Mom’s just—”

“No.” He held up his hands. “I didn’t mean ... I’m not blaming your mom. I accept I messed up. I don’t even understand how I could do it, when I loved her so damn much from the first time I saw her in high school.” Tears filled his eyes as he pressed his palm to Kylie’s cheek. “Don’t ever fall in love, princess. It hurts too damn much.”

His words echoed in her head as she recalled the pain she’d felt when she turned for Lucas and he wasn’t there. She wondered if her stepdad wasn’t too

late in offering that piece of advice. But she pushed her own emotions aside to deal with his. He needed her.

He took another deep breath. "Losing her kills me, but I deserve it, and I'll learn to live with it, but what I can't live with is ... losing you. From the day the doctor dropped you into my arms, I loved you."

Tears filled Kylie's eyes. "You aren't going to lose me."

"Good, because I'm your father and I don't want you to ever forget that."

But he wasn't her father. The words "I won't forget" rested on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say them. She looked away. She hadn't meant that cut of her eyes to mean anything.

Yet it had. She heard his sharp intake of air. She glanced back and saw it in his eyes. He knew. He knew that she knew.

"Your mom told you," he said.

Hurt filled his eyes and the same feeling swelled in Kylie's chest. "No." *My real father came to see me from the grave.* She had to come up with a lie and quick. "I found your original marriage certificate and learned she was already pregnant, and everything else fell into place."

"I couldn't have loved you more if you were mine. I never wanted you to think I didn't love you because of it."

"I know," she said. "And the fact that you loved me when I wasn't yours meant something." She spoke the words to soothe him, because his pain filled the room, but then she realized how true they were. He'd loved her when he didn't have to.

He'd done all the daddy/daughter things with her: sold Girl Scout cookies, helped her build a matchbox car to enter the school race, and gone on all the father/daughter trips. Then there were the hugs, when her mom wasn't good at giving them. She leaned into him, needing a hug now, and thinking he could use one, too.

She savored his embrace. He'd always been good at this. She heard his breath shake, and she cried into his shoulder like she had so many times as a child. That's when she realized she'd forgiven him. He wasn't a bad man; he'd just made some bad mistakes.

He was, after all, just human.

* * *

After her dad left, Kylie pulled herself together, and walked into the conference room to face her mom and John. Like it or not, she had some apologizing to do, so the sooner she got it over with, the better.

Kylie's mom shot up from her chair. John followed. "I'm sorry," Kylie said. "I—"

"We're sorry, too. Aren't we, John?" her mom blurted out.

"Yes, I spoke too freely." The apology came from John's lips but didn't appear in his eyes. "It was a mistake that will not repeat itself."

"You're just human," Kylie said, but she didn't say it with all that much confidence. And she studied his face to see if he reacted to the remark. He didn't. She still had to stop herself from checking his brain pattern again.

The scary thought was that if he wasn't human, he was a chameleon. She recalled Red, who'd given his life to save her, telling her that he was the same thing that she was, only not born at midnight. So ... Mario must be a chameleon, too. And if John was a chameleon, could he be in cahoots with Mario?

She was overreacting, she told herself. Her feelings probably stemmed from the fact that he was the reason her stepdad didn't stand a chance of getting back with her mom. However, she decided to ask Burnett to do a background check on dear ol' John.

Kylie's mom moved closer. "John, can you give Kylie and me some time alone?"

Here comes the scolding. Kylie bit her tongue and told herself she should be happy her mom decided to spare her the embarrassment of scolding her in front of her man toy.

However, the man toy looked unhappy when he turned for the door. Kylie bit her tongue harder. But damn, this guy brought out the worst in her.

The moment John walked out, Kylie blurted out, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things." And she was sorry, not because she'd said them to John, but because she'd probably hurt her mom. That had never been her intention.

“No, Holiday was right. Showing up here with him wasn’t the best idea. I just...” She blushed. “He makes me happy, Kylie. I can’t even explain it, but it’s almost the feeling I got with your real dad.”

Kylie recalled something her grandfather said, that the humans who were blessed found themselves attracted to supernaturals. Her suspicions rose about John.

“I wanted you to get to know him, because ... because he’s important to me. And—”

Dear Lord, this was hard to hear. Before she knew what she planned to say, she’d started talking. “Dad’s sorry about all this, too, Mom. If you brought John here to make Dad jealous, it worked. I know Dad hurt you, but if you still love him ... he loves you.”

Her mom closed her eyes as if searching for the right words. When she looked up, raw emotion shined in her eyes. “I did want your dad to see me and John, but I can’t ... Your dad and I won’t be getting back together.” She took Kylie’s hand. “I’m sorry, baby. I can’t...”

Kylie squeezed her mom’s palm. “I understand.”

Her mom sighed. “Do you?”

Kylie nodded. It still hurt like the devil, but she understood.

Her mom sighed as if she was about to say something difficult. “Please try to see the good in John. He’s not the reason your dad and I broke up.”

“I know.” That was all Kylie managed to say. She wasn’t sure she could ever see any good in John.

Her mom bit her lip and made a funny face. “Now, about the question you asked. If John and I were ... If we...”

“Are having sex?” Kylie finished for her, because God knew her mom would be here all day trying to say it.

Her mom blushed. “I’m an adult and I’m capable of making that kind of decision. You’re young and...” Her eyes widened. “You aren’t ... you haven’t...?”

“No, Mom. I haven’t,” Kylie said. “But I will someday, and I don’t want you to have an aneurism when you find out.”

Her mom looked horrified. “I won’t. As long as you’re thirty.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. "Mom."

"Okay, twenty-nine." She paused. "You know, it hurts to see you grow up."

"I know; it hurts to see you grow up, too."

Her mom's brow wrinkled with confusion. "What?"

"I could say it hurt to know you're having sex, but I thought you'd prefer the euphemism."

Her mom chuckled at the same time a cold entered the room, a familiar cold. Daniel? A quick glance around the room told her he couldn't manifest. But she knew he'd tried.

Her mom smiled. Then she reached over and hugged her. "I swear, sometimes when I'm with you, I can almost feel your father here."

"Me too," Kylie said, and wondered how much her mom could really feel.

The chill in the room grew colder, but oddly it came with a hint of anger and frustration. Had her dad overheard the conversation and was making his opinion known about the whole sex-with-John issue?

I know, Dad, Kylie spoke in her head. I don't like him, either.

* * *

Even before her mom and John pulled out of the parking lot, Holiday and Burnett had Kylie by her elbows. "Let's talk," Holiday said.

Kylie gazed back at the dining hall. "Shouldn't ya'll be in there?"

"First things first," Holiday said as Burnett led them to the office.

"How the hell did you disappear like that?" Leave it to Burnett to cut to the chase.

"I don't know." Kylie walked into the office. "I wished I could vanish like a ghost when I saw my mom and John kissing, and then ... I did."

"You wished yourself invisible?" Holiday asked.

"I guess," Kylie said.

"Then how did you come back?" Burnett closed the door.

"I un-wished it." Knowing how crazy it sounded, she glanced at Holiday and dropped down on Holiday's sofa. "Sort of like how you tried to teach me to shut off a ghost."

“Visualization.” Holiday arched her brows as if impressed.

Not that Kylie shared her viewpoint. “It was scarier than hell. I remembered what my dad said about us working things out together and I thought I was dead.” She paused. “How am I going to stop it from happening again?”

Holiday looked at Burnett as if expecting some wisdom from him.

“What?” He held up his arms in defeat. “I ain’t got shit. I’m just now learning to deal with ghosts.”

Holiday rolled her eyes. “You read the reports at the FRU. Did it say anything, or lead you to assume anything, about a chameleon’s gifts?”

“No. The only thing it stated was some of the case studies considered themselves chameleons.” He frowned. “There could have been more in the other reports, but they conveniently disappeared.”

Right then, Kylie couldn’t help but remember her grandfather’s warning about the FRU.

“We need to read the other files,” Holiday said. Her eyes stayed on Burnett. “How can we do that?”

Kylie closed her eyes. She didn’t know what they were going to do, but she knew what she was doing. First, she was going to find a way to get back in touch with her grandfather, and then ...

A wash of pain spilled over her. Could her grandfather be right? Did she have to leave Shadow Falls and go with him in order to get the information she needed?

* * *

After a few minutes of both Burnett and Holiday trying to come up with a solution, they finally concluded that Kylie should be careful about what she wished for.

Right! As if she hadn’t come up with that one by herself.

Burnett’s phone rang. He answered the call. “Yeah,” he said. “How long has she been missing?” Both Holiday and Kylie tried to pretend they weren’t listening, but how could they not when the call was obviously about Cindy, the waitress at the diner, the once-smiling young woman in her driver’s

license who was now in the grave with Holiday's sister?

"Okay," Burnett said. "Get me the file. Did you get anything back on the other matter?" Burnett's eyes shifted to Kylie, telling her that the "other matter" involved her, as well.

Burnett listened and suddenly that's when it hit Kylie. She couldn't hear the conversation on the line. What happen to her ... "Hey," Kylie screeched at Holiday. "Am I still vampire?"

Holiday tightened her brows. Shock filled her eyes. "No."

"What am I now?" Kylie asked.

"Welcome to my world," Holiday said.

"I'm fae?" Oh, great. More "Kylie's a freak" moments from the other campers were predicted to arrive soon. As if the parental chaos wasn't enough to get them talking about her.

Her aunt's words echoed in her mind. *The few who did not hide were viewed as outcasts, freaks, and not belonging to any one kind.*

Holiday nodded and smiled a smile that came with a lot of empathy. And Kylie not only saw it, but felt it.

Burnett must have heard the conversation, because as soon as he pulled the phone from his ear, he stared at her forehead and said, "Damn."

"What did you learn?" Holiday asked, as if sensing Kylie didn't want to discuss her ever-evolving brain pattern.

"Cindy Shaffer disappeared about six months ago."

"So after Hannah disappeared," Holiday said.

"Do we know for sure that Hannah didn't just leave for a while and then..." He paused and sympathy flowed out of him in waves.

"And then was killed," Holiday said, and the words no more left her lips than the grief floated off her and filled Kylie's chest. Kylie had always been empathetic to others, but this was so much more intense.

Not a cakewalk, Kylie thought. Being fae would take some getting used to, but at least she could go back to eating food again. Then she thought about Derek and how he'd said her emotions had felt supersized. That must have been so hard on him.

Burnett moved in. "The police are investigating her disappearance. They

have a suspect—old boyfriend—but they couldn't prove anything. I'll go over their files, but considering what we know, I don't think this is tied to her personally."

"What else did you learn?" Kylie asked, remembering Burnett's glance at her during the call.

"I had another check done on Hayden Yates."

"And?" Kylie asked, but even before he spoke she felt his discontent at having to tell her.

"He's clean. There's nothing in his background that points to him being anything other than what he says he is."

Kylie exhaled, not sure she believed it. She'd been so sure there was something hinky about him. Then she remembered ... "Can you check out my mom's boyfriend?"

"You think *he's* behind Hannah's murder?" Burnett asked, confused.

"No, nothing to do with Hannah. I just ... don't like him."

"I don't, either," Burnett clipped, "but that doesn't mean he's a criminal. There's a lot of people out there that I don't like."

Kylie frowned. "He gives me the creeps and I'd feel better if—"

"I'll do it," Burnett said, but she felt his emotions and knew he believed it was a waste of time.

"There's something else I want to talk about," Kylie said.

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like this?" Burnett asked.

Kylie glanced at Holiday, who looked equally concerned. "I think it's time to call a halt to the whole shadow thing," Kylie said.

"No!" Burnett's expression grew grim.

Kylie sat up straighter and felt her backbone stiffen. "I'm tired of never being alone."

"You're alone in your room when you go to your cabin," he countered.

"Della's listening to every move I make. I can't do it anymore. I want my life back. Mario hasn't tried anything else for weeks now. Miranda said she doesn't feel any unwelcomed presence. I don't feel his presence. Maybe he's given up."

"People like him don't give up. He's waiting for the opportunity to

strike.”

“I promise to be careful, and if I feel anything, you’ll be the first person I tell.”

“No!” he said again.

Kylie felt an odd kind of energy building in her gut. Everything inside her said she was right, that they couldn’t force this on her. She didn’t understand the ball of vigor, or her lack of fear at standing up to them right now. If she wasn’t so mad at his out-and-out refusal, she might have been more afraid that something else weird was happening to her.

“I’m not a prisoner here,” she said. “I have a say in this.”

“A say in if you get yourself killed or not?” he asked in anger.

“I’m not going to get killed.” She tilted her chin back and looked at Holiday, hoping she’d see reason in the camp leader’s eyes.

“This is because you want to see your grandfather again, isn’t it?” Holiday asked, and while she saw Holiday’s disapproval, Kylie also felt Holiday’s compassion.

“Partly.” Kylie didn’t even consider lying. There was just a sense of rightness to her request. “But that’s not all it’s about. I’m tired of being babysat.”

Burnett went to speak again, but Holiday intervened. “Would you promise to stay out of the woods?”

“She’s already broken that promise,” Burnett said.

“I promise.” Kylie ignored Burnett.

Holiday leaned forward. “Will you promise to confirm with us when you meet your grandfather?”

“Will you promise not to stop me?” Kylie asked.

“I promise we will assess the situation and only stop you if we feel your life’s in jeopardy.”

“By whose judgment?” Kylie asked. “Some people’s idea of safety is not reasonable.” She didn’t even flinch when she looked at Burnett—who, by the way, looked even more furious. And she felt every bit of his anger.

“This is insane. My job is to protect you,” Burnett snarled.

“No,” Holiday corrected him. “Our job as school administrators is to

teach Kylie how to survive in the human world. Like it or not”—she glanced at Kylie—“she has the right to leave. And that is the last thing we want to happen right now.”

Somehow, Kylie knew that the ball of energy in her gut had been about projecting how serious she was on this issue. Was that a fae talent, or was that from her chameleon abilities? Kylie didn’t know. But it was pretty damn cool, even if it scared her.

“Do I have a choice in the matter?” Burnett bit out.

“No,” both Kylie and Holiday said at the same time.

Burnett’s phone beeped in an odd kind of way. He grabbed his device and pushed a few buttons. “Someone just jumped the front gate.” He turned to leave, but stopped when a figure flashed in the doorway.

Blake, Holiday’s ex-fiancé and the suspected murderer, stood there. “I heard you were looking for me.”

Kylie jumped to her feet and stood beside Burnett, ready to defend Holiday.

But Holiday acted as though she didn’t need protecting. She jumped up and met Blake’s glare. “Did you do it?” she asked, fury pouring out of her.

“Did I do what?” he asked.

“Did you kill Hannah?”

Chapter Thirty-one

“What?” His gaze cut to Burnett and Kylie and then back to Holiday. Disbelief filled his eyes and rolled off of him in waves. “Hannah’s dead?”

Kylie tried to listen to his heartbeat, but not being vampire anymore, all she could do was read his emotions. They came off sincere, but could she trust that?

“Answer me, damn it!” Holiday slammed her palms down on his chest. Her emotions were a whole bag of raw pain, betrayal at its worst.

Burnett moved to Holiday’s side and gently pulled her back, but his eyes were bright green and on Blake with warning.

Blake exhaled, his frustration sounding in the released air. “You are so biting on the wrong vampire! This is meritless.”

“Not so meritless,” Holiday said. “She told me you were furious with her when she told you that she planned on telling me the truth.”

“Of course I was furious. We were getting married. I loved you. She told me if I showed up at my own wedding, she’d stop the ceremony.”

“Did you kill her?” Holiday demanded, her anguish filling the air Kylie breathed.

Blake stared at Holiday, hurt radiating from him. “Of all the people in the world, you know me better than that. Do you really think I could murder Hannah?”

“What I think doesn’t mean shit,” Holiday seethed. “I didn’t think you’d sleep with my sister, but you did.”

“We were drunk and ... I’d just started dating you. It was a damn mistake. And then the next thing I know, I’m in love with you. I’m still in love with

you. And yes, I wanted to tell you then, but I was scared. At first, Hannah acted as if it never happened, so I convinced myself—”

“That you could get away with it?” Tears pooled in Holiday’s eyes.

“No, I convinced myself that one mistake wasn’t enough to stop two people who loved each other from finding happiness.”

“That’s enough.” Burnett walked over and grabbed Blake by the arm. “You’re coming with me.”

Blake pulled away and the two men stared each other right in the eyes.

“Not yet.” Holiday looked at Burnett. “I want to talk to him.”

“You did,” Burnett countered.

“Alone. I want to talk to him alone,” she said.

Burnett’s body turned into one knotted muscle. Jealousy oozed from his pores. “He’s a suspected serial killer, Holiday, who illegally entered Shadow Falls. I need to get him to the FRU office.”

“Serial killer?” Blake’s eyes turned defensive. “I didn’t harm Hannah or anyone else.”

“That’s what they all say,” Burnett clipped, and reached for Blake again. The man moved back, his eyes growing hot.

“What’s wrong?” Blake baited Burnett. “Worried she might still feel something for me?”

Holiday moved in and rested her hand on Burnett’s arm and spoke with honesty. “Burnett has no reason to worry. I want the truth from you, Blake, that’s all. And then I want you to climb right back under whatever rock you’ve been hiding under.” She motioned with a firm hand for Burnett and Kylie to leave.

Burnett’s body language and emotions said what he thought of that idea. But something told Kylie that Holiday needed this time alone with Blake, and Burnett needed to give it to her.

Kylie touched Burnett’s arm, felt the warmth flow from her touch, and saw his expression soften. He looked back at Holiday right before he walked out. Kylie looked at Blake. And right then, her gut told her that he wasn’t Hannah’s killer.

But if it wasn’t him, who was it? Then Kylie again remembered Hannah

saying the killer was here. Here at Shadow Falls. Kylie couldn't help but think again of Hayden Yates. It didn't even matter that Burnett's check had come back clean; she didn't trust that guy. And by God, she wasn't going to lower her guard where he was concerned, either.

* * *

Burnett didn't move more than a foot away from the door. Kylie figured he was listening to every word spoken in the other room. For Holiday's safety, of course, so it wasn't really an evasion of privacy. At least that's what Kylie wanted to believe.

She couldn't hear the conversation, and as slightly uncomfortable as it made her listening in on private conversations, her own need to protect Holiday had her wishing she could.

"Was Blake telling the truth?" Kylie asked, wondering if the emotions she'd read from Blake were as telling as his heartbeat.

Burnett glanced over at her. "About what?"

"About not killing Hannah?"

"It doesn't matter," he said gruffly, and looked back at the door.

"Doesn't it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "The heart can lie. People, evil people with no conscience, have no problem lying."

Kylie remembered Della telling her that in the beginning. But as much as Kylie wanted to believe Blake was their man, what she'd felt from him wasn't evil. "For what it's worth, his emotions felt real."

"You mean when he said he still loved her?" Burnett's jealousy practically bounded out of him and bounced off the walls.

Kylie swallowed. "I meant his shock about Hannah being dead, but ... that, too."

Burnett closed his eyes and pressed a hand against the door.

"But just as real were Holiday's sentiments when she said *all* she wanted from him was the truth. She doesn't love him, Burnett."

He looked back at Kylie, sadness radiating from his eyes. "She used to."

"Is that important?"

“It is when that’s what stopping her from letting anyone else get close,” he said. There was a pause, and then as if to change the subject, he said, “I don’t agree with Holiday’s decision on removing your shadows.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “But tell me this—how would you take having someone shadow you all the time?”

She heard him swallow and felt his emotional answer. He wouldn’t have accepted being shadowed for a single day.

All of a sudden, the room turned cold. Ghost-visiting cold. Then Hannah appeared beside Burnett; her presence came with a thick swarm of panic. “*He’s here! He’s here! You’ve gotta stop him! He’s going to try to kill her,*” she screamed at Burnett.

“Who’s here?” Kylie asked.

Burnett didn’t wait for an answer. He bolted through Holiday’s door, without bothering to open it. Ripped off the hinges, the door landed with a loud thud on the floor. He walked across the splintered wood and faced Blake.

Door removed, Kylie watched the scene from the outer room.

Blake, already on his feet, stared at Burnett with fury.

Holiday, still sitting at her desk, wore an expression of shock. She shot up from her desk chair, showing how slow fae reaction time was to that of a vampire.

Burnett, both his hands fisted at his sides, spoke to Blake. “Either you come the easy way, or the hard way.” His threat rang with honesty. “I don’t care which.”

Kylie’s gaze shifted to the spirit. Hannah stood frozen, gaping at the scene playing out. An ugly brown aura surrounded her. While deceased, there was plenty of emotion lingering beneath the icy chill of death. Kylie picked up one emotion loud and clear. Shame—big, heaping mounds of shame. Then she felt the spirit’s surprise. Oddly, Hannah’s initial panic and fear had faded.

Something didn’t feel right. It was almost as if Hannah hadn’t known Blake was here, and if she hadn’t known Blake was here, how could *he* be the one causing her panic? “Did Blake do this?” Kylie asked Hannah in a hurried breath. No answer. “Hannah?” Kylie said her name again. Then the ghost

faded.

“What’s going on?” Holiday asked Burnett again, and Kylie’s gaze locked on the three people in the room.

Blake looked back at Holiday. “I didn’t do this. I probably don’t deserve another chance with you, but I don’t deserve this.” He turned to Burnett. “I’ll go with you, I’ll answer your questions, but if you lay a hand on me, I’ll kill you.”

And from the man’s emotions clouding the air, his threat rang with as much sincerity as Burnett’s.

* * *

It had been a lazy Sunday afternoon with a lot of frustration floating in the air. Miranda was frustrated because there was a new shape-shifter ogling Perry. Holiday was frustrated because ... well, as if losing her sister the first time hadn’t been bad enough, now her spirit hadn’t shown back up. Burnett was frustrated because he couldn’t find one thread of evidence against Blake. Therefore he couldn’t hold him.

Kylie was frustrated over the whole disaster that was her life.

The only one not in a pissy mood was Della, and Kylie, even being an emotion-reading fae, wasn’t sure what mood Della was in, but it felt wrong. The girl was following Kylie around like a lost puppy.

Even now, pulling up her e-mail, Kylie felt Della standing over her shoulder. Kylie turned around and frowned. “What?”

“What, what?” Della asked.

“You’re reading over my shoulder. You’re not even my shadow now.”

“I’m not shadowing you. And I didn’t know your e-mail was so private,” Della said.

Right then, Kylie got a huge sense of anxiety, coupled with a sense of sadness, and then anger from the vamp. Della’s emotions were dancing all over the place.

“What’s up with you?” Kylie asked.

“Not a damn thing.” Della dropped into a kitchen chair.

Kylie shifted her gaze back to her e-mail and clicked to check mail. No

new e-mails. Nothing from ...

“You’re hoping to get something from your grandfather, aren’t you?” Della asked.

Kylie looked back again. “Maybe. Why?”

Della frowned. “You’re going to go live with him, aren’t you? You’re gonna leave Shadow Falls.”

The question cut like a knife in Kylie’s chest. How could she explain to Della that leaving was the last thing she wanted to do? Yet, there was a part of her that said it might be the only way she could learn about who and what she was.

And after seeing the shock on everyone’s faces at the camp when her new fae pattern emerged, there was a part of Kylie that longed to be with people who didn’t judge her. And the sooner she learned to control this changing-pattern game and the powers that came with it, the sooner she could come back to Shadow Falls and really fit in.

“That’s what this is about?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah, that’s what it’s about. And don’t think I didn’t notice you didn’t deny it, either.”

Kylie chose her words carefully. “I don’t have plans to do that.” That was the truth. She was still praying that it wouldn’t prove the only way.

“But your fae ass has thought about it, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah, my fae ass has thought about it, but—”

“But nothing! I’m not letting you go, Kylie.” Tears filled the vamp’s eyes. “I lost Lee, I lost my parents and my sister and all my friends back home. You and Miranda are all I have, and Miss Witch is so obsessed with a certain shape-shifter right now, I hardly even have time to argue with her anymore.”

Della stood up and swiped at her cheeks. “I’m freaking tired of losing people I care about.”

Kylie stood up. “You’re not losing me.” Her own eyes stung. Even if she had to go away, she’d be back. She belonged here. Surely Della realized that.

Della huffed. “I’m leaving next weekend to go ... to go do what I gotta do for Burnett. And all I can think about is that you won’t be here when I get back.”

“I’ll...” Kylie finally heard what Della said. “Where are you going?”

Della frowned. “I can’t tell you.”

“Shit.” Kylie shook her head, recalling the anxiety she’d read from Della. Was Della scared? Of course she was scared, Kylie realized, but Della would never admit it. Kylie went and hugged the vamp. Della didn’t like it, but she didn’t fight it too hard. “Whatever you’re doing for Burnett, it damn well better not be too dangerous.”

“Group hug! Group hug!” Miranda said, bolting through the door.

“No.” Della lurched back. “That one was just for Kylie,” she said, trying to sound badass, but Kylie read her embarrassment loud and clear. “Go hug Perry.” Della stormed into her bedroom and slammed the door.

“What crawled up her butt and put her in such a sunny disposition?” Miranda asked.

Kylie rolled her eyes. Then the computer dinged with a new e-mail, and she scurried over to see who it was from. Her mom.

The thought crossed Kylie’s mind like sandpaper. If she did have to leave Shadow Falls, what in the hell would she tell her parents?

Kylie glanced back at Miranda. “Maybe you should go pick a fight with Della so she’ll know you still care.”

* * *

Dinner that night was supposed to be a celebration to kick off the new school year. Books and class schedules were passed out. Kylie and Della had all the same classes. Miranda was in two of Kylie’s five classes. Kylie couldn’t help but wonder if this wasn’t Burnett’s idea of shadowing her without calling it shadowing.

Not that she was going to let that thought ruin her night. Sitting at a table with Della, Miranda, Perry, Jonathon, and Helen, Kylie downed her second piece of pizza. It was good to enjoy food again. Not that her improved mood had anything to do with the thin-crust pepperoni. It wasn’t even the party atmosphere, or the party itself; it was what was happening after the party.

She eyed the clock—only two hours to go.

Right then Steve came over to their table and dropped down in an empty

chair beside Della. Kylie almost grinned when Della literally blushed.

“What’s up?” Steve asked.

“Hi, Steve,” Kylie said, wanting him to feel welcome. Before coming to the dinner, Della had confessed that Steve was also supposed to go with her on the mission for the FRU. Della, of course, was pissed. Ahh, but she hadn’t been able to hide the excitement in her stream of emotions.

Jonathon and Steve started chatting about some classes. Della seemed to relax and so did Kylie. Miranda nudged Kylie with her elbow and leaned in. “I think he likes her,” she whispered in a very low voice. But Della, not missing a word with her sensitive hearing, shot Miranda a scowl.

“Here’s to a great year.” Someone made a toast across the room. Everyone seemed to be in a festive mood, and for the time being, everyone had stopped staring at Kylie’s pattern. Probably another reason Kylie was in a better mood.

But no sooner did she appreciate not being stared at than the hairs on the back of her neck started doing a two-step. When she swerved around, Hayden Yates turned his head. Her heart gripped when she saw Holiday standing next to him in the crowd. Not talking with him, but talking to the shy teacher Collin Warren.

Kylie still didn’t like Hayden being that close to Holiday. She zeroed her gaze on him and when he glanced back, obviously feeling his neck hair dancing, their gazes met. *I swear if you hurt her, you’ll pay for it.*

He looked away; Kylie kept her gaze locked on him for several moments, and she hoped like hell he understood her message, because it wasn’t a threat. It was a promise.

Just thinking about the possibility of anyone hurting Holiday made Kylie’s blood thicken and start to fizz—a sure sign that while her pattern might have changed, she was still a protector.

Someday she hoped to be able to say that with a total sense of pride, but right now it seemed to be just one more thing making her different from everyone else.

Kylie had no sooner turned back when she felt another pair of eyes on her, only a different kind of feeling tiptoed up her spine. Even from fifty feet

away, Lucas's gaze felt like a caress. He winked. He glanced at the clock and she knew that like her he was counting down the time until they met.

"Damn!" Jonathon yelled, pulling Kylie's gaze from Lucas. "You cut yourself." Jonathon was holding Helen's hand; blood oozed from his grip.

Helen, looking a bit squeamish, had a bloody apple in her other hand and a bloody knife sitting in her lap. "It's okay." Her words lacked confidence. "It's not bad. Is it?"

Jonathon released his hold on her hand to look at it. His eyes grew bright, no doubt because of the blood, but even more apparent was his concern for Helen. "You need stitches," he said.

Helen looked up at Kylie. "Can you just fix it?"

Kylie's breath caught. It had been a while since she'd thought about her healing powers. And the few times she'd thought about them, she remembered those powers had failed Ellie. Kylie had failed Ellie.

"I ... don't know if I can." She looked into Helen's eyes, saw her pain, but a lump of fear formed in Kylie's stomach right alongside the two slices of pizza. "I couldn't dreamscape when I was vampire; I probably can't heal as a fae."

"But faes are known for their healing," Helen reminded her.

"Oh, yeah." Kylie let go of a breath that shuddered on its escape from her lips. "What if I mess up?" She could still recall how devastated she'd been when she hadn't been able to bring Ellie back from the dead. Looking at her hands, she remembered how her palms had been coated with the girl's blood.

"You won't," Helen said with complete confidence.

Looking up, Kylie remembered how Helen had helped her by checking out her brain to see if she had a tumor the first week she'd been at camp. Helen had helped Kylie, and she couldn't say no.

She stood and moved over to the chair next to Helen. The shy and trusting girl held out her bleeding palm. Breathing in, Kylie recalled that she had to think healing thoughts. Amazingly, her hands suddenly felt hot. She gently ran her fingertip over the wound. Her touch created a tiny wake around the pooled blood on Helen's palm.

Fearing failure, Kylie put her whole palm over the wound. Hesitating to

check to see if she'd done it, she suddenly realized that the entire lunch room had gone silent. Not a sound echoed in the large room.

Cutting her eyes up briefly, she realized everyone stared. Everyone! *Freaking great!*

Helen lifted her hand away and brought it in front of her face. Wiping the blood away with her other hand, a shy smile lifted her lips.

"You did it," Helen whispered, sounding as self-conscious as Kylie at all the unwanted attention.

Kylie leaned in. "Why is everyone staring?"

Helen made a funny face and came closer. "Because you're glowing."

"Glowing?" Kylie asked.

Helen nodded.

Kylie noticed that light did seem to emanate from her skin. "Shit!"

"No shit!" said Della. "You look like a firefly. This is so freaking cool!"

More like *not* cool! Kylie thought.

Holiday walked over, eyes rounded, and bafflement coming off her in waves.

Kylie stared up at her, mortified. "Make it stop. Please. Pleeeasse."

Chapter Thirty-two

“Where are you going?” Della asked when Kylie stepped out of her bedroom an hour later with her hair and teeth brushed, and—thank God—no longer glowing.

She almost told Della she didn’t have to report to her anymore, but decided she’d probably ask Della the same thing if she were leaving the cabin.

“I’m going to meet Lucas,” Kylie said.

Della tilted her head to listen to her heartbeat.

“I’m not lying,” Kylie said.

“I know. I heard,” Della said. “Have fun. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Gosh,” Kylie teased, trying not to be grumpy. “That leaves my options wide open.”

Della grinned. “But if you come home glowing, I’ll know what you did.”

“Not funny,” Kylie said, and meant it. Then she took off.

Thankfully, she’d stopped glowing about ten minutes after she’d healed Helen. Out of sheer desperation, she’d asked Holiday, “Why did that happen? It never happened before when I healed someone.”

Holiday’s shrug and “I don’t know” didn’t surprise Kylie. But it was just one more thing that had Kylie taking her grandfather’s warning more seriously. What if these crazy things continued? Right now, it was just the supernaturals who considered her a freak of nature. What would happen if she did something like this in front of regular humans?

Running down the path, hoping the feel of the wind in her hair would take

the edge off her mood, she made it to the office in no time. The sound of a few people still lingering in the dining hall filled the night. Before anyone saw her, she cut around to the back of the office. The second she saw Lucas waiting for her by the tree, her frustration vanished.

She ran toward him and he snagged her up and pulled her to him. His arms wrapped around her waist. His thumbs slipped under the hem of her tank top to touch her bare skin. The kiss was sweet and warm. When he pulled back and smiled, she knew what he was thinking.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, feeling another “glowing” joke coming on.

“I’m just jealous.”

“Jealous?” she asked, thinking she’d been wrong. “Of what?”

“I want to be the only thing that makes you glow.”

She thumped her hand on his wide chest. “I’m telling you just like I told Della and Miranda. It’s not funny.”

“You looked beautiful.” Honesty flowed from his comment. “Like an angel.”

She frowned. “I don’t want to be an angel. I want to be a regular supernatural.”

“Okay, I won’t talk about it anymore. I’ll just kiss you instead.”

And what a kiss it was. Hotter, sweeter, and more mind-numbing than ever. When he pulled back, she heard his pulse humming, a natural seduction mechanism for weres, and she wasn’t above being seduced by it. She was lost in the sound.

“It must be close to the full moon again.” She smiled up at the heat in his eyes, knowing her eyes held the same.

“Yeah.” He inhaled as if trying to get oxygen into his brain. “You are driving me crazy. Sometimes, I just want...” He took a step back. “Let’s try talking for a while.”

She grinned. “I kind of like driving you crazy.”

“That’s mean.” He pointed a finger in her face, but his tone rang humorous.

Not really mean, Kylie thought. It wasn’t as if she’d planned anything to happen tonight. But if it did ... Right then, she recalled Holiday’s words of

wisdom about boys, or rather sex. *When you do make that decision, it's a decision you make rationally and not one you just let happen. You understand the difference?*

Kylie did understand the difference. Problem was, it was easier to let it happen than to plan it. Planning it meant talking about it. And that would be embarrassing.

She inhaled sharply with a sudden realization. If she couldn't talk about it, she shouldn't do it—because unless she wanted to go through what Sara did with her pregnancy scare, it was essential that they talk about it.

“What is it?” Lucas asked.

She opened her mouth to answer—to talk about it—but closed her lips just as quickly. They could talk about it later. Later, but, for certain, before anything happened.

“Nothing.” Her voice sounded like a frog ready to croak.

He studied her face. “You're almost glowing again.”

“Crap!” She held out her arms and studied them in a panic.

He chuckled. “No, you're just blushing. Where did you slip off to in your head?” He tapped a finger to her temple and with her fae gifts, she felt the passion ooze from him.

“Nowhere,” she lied. “Let's just ... talk.” *But not about sex.* Because obviously, she wasn't ready to have that conversation.

He studied her as if he didn't believe her, then reached for her hand and laced his fingers into hers. His palm felt warm, but not nearly as warm as it had when she'd been a vampire.

“Okay. Let's talk.” They sat down on the soft ground, under the alcove of the tree. “Why don't you tell me how you got out of being shadowed? It doesn't sound like Burnett just to ease up on something like that.”

“He didn't want to. But I...” She recalled the strange feeling she'd gotten when she'd stood up to Burnett and Holiday. As if the power of persuasion was ... a real power. Then again, maybe it was. “I persuaded him.”

“How? He's not easy to persuade.”

“I ... sort of threatened I might leave.”

“Leave?” Concern filled his blue eyes. “You were just bullshitting him,

right?”

Mostly, but I'm beginning to worry. She almost told him that, but decided she didn't want to get into that particular conversation with Lucas, not when they had so little time together, so she just nodded. “I agreed not to go into the woods, and to tell them before I went to see my grandfather again.”

“What?” His super-charged werewolf protectiveness spilled out of him. “Burnett's going to let you go see your grandfather again? Alone?”

She nodded. “As long as it doesn't appear too dangerous.”

“How are you going to know if it's dangerous?” He shook his head, his dark hair scattered across his brow. “Don't go until I come back.” He cupped her chin in his hand. “Promise me.”

“Come back from where?” she asked.

His frown tightened. “My dad again. This time I'm going to have to spend some time there. A week or more.”

She tried to wrap her head around what he said. “But school starts tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Sarcasm flowed from him. “But my dad doesn't see getting an education as being important.”

“Can't you just tell him no? That you'll come to see him during parent weekend?”

“I wish,” he said.

“But why for so long?” Suddenly she couldn't help but wonder if Fredericka planned on going with him.

He touched her cheek. “He's being insistent, Kylie. He gets something in his head and he won't let it go. I'm sorry.”

The sincerity in his apology filled her chest. Sincerity and ... guilt. For what?

He brushed her hair behind her ear. “You know I have to do this to get on the Council. I wouldn't do any of this if it wasn't for that. And ... when it's over, it's over.”

“What's over? What does he want you to do?”

“He just ... He's crazy and I have to go along with him for now. Please ... just understand for a little longer. In less than a month, the Council will make

their choice. A month is all I need and then I don't have to go along with his plans."

"What plans?" She felt a touch of resentment swell inside her. "I hate your secrets."

"I know," he said. "I hate them, too. But you have to trust me on this."

For some crazy reason, when he said *trust*, she sensed he meant something ... more. More as in ... "Is Fredericka going?"

"No," he said. "Just me."

"Not even Clara?" she asked, still confused about the emotions she read in him.

"No. She might come for a while but not stay." He pulled her against him and they just sat there for the longest time not talking. Her heart hurt for him because she sensed how much he really didn't want to go, didn't want to do whatever it was his father had planned. But he was going and was probably doing it—whatever it was. And he felt guilty about doing it, too. Why?

"Will you call me?" she finally asked.

"I'll try, but if he's monitoring my calls, I can't be caught..."

"Talking to me," she finished for him.

He exhaled and she knew it was the truth before he answered. "I don't like it."

Neither did she. Not even a little bit.

A second passed and then he said, "You didn't promise me that you won't go see your grandfather until I get back."

"I can't promise," she said, aggravated that he wanted promises and answers from her, but still held so much back. "I'll do what I have to do." And he'd just have accept it, as she was trying to accept what he'd told her, or rather what he hadn't told her.

* * *

Monday morning, the first-day-of-school jitters at Shadow Falls didn't feel any different from all Kylie's first-day jitters. She was both excited and anxious about being forced into a room full of people who seemed to know some secret to life, a secret she didn't have.

In spite of knowing what she was, and being surrounded by other supernaturals, she still felt like the outsider—the floater, floating to one group and then another, and not really belonging anywhere.

No doubt she'd follow Della and Miranda and socialize with whoever they hung out with, and their friends wouldn't reject Kylie, but she wouldn't get that sense of belonging. Just as it had been in her old school. Only difference was that she would have been with Sara, another misfit.

While putting on her makeup, Kylie thought about Sara. They hadn't talked in weeks but Kylie would change that later. While she accepted they had changed and probably didn't have nearly as much in common as they once had, Sara was still ... Sara. And today, Kylie missed her more than ever.

The morning air had a touch of fall to it. Deciding what to wear, and how to wear her hair, had taken way more time than it should have. She hadn't thought she'd even care, since Lucas wasn't here, but the vibe had been contagious as Miranda and Della had worked to get themselves picture perfect.

Kylie hadn't dressed up for anyone. Yet when Derek looked over from the fae breakfast table, his eyes told her she looked pretty. She found herself smiling and then that smile vanished and she started missing Lucas.

After breakfast, they had Meet Your Campmate hour. Kylie drew Nikki's name, the new shape-shifter, the girl Miranda accused of having a crush on Perry. Kylie had worried that the new camper would pepper her with questions about the glowing episode, but nope. All Nikki wanted to talk about was Perry. Miranda had been right. The girl had a serious thing for Perry. Not that Kylie suspected Perry would play along. Nevertheless, before the hour ended, Kylie had nicely mentioned that Perry was already otherwise committed.

The girl had nicely ignored her, too.

The hour hadn't ended when Kylie debated what, if anything, she'd tell Miranda. Jealousy was an ugly emotion. Kylie was lucky that Fredericka hadn't gone with Lucas to his dad's place, or she'd have been battling the green-eyed emotion herself.

Kylie's first class was English with Della, Miranda, and Derek. Although

absent, Lucas was in the class as well. Ava Kane, the new teacher, had an easy teaching style, not that any of the guys noticed anything other than her body. Not a male in the room wasn't mesmerized. Even Derek. Chances were, if Lucas had been there, he'd have been just as taken.

While the boys only had eyes for the teacher, the teacher only had eyes for Kylie's forehead. Was her pattern doing something new? She actually turned to Della and asked. Della assured her that she was still just a regular boring-ass fae.

When the class ended, Miss Kane stood by the door. And when Kylie walked past, Miss Kane leaned down and whispered, "Sorry. I shouldn't have stared, I'm just fascinated by ... you."

Kylie felt her sincerity. "It's okay," Kylie offered, even though she wished it weren't. At least the woman apologized, which was more than what ninety percent of the campers would do.

History class—next in line—was difficult to sit through. As hard as Collin Warren tried to hide his jitters about teaching, they rang loud and clear. His nervousness filled the room like smoke, yet unlike Miss Kane, not once did the man look Kylie in the eyes. Frankly, she wasn't sure he looked anyone in the eyes.

Yet, because of Holiday's request that Kylie take the nervous teacher under her wing, when the class ended, Kylie hung back to offer a word of support. The students all left the room, except for her. She hoped the man would acknowledge her, but he sat at his desk, head down, shuffling his own papers.

She moved to stand in front of his desk. He still didn't look up. Okay ... this was weird. She got being shy, but this was over the top—the kind of shyness for which a person might require medicine.

"Hello," she said.

He exhaled as if unhappy, but looked up. "Can I help you?"

Emotions flowed from him—something more than just extreme shyness. Almost fear, mingled with frustration.

"I wanted to say welcome to Shadow Falls. It can be hard—"

"I ... I need practice." He glanced away. "I'll get better at it."

“I wasn’t going to criticize.” She sympathized with how he must feel, knowing he’d sucked his first day at teaching. “Practice makes perfect, my Nana used to say.”

He looked up. “Do you see her?”

“See who?” Kylie asked.

“Your Nana. Isn’t she passed? I hear you have the gift of speaking with the dead.”

The question caught Kylie off guard. “Yeah. I mean, she died about four months ago, but I haven’t spoken with her.”

“But you talk to others, right? The dead?”

Kylie nodded. “Yeah.” Unable to read him at the moment, she added, “I know it sounds pretty freaky.”

“Not at all. I’d love to be able to ask the dead questions.”

Kylie tried to digest what he’d said.

He diverted his eyes. “I mean ... with my love of history. How great would it be to talk to those who lived before us?”

“That makes sense,” Kylie said. And it did, but it was still odd. Most supernaturals would never have wanted to deal with the dead, not even for the love of history. She looked to the door. “I should go before I’m late.”

As Kylie walked away, she felt him watching her. Okay, Collin Warren was even stranger than she’d first assumed. She really hoped Holiday knew what she was doing when she hired him.

Kylie had just left that cabin and started down the path to her next class when her phone rang. Glancing at the number, a wave of nostalgia hit.

“I was going to call you, too.” Kylie sighed.

“The first day of school doesn’t feel right with you not here,” Sara said.

“I know.” Kylie bit down on her lip.

“How are things?” Sara asked. “You still got two cute boys after you?”

“I pretty much decided on one.”

“Derek,” Sara said.

“No,” Kylie corrected. “Lucas.”

“Hmm, for some reason, I thought you’d go with Derek, but Lucas is yummy.”

Why did you think that? “How are you doing?” Kylie asked, deciding she didn’t want to know Sara’s answer to the other question.

“Still cancer free,” Sara said. “As you well know.”

Kylie ignored the comment. “I’m glad.”

“When are you coming home next?” Sara asked.

“I think there’s a parent weekend in two or three weeks.” If she wasn’t still pulling stunts like glowing and vanishing, that was.

“Good, because I need a Kylie fix. Agh, there’s the bell. I gotta run. I’ll call you in a week or so.”

A week? There was a time not so long ago when not a day would go by without them talking.

Kylie pushed away the melancholy at how her life had changed. Then, pocketing her phone, she hurried to class. The thought that it was Hayden Yates’s class sent a shiver of dread skittering up and down her backbone.

* * *

The second she walked up to the door of Hayden Yates’ classroom, Kylie decided that the awkward vibes Collin Warren gave off weren’t nearly as unsettling as Mr. Yates’s.

The man hadn’t even looked at Kylie, yet somehow she knew he’d been keeping tabs on her—that he not only knew she was standing at the door, but he’d been waiting for her.

The question that had weighed on her mind grew heavier. Was he behind Hannah’s and the other girls’ deaths? If so, did he know Kylie suspected him?

Stepping farther into the classroom, she noticed that everyone was already in their seats. Only one seat remained. Kylie’s gut turned into a pretzel.

Fredericka sat right behind the empty seat. The girl smiled, or rather smirked.

Kylie hadn’t thought about having to deal with the she-wolf in her classes. Trying not to look at Fredericka, Kylie went and sat down.

As she slipped into the seat, she heard the were say, “Oh, boy. Extra light now the glowworm has shown up.”

Kylie gritted her teeth and stared at the book on her desktop.

“Bitch,” Della muttered from across the room.

Kylie, suddenly angry with herself for letting Della fight her battles, swung around and faced her nemesis. “In addition to glowing, I’ve discovered other new talents. Here’s one you’re going to love—giving smart-ass weres the mange. Especially ones that still slightly reek of skunk.”

Chuckles escaped from several of the nearby students. Fredericka rose defensively from her seat, her eyes glowing a shade of pissed-off orange.

Seeing the fury in the wolf-crazed gaze, Kylie questioned the wisdom of spouting off her mouth. No doubt about it, she was about to get her ass whupped by a were—and on the first day of school. How special was that?

Chapter Thirty-three

“Sit down!” Mr. Yates’s order echoed through the room. “Kill each other on your own time, not mine.”

Kylie turned around, surprised the suspicious teacher hadn’t let the she-wolf take her out.

The tension still hung thick when he started teaching. Facing forward, Kylie debated if she would get a pencil stabbed in her back from Fredericka.

But nothing happened. Mr. Yates started talking about how adrenaline can create strength in humans, and how it partly explained how supernaturals received their powers. His teaching skills were above average, and he had everyone hanging onto his every word. Even Kylie found it hard not to be enthralled. Yet everything in Kylie’s gut told her he hadn’t come here to teach. And considering Hannah’s warning that the killer was here, Kylie wasn’t about to let down her guard.

Her need to stay on guard shot up a notch when the class ended and she was half out the door and she heard him clear his throat.

“Kylie, stay a few minutes.”

Kylie froze, her back still to him. Della, equally wary of the man, leaned in and whispered, “I’ll be right outside the door.”

Pulling her books closer to her chest, remembering she suspected the tall thirty-something teacher of being a serial killer, she moved back into the room with caution.

“Did I do something wrong?” An image of the three girls, their decomposed bodies in that grave, filled her mind. What kind of evil person did that?

“No—well, yes. As a protector, you shouldn’t pick a fight with a were.”

“She started it,” Kylie said, and frowned at how juvenile that sounded. But this man gave her the creeps and brought out the worst in her.

His concern was touching—not—but she suspected there was more to this little chat. “Is that all?”

“I feel as if we got off on the wrong foot.” Sincerity, a heavy dose of it, seemed to flow from him, but Kylie didn’t buy it for a second. If an evil person without a conscience could lie to a vampire, he could also fake his emotions.

He continued, “I’d like to believe you would trust me.”

Had he told Hannah and the other two girls the same thing? Did he get them to trust him and then wrap his hands around their necks and choke the life out of them? She could swear he looked at her throat.

Chills spread down her spine. She heard the sound of the other campers leaving the area. Was Della still outside the door? If she screamed, would Della be able to get here in time to save her?

“I don’t trust very easily,” Kylie said.

“I got that feeling.” He took a step toward her.

She took a step back, his presence making it hard to breathe. “You know what else I don’t do?” Her heartbeat played to the tune of fear, but she fought not to let it show.

He laced his fingers together. She couldn’t help wondering if he was remembering how it had felt to use his hands as weapons.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Let anyone hurt someone I love.” Kylie listened again, and there wasn’t a sound coming from outside. The only noise bouncing off the freshly painted walls was the whishing noise of the ceiling fan.

Had Della left?

He tilted his head to the side. “What are you accusing me of doing?”

“What have you done?” Kylie fed her lungs a mouthful of air and held it.

“Nothing,” he said.

Liar! She could feel it, feel him hiding the truth. “Like I said, I don’t trust very easily.” She turned her back on him, and with each step, she expected to

feel him snatch her back, to feel his hands wrap around her throat, choking the life out of her the way he'd done the others.

* * *

Three days later, after suffering through yet another Hayden Yates class, unable to think of anything except the threat this man posed to Holiday, Kylie stormed into the office. Burnett and Holiday were arguing again; she heard them before she reached the porch, but she didn't care.

Well, she did care, just not enough to quiet the alarm blaring inside her. Hayden Yates was hiding something. That something was probably murder. And until Kylie could make Burnett and Holiday see this, Holiday's life was in jeopardy.

Walking right into Holiday's office, Kylie slammed the door behind her. "I don't like him."

"Me either," Burnett roared.

Holiday cut her eyes from Kylie to Burnett. "You two aren't even talking about the same person."

Kylie looked at Holiday for an explanation. Holiday obliged. "Blake has offered to help look into Hannah's disappearance. He was the last person to see her alive, so I think we should accept his help."

"A suspect helping with the investigation, that makes about as much sense as fried ice cream."

Holiday leaned her elbows on her desk. "You can't find one thing that points to his guilt."

"He slept with your sister!" Burnett roared.

"Guilty of murder, not of being a piece of shit."

"And I'm telling both of you," Kylie said, "Hayden is guilty."

"There's no proof of that," they said at the same time.

"He wears a glove over his emotions. Every time he opens his mouth to speak, half truths come out. I feel it."

Burnett shook his head. "I've dug so deep into his background, I can practically tell you when he stopped wearing diapers."

Holiday's chair squeaked. "Kylie, if Hayden was out to hurt me, he's had

plenty of opportunity. I interviewed him the first time when I was away taking care of my aunt's funeral. It was just him and me."

Kylie frowned. "I don't care. I still—"

"Both of you are wrong," Holiday insisted. "Blake didn't do this, and neither did Hayden. And if we don't stop focusing on them, we'll never find the killer. And we might never find Hannah's and the other two girls' bodies."

Burnett's eyes brightened and Kylie could read his mind. It wasn't finding the bodies that worried him so much; it was protecting Holiday. Hannah's warning felt imminent and Burnett felt that, too.

"Where the hell is Hannah when we need her?" Burnett bit out. He looked at Kylie. "You haven't seen her, felt her? Nothing?"

Kylie dropped on the sofa. "The last time was when she saw Blake here in the office."

"See," Burnett bellowed. "She probably figures we caught the bastard."

"I don't think so." Kylie almost feared disagreeing with Burnett when he was in this kind of mood, but getting them to see her point felt crucial. "She didn't look as if she thought it was over when she left."

He folded his arms over his wide chest. "Can we have a séance? Hold hands and call her back?"

"A séance?" Holiday rolled her eyes. "You have so much to learn about spirits."

"I don't give a damn about learning about spirits. I just need Hannah to come and tell me once and for all who she thinks is trying to hurt you."

* * *

On Friday morning, Kylie had skipped breakfast and Meet Your Campmate hour. She barely made it to English on time.

Obviously, Burnett wasn't the only one who needed to learn more about spirits. Kylie didn't know enough, either, because while she had felt Hannah's presence in the last few days, and again this morning, the spirit wouldn't manifest. Kylie had tried to appeal to her the way Holiday suggested. No luck. Kylie had even resorted to begging. Nothing.

Sitting at her desk, she reached down to make sure she'd brought her phone. The slight bulge in her pocket was reassuring. Maybe she was dreaming, but she hoped Lucas would either call or at least text her. But so far, nothing. That stung.

Looking up at the front of class, Miss Kane started talking about famous authors and the books they would be reading for the first six weeks. Who knew Jane Austen and so many others were supernatural? Kylie sure as hell didn't.

Intrigued by the conversation, Kylie barely noticed the noise when it started. Just a slight knock, as if someone were tapping on a door. The tap became a loud knock. Confused, she looked around, and oddly, no one else reacted.

Inhaling a strange vibe, she stared straight ahead again. As the noise grew louder, a slight movement to the right of the teacher caught Kylie's attention. The closet door behind Miss Kane rattled on its hinges, telling her where the banging originated.

Cutting her eyes left and right, she prayed she'd see someone, anyone, reacting to the obvious disruption.

Nope.

Then the cold of a spirit sent goose bumps racing up her arms. A trail of steam floated up from her lips, impairing her vision. Miss Kane said something, but Kylie couldn't hear over the ear-piercing hammering.

"Kylie? Kylie?" Someone called her name.

Who? Kylie couldn't think.

Forcing herself to look up, she saw the teacher staring at her as if waiting for a response. Kylie tried to talk, just a muttered, "Huh?" but not a word would leave her shivering lips. Then she saw it. Steam, lots of steam, billowing out from under the closet door.

Damn! Damn! This wasn't a normal spirit's visit. It felt more like the beginning of a vision.

That thought had hives popping out all over her chilled skin. Not because visions were scarier than hell, but because visions generally ended up with Kylie unconscious, or even worse, babbling incoherently.

Not here, Kylie pleaded. Not in front of twenty-five other campers.

An icy touch whispered across her shoulder. She looked back. A woman, her skin a pale ashen color, with dark purple circles under her gray eyes, stared at Kylie.

“She needs to see you.” The spirit wore a white nightgown and her long brown hair hung around her shoulders. She raised her hand and pointed to the closet in front of the class.

“Who are you?” Kylie asked, and realized she’d forgotten to talk in her head.

All the students were now staring. Kylie could hardly think. So cold. She could barely feel her own skin anymore.

“Who’s in there?” she asked.

In the distance, like static noise, Kylie heard others talking. Someone else called her name, maybe it was Della, and then she thought she heard Derek, but nothing sounded right, or felt right.

“She needs to talk to you.”

Suddenly, realizing it could be Hannah behind that door, Kylie forced herself to stand up and walk to the closet. Even determined to do it, she hated doing it in front of people. But what choice did she have? Her knees wobbled as she neared the closet door.

She saw Miss Kane backing across the room, fear turning her complexion pale.

Kylie completely understood. She was pretty damn scared herself.

She reached for the closet’s doorknob. Before she touched it, a hand ripped through the wood. Bony fingers latched onto the front of her shirt and yanked her through the splintered wood of the closet door. And yet it wasn’t the closet.

The dark, dank place smelled of dirt, herbs, and death.

She screamed. Hard. Loud.

“Kylie? Kylie?” The voices echoed in the distance and then faded. Now, the only sound she heard over her own screams was the clanking sound of metal hitting metal.

She lay flat on her back. Gritty dirt rained down on her cheeks from

above. The desire to brush it away hit, but her arms were locked at her sides. Even before she opened her eyes, she knew where she was.

The grave—she was in the grave with Hannah and the other girls.

And something told her she might never escape.

Chapter Thirty-four

Buried alive.

Panic scraped across Kylie's mind and clawed at her chest. Opening her eyes, she saw only darkness, but felt more particles of dirt sift down. She went to blink and each speck of grit scraped across the top of her lids.

Please, I don't want to be here, she screamed in her mind. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and tears stung her sinuses, but the watery weakness helped wash away some of the grit.

She went to breathe, but her mouth wouldn't open; something held it shut. Her lungs demanded oxygen, so she drew air in through her nose. Her throat knotted at the smell, the smell of death and then a heavy herb scent. She forced herself to turn her head to confirm what she suspected: that this vision had landed her in the grave.

A long strand of red hair rested against the side of her face. As had happened in the other vision, she was the spirit. She was Hannah—only unlike the woman whose body she inhabited, she breathed. The thought that she was in the corpse brought on another wave of nausea. Then another followed when she saw a large black beetle move across her lashes. Its prickly legs inched over her cheek and poked its head up into her left nostril.

She started snorting and struggling to free herself, but nothing worked.

Turning her cheek a little farther to the right, her gaze came upon the face of Cindy Shaffer. A scream rose in Kylie's throat, but stayed bubbled in her mouth that was still forced closed. Her heart thumped against her breastbone at the sight. The girl's facial skin hung loose, exposing some cheekbone. But the girl's mouth was covered with duct tape. Staring down past her own nose,

Kylie saw she bore the same tape. And the decomposing body she was in was shackled with chains. Was this supposed to mean something? Or had the killer really done this?

Another loud clank came from above. Kylie's gaze shot up toward the noise. She saw a long iron spike being pushed through a hole in the slats that appeared to be decaying wood flooring. The piece of iron dropped on top of her, and the cold of it sizzled against her forearm, which was pinned at her side. On one end of the metal bar was some kind of ornament, a cross. Kylie recognized the emblem as being like the rusty fence and gate at the cemetery.

Footsteps sounded on the floor above as if someone was walking away, but then he returned, and another piece of rusty fencing was pushed through the hole. This time, Kylie saw the hand of the person shoving the iron inside. As the arm moved almost in front of her face, the cuff of the shirt rose slightly upward, exposing the edge of a silver watchband.

What am I supposed to learn from this? Kylie asked with her mind, and looked at the dead girl at her side. Another wave of panic filled her lungs when a fat snake at least two feet long slithered up her chest and then higher. The cold, damp feel of its underbelly muscles inching across her cheek had a scream building in her throat.

She had to get out of here.

* * *

"You're fine." The calm sound of Holiday's voice had Kylie opening her eyes seconds later. She took a quick look around. She was in Holiday's office. But why was she...?

The vision played in her head like a horror movie in fast forward. Panic flooded her chest. She jackknifed up, jumped off the sofa, and slapped at her arms, legs, and face, hoping to chase away the feel of death and underground creatures moving against her skin.

"It's okay," Holiday said again.

No, it wasn't. She'd been dead and had a snake crawling over her face and a bug playing peekaboo inside her nose. That was so not okay.

Kylie took a deep breath, then bent over and barfed—once, then twice.

Barfed all over someone's dark pair of shoes.

"Oh, damn!" a deep voice said.

Kylie recognized the voice and the shoes.

She looked up at the disgusted expression on the badass vampire and started to apologize, but instead barfed again. She missed Burnett's shoes this time, but made a direct hit to the front of his shirt.

"Oh, fu—," Burnett muttered, but never finished the word.

Holiday wrapped her arm around Kylie. "Breathe. Just breathe. It's going to be okay." She guided Kylie back to the sofa. Burnett, holding his arms away from his shirt front, handed Holiday a damp cloth, which was quickly pressed to Kylie's forehead.

Kylie reached for it and wiped her mouth, and then looked at Burnett. "I think you need it worse than me." Tears filled her eyes and her whole body trembled. "Sorry."

He looked down at his shirt and back up at her. "I'm not mad."

She focused on Holiday's face, felt the calm flowing from her touch, and tried to remember exactly what had happened. How had she gotten ... Her memory started to fall into place one piece at a time.

But it only took a few pieces for her to start panicking again. "Please tell me I didn't go wacko in English class."

Holiday's gaze filled with empathy. "It's not your fault. And Della brought you here as soon as she got you out of the closet."

Kylie flopped back on the sofa and started to wish she could vanish, but stopped herself before it came true. "I hate this. I really, really hate this."

Kylie stared at the ceiling. Burnett left the room, but returned in record time wearing a different shirt. Obviously he didn't keep a new pair of shoes handy in his office because he now stood in his socks.

After a few minutes, Holiday asked Kylie, "Can you talk about it?"

"I was Hannah. But ... most of the time when I have these types of visions and I'm the spirit, the spirit isn't dead and ... in a grave with bugs and snakes." Kylie's breath shuddered.

"Hannah's trying to show you something. That's what visions are all about," Holiday said. "Tell me what happened."

Kylie swallowed a tight knot down her throat. "I don't know what she wants me to see. We were in the grave. There were snakes and bugs. I saw plenty of those." She wiped her face, remembering the snake slithering across her cheek.

"Tell me everything," Holiday said. "Everything."

Kylie started recounting it, from the footsteps sounding on top of the rotting wooden planks above her, to the herb smell and the scrap pieces of iron that looked like they came from the cemetery. When Kylie finished, Holiday's expression went white.

"What is it?" Burnett asked, not missing the look on her face.

"Someone knows Hannah is reaching out from the grave."

"How do you know that?" Kylie asked.

"The tape over their mouths and the chains. You said you smelled herbs and that you saw someone adding iron from the graveyard. In the past, it was called cold iron. It's basically iron, but some of it was blessed by practicing Wiccans. It was used to keep spirits from escaping, and ... the herbs, there are several that are used to silence spirits. That's what she was trying to tell you. That someone is trying to stop her from communicating with us."

"And Blake knows you are a ghost whisperer," Burnett said. "It's logical that Hannah would come to you."

"But if that's the case, why is he just now trying to silence them? He would have done that in the beginning."

"She's right," Kylie said. "It's someone here. Hannah told us that much. And excuse me for sounding like a broken record, but Hayden Yates is bound to have heard I'm a ghost whisperer. *Everyone* here has." And if they hadn't, today sealed the deal.

Holiday twisted her hair in a tight rope and then met Kylie's gaze. "I don't want to suspect someone here," she said, and then met Burnett's gaze. "But Kylie's right. It could be someone from Shadow Falls. And if it was the iron from Fallen Cemetery, then Hannah's and the other's bodies are close by."

"Fine," Burnett growled. "I'll go back and run Hayden Yates through every damn database I can find. Until then, you don't let the man within two

feet of you.”

“I still don’t think it’s Hayden,” Holiday said.

“And I still do,” Kylie insisted.

“Who else could it be?” Burnett asked.

“One of the new students or teachers,” Holiday said, “but...”

“Most serial killers are men. And I don’t see a teen being able to pull this off.”

“And Hannah keeps calling the killer a he,” Kylie said.

Burnett huffed. “I’m not sure Collin Warren could look at someone long enough to kill them.”

“But he’s strange,” Kylie said. However, Kylie’s gut just knew that Hayden Yates was up to no good.

“Being extremely shy doesn’t make him a killer,” Holiday pointed out. “It just makes him socially awkward.”

Burnett shook his head. “But just to be sure, I’ll check him out again, too. You stay away from both of them.”

Holiday rolled her eyes. “How am I going to run a school and not talk to any of the teachers?”

“I could always lock you in my cabin,” Burnett said.

“You wish,” Holiday said.

Burnett’s eyes brightened and a smile barely tilted his lips up slightly. “That I do.”

Kylie smiled for a second, too, completely getting Burnett’s underlying message. Then for some reason, Kylie thought about Lucas, and started missing him, wishing he could be here to help her cope. *Don’t ever fall in love, princess. It just hurts too much.*

Her stepfather’s words echoed in Kylie’s head and right then, she knew. She loved Lucas.

As if the epiphany gave her heart and mind a reboot, she suddenly recalled being in Miss Kane’s closet and screaming at the top of her lungs. She closed her eyes as embarrassment flooded through her. If any of the other campers hadn’t quite made up their minds about whether she was or wasn’t a freak, she’d made it easy for them.

Kylie felt Holiday slip her soft hand against her wrist, as if reading some of her emotional angst. The touch had little effect this time. Kylie was in love with Lucas, a guy who couldn't even be seen in public with her, and she'd made a complete idiot out of herself with one of her ghost visions.

"Burnett," Holiday spoke softly, "why don't you go find some shoes and give Kylie and me a few minutes alone."

* * *

Something about being alone with Holiday had Kylie letting go and allowing herself to fall apart. She fell against the camp leader's shoulder and started sobbing.

Holiday held her, held her so tight that Kylie cried harder. After a few minutes, Holiday spoke. "I'm so damn sorry. Hannah shouldn't have come to you. You're too young to have to deal with this."

The words brought a sudden halt to Kylie's pity party.

She pulled out of the embrace. "No. I mean, sure, it's hard, but this is what I do. I'd do it for a stranger. And I'd do it for your sister again and again." *And if it meant stopping someone from hurting Holiday, I would do that and more.*

Kylie wiped her face to clear the tears and knew she was all red and blotchy. Not that she cared. This was Holiday. Her mentor, her big sister. Her friend.

"Besides," Kylie added, "it's not just the vision. It's Lucas. I think I love him. No, I'm pretty sure I love him. Oh, shit! I'm in love with a boy who can't love me back."

Holiday brushed her hand over Kylie's cheek. "Oh, hon, he might not supposed to be in love with you, but that doesn't mean he can't, or that he doesn't."

Kylie inhaled deeply, trying not to let herself cry again. "He hasn't told me he loves me. I mean, I haven't told him either, but ... Derek told me he loved me. And..." She closed her eyes, trying to figure out how to put it. "And sometimes I'm confused about what I feel for him, but just now, seeing what you and Burnett have, or what you could have, it made me realize I

want that. I'm tired of hiding what I feel and being afraid of it."

The tears Kylie had stopped shedding filled Holiday's eyes. "Love's always scary."

Kylie felt Holiday's emotions blend with her own. "It shouldn't be scary," Kylie said. "Burnett loves you. Even I can see it. And I know you love him. Don't lose out on something wonderful because you're scared."

"I just need some time," Holiday said.

"Time we might not have. Life's fragile. Look at Hannah, and Cindy and the other girl. They don't get the opportunity to love again. We have the chance and we're not doing it. I should have told Lucas how I feel. I should have forced him to be honest with me about what's happening with him. You should tell Burnett how you feel."

Holiday bit down on her lower lip. "I thought I was the one offering advice here."

"Yeah, well, the tables turned," Kylie said. *Things change*. Kylie just hoped with all the things changing, the one constant in her life would be Shadow Falls. The thought of losing Holiday and everyone here, even the ones who considered her a nutcase, was too much. They were her family.

* * *

That night, Kylie had tried to dreamscape with Lucas, but it wasn't working. She texted him, called him, and even e-mailed. No answer came back. Then at two in the morning, staring at the ceiling, her phone rang. She grabbed it without checking the caller ID.

"Lucas?" she said his name at the same time she hit the light switch. The cold in the room came on faster than the light.

"Sorry," the voice on the line said. "Just me."

Kylie shivered then frowned when she recognized the voice. "I just tried ____"

"It's okay," Derek said, but his tone said it wasn't really okay. "I just woke up and felt you worrying. I tried to call you earlier to see how you were after the vision, but you didn't call me back."

Kylie pulled the blanket up around her neck. The spirit standing by the

bed faded, but before she did, Kylie recognized her as the woman from earlier that day. Remembering who was on the phone, Kylie's chest swelled with emotion.

"I ... It's been crazy." She'd gotten his messages. She just hadn't wanted to talk to him because of the emotional storm she felt about Lucas right now. It wasn't fair to Derek, because even though she wasn't doing anything wrong, she knew their friendship offered him hope that she would change her mind, and she didn't think that hope had a hell of a lot of merit.

"You're pulling away again," he said.

"Derek, it's—"

"Kylie, you don't have to explain. I know." He paused. "It's okay. And someday I'll even be able to say that and mean it."

"You're a special guy," Kylie said, hurting for him.

"I know," he said, and chuckled. "And that's why I'm not completely giving up. But I'm working on it. I just called to check on you."

"I'm okay," Kylie said.

"Then I'll say good night." Rejection sounded in his voice.

"Derek, I'm really—"

"Just say good night, Kylie," he insisted.

"Good night," she whispered, and nothing was sadder than the sound of that dead line.

Putting her phone down, Kylie looked around. The cold from the spirit had lessened but she could tell she lingered nearby.

"Who are you?" Kylie asked.

The woman didn't answer. And why should she? They never made it easy.

But then, neither did the living.

* * *

"Kylie! Kylie!" The voice jolted Kylie from a deep sleep before the sun rose the next morning. She shot up, chills crawling up and down her spine like spiders. Without even knowing why, her blood sizzled with the need to protect. Protect someone.

Still half asleep, she pushed her hair from face and stood in the middle of the room, breathing in and breathing out. Her pulse raced, and panic filled her chest, crowding her lungs. Something was happening. She felt it.

Someone needed her. Someone needed Kylie's protection.

Who?

Her mind raced as she tried to make sense of what she felt. Then Kylie remembered the voice. She let it play in her mind, again and again, until finally she recognized it.

"No!" She grabbed her jeans and T-shirt.

Holiday was in trouble.

Chapter Thirty-five

Right before Kylie lit out of her room, she glanced at the clock on her nightstand. Five AM. Holiday would be at the office already.

Kylie stormed into Della's room, but the girl wasn't there. Probably at an early vampire ceremony. Kylie didn't wait a second longer; she bolted out of the cabin and flew like the wind to the office. The only thing that felt heavy about her was her heart. As if her heart knew Holiday's situation was bad. Really, really bad.

When Kylie got to the office, she found the door ajar. Not a good sign. Even worse, there was glass shattered all over the wet floor of the entrance. The broken handle of the coffee pot lay in the corner, another sign that a struggle had taken place.

"Where are you, Holiday?" Kylie's voice trembled. Tears filled her eyes and she tried to think.

Burnett. She needed to contact Burnett.

She reached into her pocket for her phone, only to realize she hadn't brought it. She ran into Holiday's office. The room looked undisturbed. Whoever had gotten Holiday had done it in the entrance area. He'd probably been waiting for her when she came in this morning, or maybe walked in when she'd been making coffee.

Hands shaking, Kylie grabbed Holiday's office phone. She couldn't remember Burnett's cell number. But damn, she could get to his cabin quicker than find his number.

She tore out, her feet barely touching the ground. She didn't know if she'd morphed into a vampire or if in protective mode she simply had more power.

She didn't really care. Only one thing mattered, one thought echoed in her mind. Save Holiday. She had to save Holiday.

She made it to Burnett's cabin, and didn't even knock. She screamed his name when she entered, but no one answered. No one.

She went into his bedroom. The bed stood empty.

Recalling the vampire ritual, she tore out again. Della had told her once where they held it. She shot through the woods, not caring about her promise to not enter. If she ran into trouble, being in protective mode, she could kick ass and ask questions later.

She exited through the line of trees into a clearing. The wind whizzed past as she moved. Coming to a jolting stop, she found herself circled by a half-dozen angry vamps, their eyes glowing at the idea of an intruder disturbing their ceremony.

Lucky for her, the Shadow Falls vamps weren't likely to attack. A good thing, because even in protective mode, she didn't know if she could take on all six of them.

"Where's Burnett?" Kylie snapped. "Or Della?"

"What is it?" Burnett came to a stop beside her.

Kylie never answered. She didn't have to. He saw it in her eyes.

"Holiday?" The sound in his voice had Kylie's chest aching. Her blood pumped faster.

Kylie's breath caught. "He's got her."

"Who?" he demanded as Della stopped at his side.

"I still don't know," Kylie answered, and her eyes spiked with more tears. But they had better find out, and soon, before it was too late.

* * *

Three minutes later, after Kylie had explained everything, Burnett had spouted out orders for all the vamps and her to go search the Shadow Falls property. If Holiday was still here, they'd find her. Burnett headed back to the office to see if he could find clues and to check to see if the alarm was functioning.

Kylie headed to the west side of the property. But when she passed the

trail that led to the cabin where Hayden Yates lived, she did a complete U-turn.

She slammed down on his porch. Heard him moving around inside. Heard him talking to someone.

She stormed in without knocking and oops, forgot to open the door. It landed with a loud crack on the floor. Hayden stood by the sofa, his hooded sweater in one hand as if he'd just removed it, and his phone in the other. His dark hair appeared darker, wet with sweat. His skin looked flushed, as if he'd been running. But from what?

Or better yet, from where?

"Where is she?" Her tone came out deep, filled with fury and warning.

He cut off the phone. "Where is who?" he asked in innocence.

"Don't play games with me." Her blood now fizzed in her veins. Her patience, if she'd had any at all, was now gone.

He tossed the hoodie and his phone on the sofa. Beside those two items was a watch. A black-banded watch.

"You're vampire now. Try listening to my heart for the truth."

Kylie had already listened to his heart, but it didn't matter. Didn't matter that he had a different watch from the one she'd seen in the vision. He could have two watches. "That only works with people who have a conscience."

"And you're assuming I don't."

"You've been hiding something ever since you got here." She took a step closer. Her intent was to get answers, and she didn't care how.

He apparently read her mood, because he held out his hands, palms up. "Perhaps, but it isn't what you think. I haven't hurt your precious camp leader."

"I didn't tell you who it was! So how the hell—"

"I'm no fool. Burnett stakes out at her house most nights."

"If you've hurt her, I'll kill you." She didn't flinch at hearing the words. They were true. For Holiday, Kylie would kill.

But what if she'd failed Holiday and it was too late? Anger, fear, and love burned in Kylie's chest. Her hands shook.

"I don't doubt you could kill me," Hayden said, holding his submissive

pose. “Your strength right now appears ... palpable.” He inhaled and she could swear he looked sincere, even respectful. “It isn’t my place to”—he hesitated again—“speak up.” He ran a hand through his hair. “It would probably be beneficial for me to just keep my mouth shut. But unfortunately, unlike you believe, I do have a conscience.”

He closed his eyes again and when he opened them, she saw complete honesty. And she saw something else, but she wasn’t sure what it was. Something about him that looked ... familiar in a weird way. “I saw Collin Warren out and about this morning. Something told me he was up to no good.”

Kylie listened to Hayden’s heart speak the truth. She continued to study his eyes, which held no dishonesty. “Who are you?” she asked.

He brought both hands up and brushed his hair from his brow. “See for yourself.”

Kylie did see. His pattern was the same as her father’s. Hayden was ... a chameleon.

Her breath caught. He had all sorts of information she needed, but not now. Because more important than even the answers he held was Holiday’s life. Then her gaze shifted back to his sofa, and she realized he did have one thing she needed.

She snagged his phone and lit out as she heard him protest.

* * *

Kylie flew off his porch. The sunrise had painted the horizon a bright color, not that she took the time to enjoy the view. She held the phone up and realized the problem. She still couldn’t remember Burnett’s number. So she dialed Della.

Della didn’t answer, damn it.

Kylie left a message. She told her what she suspected—that Collin Warren had Holiday and that she was looking for him now. She didn’t slow down, didn’t stop until she stood in front of Collin’s cabin. She listened. Not a sound echoed from inside. She had to see for herself. She started up the porch steps when she heard quiet footfalls sound behind her.

Heart stopping, Kylie swung around, expecting Collin, but found Fredericka instead.

“What are you doing sneaking around?” the were asked.

Kylie didn’t have time to chat, so she turned around and went to check out Collin’s cabin. The door was locked, so she simply crashed it in. She’d done it at Hayden’s cabin, what was one more?

Fredericka’s gasp sounded behind her. Kylie ignored it.

She went into Collin’s bedroom, looking for anything that might help her find Holiday.

“What’s going on?” Fredericka asked, following her into the room.

“Just leave. I don’t have time for pettiness.” She opened the drawer and yanked everything out.

“What’s going on?” Fredericka asked again.

Kylie sighed. “Holiday’s missing and I think this creep took her.”

“Shit!” Fredericka said. “I knew he was weird.”

Kylie went to leave.

“Wait,” Fredericka said. “I followed him a couple of days ago. He went to some old cabin in that park next door.”

“Where?” Kylie roared; every instinct in her seemed to be turned on.

“I’ll ... show you.” She held up her hands as if half frightened.

They ran into the woods. Kylie’s patience was pushed when she had to slow down for Fredericka, but Kylie held her tongue. Normally, she wouldn’t have trusted the were to spit on her if she was on fire, but her gut said the girl wasn’t pulling any tricks now. No doubt Fredericka knew Holiday had gone to extra lengths to get her to Shadow Falls, and to keep her here.

They came upon the property gate. Kylie jumped without even trying. Fredericka barely made it and landed hard on the other side.

Kylie hesitated and looked back.

“I’m fine,” the were growled, and bounced onto her feet.

I didn’t ask. Kylie bit her tongue. They started to bolt again when Hayden’s phone rang. Kylie pulled it out of her pocket and saw Burnett’s name. Obviously, Della had given him this number.

“Where the hell are you?” Burnett barked. “And why do you have Hayden

Yates's phone?"

* * *

Kylie and Fredericka arrived at the cabin before Burnett. But he'd said he was on his way, which meant he would be there soon. Weeds and young trees grew around the structure as if someone had forgotten it existed. The sounds of the night suddenly went silent. Burnett must be close by.

He'd ordered them to wait before moving into the cabin. But Kylie heard someone inside. She listened; God help her, she only heard one person breathing. Fear stole her next breath. Her blood fizzed so strong, it almost burned.

Protect Holiday. Protect Holiday. The words echoed in her head like a litany.

She motioned for Fredericka to stand back. The girl's eyes filled with rebellion. Kylie didn't have time to argue. She stormed into the building; the door splintered, the walls wobbled.

Collin Warren jumped up from the floor. At his feet lay Holiday.

A very still, very dead Holiday.

Chapter Thirty-six

Fear filled Collin's eyes when he saw Kylie, while pure evil seemed to surround him.

Kylie picked up Collin Warren and tossed him across the cabin. She heard his body hit the log walls with a loud, cracking thud. The air gushing out of his lungs sounded in the room, but she didn't see him land.

She heard a scuffle happening behind her. Fredericka screamed. Kylie ignored it.

On her knees beside Holiday, Kylie removed the rope from around her throat.

"Is she dead?" Kylie heard Fredericka ask. The question floated in the room—unanswered.

Kylie's gaze stayed locked on Holiday. Kylie's heart stayed locked on the fact that she'd tried to save Ellie and failed—tried to save Roberto and failed then, too.

Burnett's footsteps sounded in the cabin; she heard him let out a sound of pure anguish. He knew. He knew Holiday was dead.

Kylie still didn't look up. Everything she had—everything she wanted to believe in—stayed focused on Holiday. This couldn't be happening. Not Holiday.

"No!" Kylie screamed.

Not Holiday, who had always been there for Kylie, always listened, always cared. Memories of them together filled her mind. Memories of them laughing, sitting side by side at the falls, even eating ice cream while talking about heartaches and boys. How many times had Holiday offered Kylie a

warm, comforting touch?

“You can’t go,” Kylie said with a half sob. Tears rolled down her cheeks and landed on Holiday’s pale face. Kylie ran her hands over Holiday’s swollen, bruised throat.

When Kylie didn’t feel her hands heat up, she closed her eyes and prayed. *Let me save her. You gave me this power, now let me use it. I’ll pay whatever price it takes, even if it’s my own life. Do you hear me? My life for hers!*

A ball of warmth formed in her chest and then slowly spread to her hands. Her hands tingled and then turned hot and then hotter still. Holiday’s body felt so cold, so lifeless under Kylie’s palms, but she didn’t stop. She couldn’t.

“She’s glowing again,” Fredericka’s voice sounded in the distance.

But even as Kylie’s light filled the small room, Holiday didn’t respond. Another somber, grieving sound came from Burnett. It was the last sound Kylie heard before her vision went black.

* * *

Darkness surrounded Kylie. Exhaustion pulled at her mind. Where was she? Why did she feel so depleted? So dead?

She tried to open her eyes, but the effort felt too much. *Wake up! Wake up!* a part of her brain demanded. The feeling of urgency filled her chest and she fought to push the cobwebs from her mind.

As the last few clouds of confusion and exhaustion were cleared, she came to. She was in someone’s arms, someone who ran. Kylie’s body jolted up and down with the footfalls. She forced her eyes open and looked up at ... Fredericka?

What was...?

“Put me down,” Kylie demanded.

“Burnett said to carry you,” Fredericka bit out. “Believe me, I don’t like it, either.”

“Put me down!” Kylie demanded, and the she-wolf came to a sudden stop and dropped her none too gently on the ground. The feel of her butt hitting the hard ground brought it all back.

Collin Warren had Holiday.

Holiday ... dead.

Pain filled Kylie's chest.

Bolting to her feet, she saw Burnett, holding a lifeless Holiday in his arms.

Kylie rushed over. "Let me try again!" she begged.

"You already did," Burnett bit out.

"But maybe this time—"

"Kylie! You already saved her," Burnett said. "She's weak, but she's breathing. Now, let Fredericka carry you back to camp so we can get both of you help."

"I'm fine," Kylie insisted.

"You're still glowing, Kylie," Burnett snapped. "And I don't know what that means."

Kylie didn't know either. But she didn't care. She stared at Holiday's chest, waiting to see it shift upward, bringing in oxygen. She held her own breath.

Only when Holiday breathed did Kylie draw air into her hungry lungs.

"Let's go," Burnett muttered. "I have a doctor meeting us at the camp."

Kylie pushed herself to run, but it wasn't nearly as fast as before, and damn if she didn't feel every muscle burn. Not that she was complaining. Holiday was alive and so was she. Nothing else mattered.

* * *

Kylie sat in Holiday's living room, silent and still glowing, while the doctor checked Holiday out in the bedroom. Burnett, on his feet, kept a listening ear turned to the door.

All the other students gathered in the dining hall. School had been canceled while everyone waited for news. Kylie wondered if Holiday knew how loved she was. That everyone, even Fredericka, cared.

Everyone except ... Collin Warren. Questions start flipping through her mind. Kylie looked at Burnett. "What happened to Collin?"

Burnett shook his head.

Kylie's gut knotted. She recalled tossing the man across the small shack,

recalled hearing the sound of his lungs give up air. Had his soul given up as well?

She'd said she would kill for Holiday, and she would, but now the thought that she might have taken a life made her want to puke. "Did I...?"

Burnett shook his head. "Fredericka. She said he came at you with a knife. She attacked. They fought. He lost."

Kylie now recalled hearing the struggle, but the idea left her stunned. "Fredericka saved my life?" *Oh, hell.* She didn't want to be indebted to someone who hated her. Then she couldn't help but wonder why she'd done it. She could have let Collin kill her.

Burnett stared at Kylie as if reading her mind. "She comes off as a real bitch, but I don't think she's as bad as she lets people believe." He hesitated. "That happens when you have a rough upbringing. People think the worst of you and it just gets easier to let them think it than to try to prove them differently." He looked back at the bedroom door. "Holiday believed she was salvageable."

So did Lucas. Kylie sat there and chewed on her feelings. About Fredericka, then about Lucas. She missed him. Wished he was here.

Then she reheard Burnett's words and picked up on the personal reference in his tone. *That happens when you have a rough upbringing.* A piece of the puzzle of who Burnett was suddenly fell into place. She didn't know why it felt important but it did. She looked up at him. "You were raised in a foster home with Perry, weren't you?"

Burnett's gaze stayed fixed on the door. "She's going to be okay." A smile brightened his eyes. "The doctor, he just said she was going to be okay." He reached back with both hands and laced his fingers behind his neck. When he glanced at Kylie, he was still smiling. "Yeah. I was raised in foster care. Why? You thinking that's why I'm a mean bastard? Because of my rough upbringing?"

Hearing the humor and relief in his voice, she smiled. She knew if he weren't so relieved by the doctor's news, he'd probably be pissed that Kylie figured it out. Then the opportunity occurred to her. "No, but I'm thinking that's why it might be so hard for you to tell Holiday how you feel. To admit

that you love her. And I think she really needs to hear that.”

His eyebrows arched. “I’m not the one who’s been pushing the other away.”

“But you haven’t told her how you feel, either. And you gotta trust me on this. A woman needs to hear that.”

A few minutes passed in silence; she knew Burnett was thinking about what she said, and that felt good. But then the vamp looked back at her with questions in his eyes. “How did Hayden Yates know about Collin Warren?”

Kylie chose her words carefully. She hadn’t told Burnett that Hayden was a chameleon and wasn’t sure if she should.

“When I went to his cabin, he’d been out running. I accused him of being involved. He denied it. He said he’d seen Collin out and the man looked suspicious.”

Burnett digested what she’d said. “Supposedly, Collin’s always been socially flawed but no one saw the evilness in him until now.” Burnett paused again. “How did you end up with Hayden’s phone?”

“I’d forgotten mine when I left. So I ... confiscated his.” She shrugged.

“Did you know he left a message with me, saying he had a family emergency and had to leave for a few days?”

Kylie tried not to let her disappointment show. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Do you still think he’s involved?” Burnett asked. “If you do, I’ll bring his ass back here now.”

“No,” Kylie answered honestly. “I was wrong. He didn’t have anything to do with Holiday. If anything ... he helped save her.”

Burnett studied her. “And you don’t see it as suspicious his leaving right now?”

“Maybe a little,” Kylie said, so she wouldn’t get caught in a lie. “But I’m sure he didn’t have anything to do with Holiday’s abduction.”

“I’m still questioning him when he gets back,” Burnett said.

Me too. Kylie shook her head. *If he comes back.* Her heart sank.

Then she recalled the phone again, still tucked in her pocket. Hayden Yates had to be working for her grandfather. And if so, he was probably in contact with Hayden. That meant she might have her grandfather’s number in

the phone.

If her grandfather hadn't changed his number again.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, after Burnett had visited Holiday, Kylie moved into the bedroom. Holiday, her red hair looking redder against the white sheets, looked pale, but alive. The bruise on her throat hadn't gone away.

She touched her throat and motioned for Kylie to hand her the water on her bedside table.

"You brought me back." Holiday's voice sounded raw, painfully raw.

"But I didn't heal you all the way." Kylie's throat hurt hearing Holiday talk. "Do you want me to see if I can—?"

Holiday shook her head. "I think you've done enough. You look worn out."

Kylie felt worn out, but not so much that she couldn't try. "I could—"

"No. I'll heal." Holiday looked concerned. "You haven't stopped glowing."

"I know," Kylie said. "But it'll go away, right?"

Holiday nodded but didn't look confident. Then she motioned for Kylie to sit in the chair beside the bed. "I got to see Hannah before she passed over. Right as I was dying, everything slowed down and she came to me. We talked. We made amends." Tears brightened Holiday's green eyes. "None of this would have happened if not for you. Thank you. I know the cost you have to pay, and I promise to live my life so it won't cost you even the tiniest piece of your soul."

Kylie took her hand and squeezed. "I don't think you've ever lived it any other way."

"I can be better." Holiday swallowed. "Nothing like dying to show you how to live."

Kylie smiled. "I hope in that message, you're talking about Burnett."

Holiday grinned. "The stupid vamp just asked me to marry him. Here, now? As if looking like I just died is how I wanted to be proposed to."

Joy did a lap around Kylie's heart. "And you said?"

Holiday took a sip of water. "I asked him if we couldn't just live together in sin."

Kylie frowned, but then she saw something in Holiday's eyes. "And?"

"He told me it wouldn't be a good example to our students. So ... I agreed to marry him." She pushed a hand against her forehead. "Dear God, what am I getting myself into? He's not an easy man to deal with."

"I can hear you," Burnett called out from the other room, a chuckle sounding in his voice.

Holiday rolled her eyes.

Kylie squeezed Holiday's hand tighter. "He loves you," she whispered.

"Yeah, that's what he said." She sank deeper into her pillow, looking exhausted, but she also looked happy.

A sense of rightness filled Kylie's chest. She'd done it. Or at least, she'd helped do it. Burnett and Holiday were getting together.

She couldn't help but wonder if she and Lucas would have the same luck.

Holiday stared up at the ceiling for a second. "I also saw your grandmother, Kylie."

"Nana?" Kylie asked. "What did she say?"

"No, not Nana, the other one. Heidi."

Kylie saw something almost sad in Holiday's eyes. "What did she say?"

"Just to say hello." Holiday sighed.

Something told Kylie there was more. What was it that Holiday didn't want to tell? Kylie almost asked, but when Holiday's eyes fluttered closed, Kylie realized now wasn't the time to push. Later, she thought, and reached down and touched Hayden's phone in her pocket. Later.

* * *

It was after lunch before Kylie could sneak away to her bedroom. She pulled out Hayden's phone and searched for her grandfather's number. Unfortunately, there were no names listed. Just numbers. Three had been called the most. Kylie sat down on the edge of her bed and called the first.

She held her breath while it rang.

A woman answered. "About time you called," the voice said.

“Who is this?” Kylie asked, unsure how to approach the call.

“This is ... Casey. Who are you?”

“I...”

“What are you doing with Hayden’s phone?”

“I...”

“Damn that bastard! He said he wasn’t seeing anyone else. Tell him I said to go to hell! He wasn’t that good in bed anyway, as I’m sure you probably know.” The line went dead.

“Uh-oh.” Kylie considered calling back and trying to explain, but what would she say? *I’m not his girlfriend, just someone who stole his phone after accusing him of being a serial killer.* That might complicate matters even worse. Best to let him handle it on his own.

“Sorry, Hayden,” Kylie muttered.

Before Kylie called the next number, the phone dinged with an incoming text. She debated over reading it, thinking it might be from his pissed-off girlfriend. Then she saw it wasn’t from that number. She might be invading his privacy, but after stealing his phone, what was one more sin?

It took a second to figure out the phone’s features to display the message. But she was so damn glad she did.

Chapter Thirty-seven

The message wasn't for Hayden. It was from him.

You're answering my messages? Hayden

Kylie typed back. *Only because I hoped it was either you or my ...* She paused. Should she let him know she assumed he was with her grandfather? She didn't see any advantage to playing dumb.... *my grandfather*. She tapped her fingers on the phone waiting for a reply.

The phone dinged. *What did you tell the others?*

She decided to be honest. *Only that you helped save Holiday's life. You can come back.*

She waited for him to respond. When he didn't do it quickly, she wrote, *Sorry I suspected you.*

He replied: *If you did the right thing and came to live where you belonged, I wouldn't have to return.*

Kylie considered her answer.

I belong at Shadow Falls.

She no sooner finished typing the words than her reflection in the dresser mirror caught her attention. She hadn't stopped glowing yet. How long could she continue to believe she belonged here when everything pointed to the fact that she was different? Different even from all the other supernaturals.

Her chest swelled again at the thought of leaving. She rejected it. But what was going to happen in two weeks when her mom was expecting to pick her up for parents' weekend? How would she explain the fact that she was freaking brighter than a fifty-watt bulb?

The phone pinged again. *It's not safe for you to stay there.*

Holiday and Burnett won't let the FRU do anything.

It's not just the FRU. You were right in what you told your grandfather. There's an underground rogue gang after you.

Swallowing a knot in her throat, she texted, *Is my grandfather's number in the phone?*

It took a few minutes for him to get back. But he did. Yes.

She typed in. *Thank you.* And hit send. Then remembering, she sent one more message. *Call your girlfriend. I might have upset her.*

* * *

Her grandfather answered the next number she dialed. And he didn't bother with formalities. Hayden had obviously told him to expect her call.

"I sent him because I was concerned for your safety," her grandfather said, his voice just an octave lower than her father's.

"I'm not upset," Kylie said. "Although I wish someone would have told me."

"You need to come with us, Kylie. It's not safe. You were right about the underground rogue. I don't trust the FRU not to harm you. How can I trust them to keep you safe from others?"

"Please," Kylie said. "You don't understand what you're asking." Tears filled her eyes. "I ... This is home to me. Burnett's not like the FRU you remember. And Holiday ... she took me in. Both of them have protected me." Her throat grew tight. "People have died here saving my life. These people you don't trust are my family." Her voice shook and she swiped the tears from her cheeks.

"We are your family."

"I can't leave," Kylie said.

There was a long pause. "I will send Hayden back if you offer your word that you have not told the others."

"I haven't told anyone." Silence fell again, then she blurted out, "I'm glowing. How do I stop it?"

"Glowing?" he asked, and paused as if in thought. "You have the gift of healing?"

“Yes,” she answered.

“I’m assuming you used it.”

“I ... brought someone back to life.”

He didn’t speak for a few seconds. “Your gifts are indeed amazing.”

“But how do I stop it?” She hadn’t been fishing for compliments.

“You must release the energy you drew inside you to complete the healing.”

“How?” Kylie asked.

“Meditate.”

“I’m not good at meditation.” She bit down on her lip.

“Then you’d better learn. And fast.” He exhaled. “Kylie, if other gangs learn just how gifted you really are, you’ll be a commodity. They will either want you working for them, or they’ll want you dead. It won’t be just one gang coming after you.”

His warning rang in her ears. *Great. That’s all she needed.*

“I will send Hayden back,” he went on, “but think carefully on this, my child. I deserve to get to know my only grandchild.”

* * *

Monday morning Kylie sat in the dining hall while everyone stared. She wasn’t glowing anymore. Her internal bulb had blown sometime during the night.

She’d stayed in her room all weekend and meditated, and slept. Obviously, bringing someone back to life took it out of you. Holiday and Burnett had dropped by with food, TLC, and news that all the bodies of the girls has been turned over to their families. Both Burnett and Holiday were now glowing, but it was a natural glow. They were in love.

That only made Kylie miss Lucas even more.

Derek had called twice just to say he was thinking about her. Lucas hadn’t. She didn’t even know if he was aware of what had happened. Still, his silence was hard to take.

Helen and Jonathon had dropped by. And Miranda, Perry, and Della had checked on her almost every hour. Even during the night, they’d crack open

the door and peer at her. Of course, that could be because she looked really cool glowing in the dark. Hell, they could have sold tickets to the other campers for a dollar a peek. Not that they would. They were her friends.

Kylie stared down at her runny eggs and frowned as she felt all eyes in the dining hall on her.

Nope, right now, glowing wasn't the problem. It was her pattern. She'd changed again. She was finally a werewolf and Lucas wasn't around to enjoy it. And neither was Socks. Her cat hadn't come out from under the bed all morning. He made his prejudices known. Just as clear as the other werewolves here at the camp. Not one of them had come to say hello, or go to hell.

"You hanging in there?" Della asked.

"Like a pro," Kylie answered, and looked up to see Hayden Yates walk into the dining hall. Her heart did a little dance. He was back. Relief at knowing she wasn't completely alone washed over her.

We are your family. Her grandfather's words sliced through her.

"You still can't lie worth a damn," Della said.

Kylie looked away from Hayden before anyone guessed they shared secrets.

Della was right. She'd lied. She wasn't hanging in there like a pro. More like by a thread. She was confused, scared, and worried. She might have stopped glowing, but what was next? What freaky thing would she be calling her grandfather or running to Hayden to help her fix? And if she really belonged at Shadow Falls, why did Hayden's presence bring her so much comfort?

* * *

"Let's get this show on the road," Chris, the Meet Your Campmate leader, announced after breakfast. Kylie stood outside beside Della. She fought the need to fan herself. Her sudden increase in her body temperature would take getting used to.

"And first on our list of names is none other than our brand-new were." Chris's gaze shot to Kylie.

Kylie's breath caught. The first people announced were generally the ones someone had paid in blood for Chris to arrange. Swallowing, her gaze shot to Derek. But he stared at Chris in concern.

"Kylie, you get the pleasure of Fredericka's company."

Oh, great. They had saved her life only to kill her later.

"I can follow you if you want," Della whispered, her eyes bright.

Kylie shook her head, tired of always being under someone else's protection. "No."

Fredericka walked up. "You wanna walk to the lake?"

"Sure," Kylie answered. *Why not? The lake would be a nice place to die.*

"I'll see you later." Della's tone came with all kinds of warnings for Fredericka.

As they started walking, neither Kylie nor Fredericka talked. Kylie listened, but amazingly, she barely heard their footsteps. The ability to move in silence must be part of being were. Her mind chewed on what Fredericka really wanted.

Or it did until her friendly blue jay showed up and did a song and dance right in front of them.

Fredericka frowned. Kylie shooed the bird away. "Go!"

As they continued on, Kylie did some thinking. She didn't believe the she-wolf really wanted to kill her. Then again, hadn't she already tried once? Putting a lion in Kylie's bedroom several months back hadn't been an act of kindness. But if the girl really planned on murder, would she have let the whole camp know they were together?

Then another thought suddenly hit. Was Fredericka pissed that Kylie hadn't said thank you for saving her life?

She'd planned on doing it. She really had. But she'd spent all her energy on stopping herself from glowing this weekend. Nevertheless, she should have done it first thing this morning. Was it too late?

Better late than never.

"Burnett told me you saved my life," Kylie said. "I should say thank you."

Fredericka's dark black hair swung loose around her shoulders. She was

at least three inches taller than Kylie, and probably outweighed her by twenty pounds. Not that Kylie was seriously frightened anymore.

"I probably did it more for Holiday than you," the were said.

Probably? "I figured that," Kylie said, "but thanks anyway."

Fredericka nodded and remained quiet for the next few minutes. Kylie hated the tense silence. "Did you pay blood to get Chris to match us up?"

The were nodded. "Three pints. He said since he might get in trouble for pairing up enemies, I had to pay more."

"That's a lot of blood," Kylie said, when she couldn't think of anything else to say. Then the thought of blood had her remembering how she'd felt when she thought she'd killed Collin Warren. Fredericka had to feel the same, didn't she? Kylie's gratitude suddenly grew. "I'm sorry that ... you had to ... ki—Do it."

"It was nothing." She glanced at Kylie. "I've killed before."

Kylie couldn't swear on it, but something told her that if she'd been able to hear the girl's heartbeat, it would have told a different story.

"It still can't be easy," Kylie said.

"I'm over it," she snapped, but her tone said she wasn't.

And I'm still sorry.

More silence hung in the air. Fredericka finally spoke again. "You were wrong to sic your skunk on me."

"I didn't sic him on you," Kylie said, being honest. "You attacked him."

"It still wasn't nice," she said, and growled.

"Neither was putting a lion in my room." There, Kylie had thrown that bone out for them to chew on.

"I guess so." Fredericka looked away, but not quick enough.

Kylie saw the truth. "You didn't do it." She shook her head. "Why did you lie and say you did?"

She didn't answer for a long time. "I heard rumors that you thought I did it. I figured, why not let you believe it? I didn't like you."

"And now?" Kylie asked, still wondering why the were had paid three pints of blood to have an hour with her.

"Still don't like you," she said matter-of-factly. "But after I saw what you

did for Holiday, I don't hate you as much."

"Well, there's a compliment I'll savor," Kylie said, letting a little humor slip into her voice. Fredericka didn't respond.

They arrived at the lake, and the girl stood there and looked out at the water. "I love Lucas," she confessed.

Kylie inhaled and tried to figure out how to play her cards now. Honesty seemed the only way. "So do I."

They were looked at Kylie, anguish filling the girl's eyes. "I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you. While I don't like you, I like *her* even less. And at least I know he cares about you. Even before you showed up here, he'd mentioned you to me. I was jealous of you even then."

Kylie shook her head, trying to play catch-up with Fredericka's conversation. "I'm not following you."

"I'm talking about Monique. I know he's told you that he can get out of it. But I'm not sure he can. I don't think you should let him do it."

"I'm still not following you," Kylie said, but she already had a feeling she didn't like what Fredericka had to say.

Fredericka just stared. "Shit. He didn't tell you? He said he did and you understood. That damn dog lied to me."

Frustration welled up inside Kylie. "Lied about what?"

"Lucas's betrothal ceremony is tonight."

Fredericka's words bounced around Kylie's head. "His what? He's ... getting married?"

"Engaged, but with weres when you get betrothed, it's written in stone. He thinks he can get out of it, but I don't buy it. You don't just change your mind. And she's a complete bitch. If he goes through with this, he'll be stuck with her for the rest of his life."

"No!" Denial shot through Kylie and anger welled up inside her. "You're lying. You just want to start trouble. You'll do anything to break Lucas and me up."

"You bitch." Fredericka growled. "I'm trying to help and this is what I get? Yes, I've tried everything to break you up. It didn't work. But I'm not lying." She pulled an envelope from her pocket. A small envelope, like an

invitation. “If you don’t believe me, go see for yourself.” She stepped away, and then turned back. “Just make sure you keep your were pattern on, or someone will rip your heart out before they ask questions.”

* * *

Kylie didn’t want to believe Fredericka. More than anything in the world, Kylie wanted this to be just another one of the were’s tricks to come between her and Lucas. Yet the girl was right about one thing: Kylie had to see it for herself.

The ceremony was taking place at another state park around five miles from there. As a were, Kylie could make that run fairly quickly. All day, she considered whether or not to tell Holiday and Burnett, but decided she’d rather ask for forgiveness than for permission. And speaking of forgiveness ... She swore if Fredericka was lying, she’d never forgive her, never trust her again.

But if she wasn’t lying ... Kylie wasn’t sure she’d ever forgive Lucas.

The ceremony was supposedly happening at midnight. Which made it easy to get away.

Kylie tiptoed out of her room. Della yanked open her bedroom door.

Easier to get away, but not easy.

“Where are you going?” Della snapped, her gaze moving up and down on Kylie. “And all dressed up?”

Kylie didn’t know what one was supposed to wear to a betrothal, but her black dress and low black pumps would have to do.

“I need to go somewhere,” Kylie said, stating the vague truth. She hadn’t told Della or Miranda about this. At first, Kylie thought it was because it just hurt too much. Then she thought it was because they’d try to talk her out of going. Right now, she realized it was because she was worried they might say, “I told you so.”

They hadn’t been pro-Lucas lately.

Not that Kylie totally believed it yet. But she obviously believed it enough to sneak out of Shadow Falls to find out. But how could she not be suspicious? Lucas never told her anything. And damn, that hurt.

“You’re meeting your grandfather?” Della asked, studying Kylie with suspicion.

“No,” Kylie said.

Della frowned. “You’ve been acting weird since you walked off with Fredericka.”

“I need to go,” Kylie said.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” Kylie pleaded. She needed to do this alone.

Della’s chest puffed out. “Then tell me where you’re going.”

“You’re not my shadow anymore,” Kylie countered.

Della’s scowled. “No, I’m your friend.”

The honest emotion in Della’s voice pulled at Kylie’s heart. “Look, I’m going to try to meet up with Lucas.” It was the truth—or a form of it.

“I thought you hadn’t heard from him,” Della said.

“Fredericka told me where he was.”

Della made a face. “You trust her wolf ass?”

“Not really,” Kylie said. “But I’m going anyway, and as your friend, I’m asking you not to stand in my way.”

“I don’t like it,” Della said.

Kylie paused in thought, trying to find a way to get Della to understand. “I don’t like that you’re doing work for the FRU, but I respect your wishes.”

Della frowned. “But I’m not doing it alone.”

Yeah, Della was going with Steve, not that she was thrilled with it, but that wasn’t the point. Convincing Della to let Kylie go was what mattered. Right or wrong, finding out the truth about Lucas once and for all felt crucial. She had admitted to loving him; now she needed to know if she’d given her heart away foolishly.

It took some time, but Della backed down.

And ten minutes later, when Kylie jumped over the fence leaving Shadow Falls property, she knew Burnett might come running. It was another chance she took. However, since she suspected that several of the weres might be attending the ceremony—if there really was a ceremony—she hoped Burnett would assume she was one of them. Then again, she *was* one of them, she

reminded herself.

As Kylie ran, she felt an odd kind of power flow through her. Different than the strength that came with being vampire. The way her limbs moved seemed less human. The power of a wolf, she supposed.

Her chest tightened, remembering Lucas telling her how he wanted to run with her as a wolf. *Please, please let Fredericka be wrong.*

Trying not to break all her promises to Burnett, Kylie avoided the woods whenever possible. But as she drew near the park, she wasn't going to have any other option. As she moved in a lithe run, her gaze kept shifting to the moon. She felt it calling her, like water to a person left in the sun too long.

When she entered the line of trees, the darkness grew blacker. The moon was no longer visible through thick foliage. The night air was warm, almost too warm. She felt a sense of danger sting her skin.

Ignoring it, she kept running. She didn't stop. Not even when she realized she wasn't alone.

Chapter Thirty-eight

The cold finally started to impair Kylie's speed and she glanced over to see who the spirit was keeping pace at her side.

The ghost, a woman, the one who appeared in the classroom right before the vision, moved with powerful strokes. Her white gown flowed around her, and her long brown hair danced in the wind.

With Kylie's attention on the spirit, her foot caught on a root and she tumbled down onto the earth—hard—landing facedown.

Pushing up with her arms, breathing in the scent of moist dirt below her, she stared at the spirit looming over her. "Who are you?"

"I'm not important. You are." She held out her hands and instantly a long, bloody sword appeared. *"You must kill him."*

Kylie got to her feet and stared at the spirit's bloody hands; red liquid flowed onto the sword, then dripped to the ground. One slow drop at a time.

For the first time, Kylie understood a symbol connected with the spirit world. This ghost had blood on her hands. And now she wanted Kylie to do her bidding.

Drawing herself to her full height, Kylie spoke in her mind, *I don't know what you heard, but I don't ... I haven't killed anyone, and I'd kind of like to keep it that way.*

She stared at Kylie with gray, dead eyes that held no emotion, no soul. Fear raced up Kylie's spine. Something about this spirit was different from the others. Something scary.

"Then you, too, will die," the ghost said as if it didn't really matter. Without warning, the spirit faded. But the spot where she'd stood was coated

with ice. Dark, black ice.

“Couldn’t you have told me that first?” Kylie muttered, and then inhaled. “No!” She fisted her hands. “I’m not going to think about this now.”

Her heart pounded in her chest and she commenced running, running to Lucas, or rather, to the truth about Lucas.

She remembered the last time he’d kissed her, the way he’d held her, the way she’d felt so loved. Fredericka was lying. She had to be lying.

A few minutes later, Kylie sensed others around her.

Other wolves.

She wasn’t sure how she knew, she just did. Not wanting to draw attention to herself, she stopped running and started walking. Hoping to hide the windblown look, she pulled the band from around her wrist and put up her hair.

As she moved closer to the park, she heard voices. Happy voices. She thought she recognized Will’s voice. She stopped beside a tree so as not to cross paths with him or any other of the Shadow Falls campers. The last thing she wanted was to be recognized.

Only when Kylie couldn’t hear anyone moving around her did she continue on. When she left the line of trees, she saw the crowd, standing in rows. A hundred or more wolves gathered together. A few in the back line turned and looked at her. Thank goodness they weren’t from Shadow Falls.

Fredericka’s warning rang in her ears. *Just make sure you keep your were pattern on or someone will rip your heart out before they ask questions.*

She felt a few of the bystanders checking her pattern and she prayed it was still were. Her breath hitched in her lungs until they turned around as if content she was one of them.

But Kylie didn’t feel as if she belonged. Her heart ached at knowing Fredericka hadn’t been lying. She almost left, but stopped herself. Maybe this wasn’t even about Lucas. Maybe Fredericka sent her here hoping she’d see the crowd and believe the lie.

Stiffening her spine, she moved in and stood in the last row. Obviously weres didn’t need to sit down, because no seats were provided. Her view of the front was blocked, but that meant people up front couldn’t see her, either.

A voice suddenly started speaking, welcoming everyone here. Kylie's chest ached when she recognized the deep tenor.

Not Lucas, but his dad.

Her chest started to burn with the idea of Lucas getting engaged to someone else.

"Tonight I present to you my son and his bride-to-be," Lucas's father said. "You will witness their vows, their promise to each other."

Kylie closed her eyes. As betrayal filled her chest, music filled the dark night. The slow bell-like music was unlike anything Kylie had ever heard.

A young woman, dark hair pinned up with flowers, wearing a long black evening gown, walked down the aisle. The attendees oohed and ahed over her beauty. Even Kylie couldn't deny it.

The crowd in front of her shifted, and Kylie saw Lucas's father. Standing beside him was ... Lucas. The air in her lungs shuddered. He wore a dark gray tux that fit his hard frame just perfectly. Tears stung her eyes when she saw him reach out and take his future bride's hands.

The crowd shifted again, and she lost the view, but she could still hear. Words were spoken.

Vows.

Promises.

Lucas Parker gave his soul to Monique. *His soul.*

The sound of Lucas's voice cut into Kylie like a dull knife. She wanted to run, to escape, but to leave now would draw attention.

She waited. Her breath held, and she kept staring directly in front of her. The crowd shifted, and the view opened up again. Not a sound filled the night as Lucas pulled the girl into his arms and kissed her. Kissed her like he'd kissed Kylie.

Her breath caught. Anger and betrayal filled her.

She swung around to escape; not realizing another line had formed behind her, she slammed into someone.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Kylie?" She heard someone say her name behind her.

She tried to dart around, but suddenly the crowd seemed to close in as

everyone started applauding, cheering on the kiss.

“Excuse me,” she said, pushing through another line of weres.

“Kylie?”

She heard her name again. And this time, she glanced back and saw Clara moving in.

She darted through the crowd, only to land in the midst of another close-knit group of weres. She looked back one more time. Lucas had his arms around the woman. He looked happy. Genuinely happy.

More than anything, Kylie wanted to disappear, to vanish. Then she realized she could disappear. She wished it, wished it with all her heart. Clara charged through the crowd, stopping beside Kylie. The girl looked around ... and looked right through Kylie.

“Did you see the blonde that was here just a second ago?” Clara asked.

Kylie inhaled and left. Now, merely a wisp in the air, she took off running.

She didn’t look back again. She couldn’t.

She was crying when she entered the woods, crying when she left them.

Perhaps this was fate, she told herself. Because now she knew the right thing to do.

When she jumped the fence back into Shadow Falls, she didn’t go to her cabin, she went to Hayden’s. She didn’t know if she was visible until he opened the door and stared at her. At her, not through her.

“What happened?” he asked, sounding urgent.

“Tomorrow.” She forced the words through her tight throat. “Tomorrow I’ll leave.”

He ran a hand through his mussed hair, sleep still filling his eyes. “We could go now. It would be easier.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I have to say good-bye.”

He frowned. “They won’t let you go.”

She inhaled a breath of resolve. “They can’t stop me.”

* * *

When she got to her cabin and saw who waited on the front porch, her heart

stopped.

She started to run away, but realized running wouldn't accomplish anything.

He still wore the tux, but he'd unbuttoned his shirt and the bow tie was gone. When his blue gaze met hers, regret filled his eyes.

She moved up the steps, and he studied her every move. He could probably tell she'd been crying, but she refused to cry in front of him now.

"Go back, Lucas," she said. "You're missing your own party."

"Don't do this," he growled. "I told you I was doing what I had to, that it didn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything."

It sure looked as if it meant something. "Well, it should have meant something." *You gave her your soul.* She waved him away from the door. "I'm tired, do you mind?"

"Damn it, Kylie. As soon as I'm on the Council, I'll call off the engagement. I had to do this before my dad would give me his approval for the position. You said you understood."

She bit down on her lip. "How long have you been seeing her?"

He closed his eyes. "Dad's had it planned for a few months. He's been bringing her around, but I haven't—"

"Stop!" She shook her head. "Of all the things I considered you were hiding from me, I never imagined this."

"Try to see this from my point of view," he pleaded.

"I do see it," she said, and God help her, but there was some truth to her words. "You did what you had to do. As hard as it is, I understand that." *Lucas belonged with his pack, his people.*

And so did she.

He reached for her. She stepped back. She couldn't let him touch her. It would hurt too much. She held out her hand. "No."

He shook his head. "Please, don't do this. Damn it!" He swung his fist, closed his eyes and when he opened them, he looked at her. Right at her. "I love you."

Now he told her. Now! She lifted her chin. "I think you vowed your love and soul to Monique tonight."

She darted around him, entered the cabin, and shut him out. Then, leaning against the cold door, she wrapped her arms around herself. Her heart felt swollen, inflamed.

Don't ever fall in love, princess. It hurts too much. Her stepfather's words whispered through her broken heart. He'd been so damn right.

When she heard Lucas leaving, her breath caught.

"He's a piece of wolf shit," Della roared. Kylie looked up. Miranda stood beside Della in the kitchen. Had they heard everything? More tears filled her eyes.

"Sit down." Miranda pulled a chair out. "I'll get you some ice cream."

"No ... not now." Kylie didn't have any strength to explain or to even talk.

"Tomorrow." She went into her room. Socks looked out at her from under the bed, and then disappeared. Even her cat betrayed her. It was the last straw. Kylie dropped on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

* * *

Not that she stayed asleep for long. At four in the morning, Kylie knocked on Miranda's door. "I need to talk to you."

Della had already gotten up and stood by the kitchen table, staring sleepy-eyed and suspicious at Kylie.

When Miranda came out, wearing her duck slippers, she pushed a curtain of hair from her face. "What time is it?"

"Early," Kylie said. "I'm sorry, but ... I have to talk to both of you." *Make it short and sweet. Short and sweet.* She'd told herself all morning.

She'd tried talking herself out of this, but she couldn't. Leaving Shadow Falls was the right thing to do. But the right thing didn't always feel right. Coming to Shadow Falls had felt wrong, yet it had turned out to be a step toward finding the truth. This was just another step—a needed step.

Someday, Kylie hoped her choices could be made by what she wanted, and not by what she needed. But that time hadn't arrived yet.

"No," Della said.

"No, what?" Miranda asked.

“She’s going to tell us she’s leaving.” Della’s eyes filled with emotion.

“No, she’s not,” Miranda smarted back.

Short and sweet, Kylie thought again. “Della’s right. I need to go live with my grandfather for a while. Not forever. I’ll be back.” God, she hoped so.

Miranda stared, her expression one of disbelief. “You can’t do that. What will your mother say?”

“I haven’t figured that out. But I will. I just need you guys to understand, and not be mad. And...” Tears filled her eyes. “And take care of Socks because he doesn’t want to ... go with me.”

“You’re leaving us,” Miranda said. “You can’t leave us. We’re roommates, we’re best friends.”

Della stood there, stoic, tears glistening in her dark eyes, and she swiped away every drip of moisture that slipped from her lashes.

Kylie went to hug Miranda first. The witch started crying and Kylie’s heart hurt so much she couldn’t breathe. When Kylie turned to Della, the girl held up one hand. Anger flashed in her eyes.

“Oh, hell no,” Della screamed. “You’re freaking leaving us. I don’t hug people who walk out on me.” The vamp stormed back into her bedroom. Kylie felt the door slam all the way to her soul and it hurt so damn bad.

She walked into her room, picked up her suitcase, and left, before it got harder. Inside, Kylie felt raw. Sooner or later, it would stop hurting, she told herself.

Derek stood outside her cabin. He looked as if he’d woken up, pulled clothes on without thinking, and came running. His jeans weren’t snapped, his shirt unbuttoned.

She wasn’t sure how he knew, but he did. She saw it in his green eyes.

“Why?” he asked when she walked up to him.

“Because I have to figure things out.”

“But you’ve already figured a lot out while you’ve been here.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “But it’s time to take the next step.”

He didn’t try to talk her out of it. He didn’t speak on the walk to the office. But she felt him reading her every emotion. When they arrived at the

office, she looked back at him. For some reason she recalled the first time she'd seen him—sitting in the back of the bus, not very happy to be there.

She dropped the suitcase and hugged him. Tight. They had something special. She wasn't sure what it was, or if it should have been more, but she knew she cared about him. Probably always would.

He touched her cheek. He didn't say anything, but that touch said so much. He still loved her.

She picked up her suitcase and walked up on the porch. She left her suitcase by the door, then looked out toward the exit. She'd called Hayden earlier and told him to meet her at four thirty. She suspected he was already here. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be late.

"Holiday." Kylie called out her name when she walked in.

"In the office," Holiday called back. "I just poured you a cup of coffee."

Kylie moved to the door. Holiday sat at her desk, her red hair hanging loose. She looked ... happy. She wore her love for Burnett very well.

"You're up early ... again," Holiday said.

Two cups of coffee waited on the desk. Had Holiday known she'd be here? Kylie went and sat in the chair. "How—?"

"Lucas came by late last night," the camp leader confessed.

Kylie swallowed. *Short and sweet.* She didn't want to talk about Lucas right now. "I have to go live with my grandfather for a while. Just until I figure out who I am."

Desperation entered Holiday's gaze. "You can't..."

Emotion lumped in Kylie's throat. "I need to figure this out."

"We can figure it out together," Holiday said, but her expression was one of sad acceptance. And it wasn't like Holiday not to fight harder. Unless ...

Kylie remembered that when Holiday died, she'd spoken with Heidi, Kylie's grandmother. "She told you I had to go, didn't she?" When confusion filled Holiday's eyes, Kylie explained, "Heidi, she told you about this."

"No, not..." She paused. "She said I shouldn't stop you from making your own choices."

"And this is my choice." *Damn, it hurt to say that.* "I'll be back. You know that."

Holiday pressed her open palms on the desk. “What am I going to tell your parents?”

Kylie paused. “I’ll figure it out and call you.”

Holiday exhaled. “Burnett is going to be so furious.”

“I know. That’s why I was hoping you’d just tell him about this. I don’t think I could face him right now.”

“I don’t like this.” Holiday’s voice sound so tight.

Tears filled Kylie’s eyes and she stood up. “Della wouldn’t hug me good-bye. Please don’t say you won’t.”

Holiday bolted up. “I’ll hug you for me and Della. And Burnett.”

The embrace lasted for several long seconds. “I love you,” Holiday said. “And I expect a phone call from you this evening. And every day. Every morning and night.”

Kylie nodded. “Thank you for not fighting me on this.”

Holiday put a hand on each side of Kylie’s face. “Don’t think I don’t want to.”

“But you know it’s the right thing?” Kylie asked, hating that she needed a little more confirmation. But damn, should doing the right thing feel so wrong?

Holiday inhaled. “I don’t know if it’s right. I won’t stop you.” She frowned. “But I will say this. If this is about what happened with Lucas—”

Kylie inhaled. “This isn’t just about him.” And it wasn’t. He was just the proverbial straw that brought the camel to its knotty knees.

Holiday sighed. “Sometimes, when we’re hurting, we make choices we wouldn’t normally make.”

Kylie shook her head. “Remember how my dad told me that we would work out these things together? I think by ‘we’ he meant chameleons.”

Holiday frowned. “You don’t know that’s what he meant. You thought he was telling you that you were going to die. Maybe if we went to the falls you might—”

“No, this is right,” Kylie said, and there was a part of her that believed it.

Holiday exhaled, her breath shaky. “Then I have to let you go, even if I don’t agree.”

They hugged again. *Short and sweet.* Kylie walked out.

The dad-blasted blue jay swooped in. More tears filled Kylie's eyes. "Go," she told the bird. "It's time to leave the nest. For both of us."

Turning, she spotted Hayden waiting by the gate. She picked up her suitcase, the same one she'd brought with her to Shadow Falls last June. She started walking and got a few feet from the gate when a sudden whisk of wind, a familiar whisk, flashed past, then stopped.

Della's arms embraced her. "Promise me you'll get your wolf ass back here soon. Promise me, damn it!"

Tears filled Kylie's eyes and she held on to Della extra tight, the way only really good friends do. "I promise," Kylie said. "I promise."

It was a promise Kylie intended to keep, too. Della, obviously another believer in short and sweet, flashed away. Kylie looked back one more time. She saw a crying Miranda with Perry running up from the path into the main clearing; she stopped and just waved. Kylie knew that Miranda had helped convince Della to come. Dear God, she was going to miss her roommates.

Then Kylie's gaze shifted to the office porch. Holiday stood there. But not alone. Burnett stood by her side. Even from this distance, she saw his disapproval, but she also saw how his arm tenderly circled Holiday's waist. A warmth filled Kylie's chest; she'd played a small part in helping that happen. And somehow she sensed that had been part of her destiny.

Suddenly she saw Derek standing to the side of the office. He met her gaze and smiled.

If she wasn't hurting so much, she would have smiled back. Right before she went to turn away, she felt another presence. Felt it, didn't see. Somewhere behind the first line of trees, a certain blue-eyed were watched. He was hurting, but so was she.

She turned toward the gate. Hayden had come closer. "You ready?" he asked.

No, her heart said, but her head said yes. She didn't know what awaited her at her grandfather's, but nothing, nothing would take the place of Shadow Falls.

"It's hard to say good-bye," Hayden said.

“I’ll be back,” Kylie said. “I swear I will.”

And she wanted to believe that more than anything, too.

Chosen at Nightfall

c. c. hunter

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Val Sturman.

The first time I met you, my life became a little brighter. You danced your way through life with a smile, an infatuation for storytelling, and with a kind word for anyone who paused long enough to listen. I'm honored and blessed to have been called your friend. You will be missed.

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Chapter One

Kylie Galen looked up from the slice of pepperoni pizza on the fine china plate and tried to ignore the ghost swinging the bloody sword right behind her grandfather and great-aunt. Her newfound family members were ... good people, but a tad on the proper side. And proper people probably wouldn't appreciate an uninvited ghost getting their dining room walls bloody.

The spirit, a female, dark flowing hair, in her early thirties, stopped in mid-swing and stared directly at Kylie. *You kill or be killed. It's really rather simple.* The words reverberated in Kylie's head. They were communicating telepathically, and considering the topic being discussed, that was probably for the best.

That's not simple, Kylie shot back. *And I'm trying to eat, so would you mind leaving?*

That's rude, the ghost said. *You're supposed to help spirits. You need to abide by your guidelines.*

Kylie twisted the cloth napkin she'd placed in her lap. Okay, was there something written in the rule books about a ghost whisperer having to be polite to obnoxious spirits?

Oh, wait, she didn't have a freaking rule book, or guidelines. She was winging it. Winging everything, in fact: ghost whispering, being a supernatural, being someone's girlfriend.

Being someone's ex-girlfriend!

Lately it felt like she was winging her whole damned life, and making a fine mess of things, too. Like her decision to leave Shadow Falls, the camp/recently turned boarding school for paranormal teens. It had felt like

the right thing to do at the time.

Had.

She'd been here at the chameleons' compound less than two weeks, and she wasn't so sure anymore.

True, she'd had a good reason to come—to discover more about her paranormal heritage. To get to know Malcolm Summers, her grandfather, and her great-aunt Francyne.

Months after learning she wasn't all human, she'd finally discovered she was a chameleon, a rare species that had gone into hiding after an organized unit of the paranormal government, the Fallen Research Unit, the FRU, had used them as lab rats to try to explain their abilities. Kylie's own grandmother had died as a result. And now the same branch of the FRU wanted to take Kylie in for testing. That was so not happening!

However, Kylie's main motivation for leaving Shadow Falls didn't have anything to do with the FRU, or with finding out about her heritage. Nope. It had everything to do with running away.

Running away from Lucas, the werewolf she'd fallen in love with. The werewolf who had promised his soul to another werewolf and expected Kylie to believe it meant nothing. How could he have done that? How could he have kissed Kylie with all that passion for the last month, yet every time he went to his dad's house, he was seeing that girl? How could Kylie stay at Shadow Falls and continue to face him?

The problem was, she might have run away from Lucas, but she'd brought the heartbreak with her. And now, she wasn't just hurting over a certain werewolf; she was hurting because ... every cell in her body missed Shadow Falls. Okay, so maybe not really Shadow Falls, but she missed the people. Friends who had become as close as family: Holiday, the fae camp leader, who was like a big sister. Burnett, the stern vampire, the other camp leader who was a friend and sort of a father figure wrapped into one. Her two roommates, Della and Miranda, who'd felt abandoned by Kylie when she left. And Derek, who'd vowed his love to her, even when he knew she loved Lucas.

Oh God, she missed everyone so much. Amazingly, she was only a few

miles away from Shadow Falls, tucked away in a secluded spot in what Texans referred to as the hill country, and yet it might as well have been across the world.

Sure, she'd spoken to Holiday every day. At first, her grandfather had refused her this right, but her aunt had insisted he see reason. He'd relented, but only if she used a certain phone and kept the conversations very short, so the calls couldn't be traced. And by no means could Kylie tell anyone where she was.

Because of the camp's affiliation with the FRU, her grandfather didn't trust anyone at Shadow Falls. And his distrust only added to Kylie's feelings of isolation from everyone she loved. Even her mom, who called to inform her that she was about to fly to England with John, her mom's new boyfriend, whom Kylie wasn't so sweet on. Sure, her granddad allowed her to call her mom back every time she called. So they had spoken twice. But only twice.

Kylie's throat knotted with tears, but she refused to cry. She had to be strong. Pull up her big-girl panties and be an adult.

"Is the pizza to your liking?" Francyne, her great-aunt, asked.

"Yes, it's great." Kylie watched the two older people slice into their piece of pepperoni pizza as if it were steak. She knew they served it just for her—because after barely touching her meals these last few days, they'd asked about her favorite foods. Feeling obligated, both to eat and to comply with their show of manners, she forced herself to cut a bite of pizza from her slice and slip it into her mouth.

She wasn't vampire right now, so she should be able to enjoy food. But nope.

Nothing tasted right.

Nothing felt right.

Not eating pizza with a fork off a fine china plate that looked old and rare enough to be in a museum. Not sitting at this fancy dining table with a formal place setting. And especially not feeling right was the spirit who now moved in closer to her grandfather and held the sword over his head.

Kylie stared at the spirit. *Either tell me exactly what you need, that doesn't involve murder, or go away.*

A drop of blood splattered onto her grandfather's forehead. Not that he could feel it or see it. But Kylie could. The spirit performed this show just to get Kylie's attention.

And it was working.

Stop it! Leave. Kylie shot a warning glance at the spirit.

You are in a nasty mood, huh? the ghost said.

Yeah, she was, Kylie admitted to herself. A broken heart would do that to you. It pretty much sucked the joy out of life. Or maybe what sucked the most was missing everyone.

Not that Kylie's time here had been in vain. She'd discovered a lot about herself, about chameleons, these thirteen days. Chameleons had only come into being in the last hundred years. While they considered themselves a species, they were really a blend of all paranormals—individuals who retained the DNA and powers of all the species.

Problem was, learning to control that power was a real bitch. Most chameleons didn't even master the feat until their mid-twenties. Not that there were a lot of young chameleons trying to master things. Chameleons were rare. Her grandfather said about a hundred compounds existed across the world, but in total there were less than ten thousand of her kind. And only one in ten chameleon couples had been able to produce a child. Hence the low population.

Kylie couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever be able to have a child. But damn, she was sixteen, too young to start worrying about being infertile.

"How did classes go today?" her grandfather asked.

Kylie focused on the man. In his seventies, his hair held tight to its strawberry blond color, with only a few signs of graying. His eyes, a vivid light blue, matched hers and her father's.

Another drop of blood landed on his cheek. Kylie scowled at the smirking spirit who sliced the sword through the air only an inch above his head.

I said, stop it! Kylie tightened her eyes.

"So it didn't go well?" her grandfather asked, obviously reading Kylie's expression.

"No, it went fine. I'm ... I was able to switch my pattern from a werewolf

to a fae.” Supernaturals all had patterns that could be seen by other supernaturals. Chameleons had their own pattern, one they hid. And unlike any other supernatural they could change into any other species, and attain this species’ powers with the transformation.

Problem was, like their other powers, it wasn’t easy to control. Classes here didn’t involve so much English, math, and science, but training on how to control one’s powers and to hide their true pattern from the world.

“That’s amazing. Then why the long face?” her grandfather asked.

“It’s just...” *I’m miserable here. I want to go back to Shadow Falls.* The words sat on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t say them. Not until she knew for sure that she’d given this a shot. And until she knew how she would survive facing Lucas.

“I wasn’t frowning at you. It’s—”

“Kylie has company,” Francyne said. Her aunt wasn’t a full-fledged ghost whisperer. She claimed she couldn’t see them or hear them, but she could pick up on a spirit’s presence easily.

The ghost held the sword up, pointing it at the ceiling as if making some big declaration. *You’re about to have more company.*

Kylie didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but she focused on her confused-looking grandfather now and not the spirit.

“Company?” Her grandfather looked at his sister-in-law. “Oh.” He tensed. Then his eyes widened. “Is it my wife, or my son, Daniel?”

“No.” Kylie wished Daniel, her father, who’d died before she was born, would come for a visit. She could use some TLC, and her father was really good at offering it. However, he’d used all his allotted time on earth.

“It’s not them. It’s ... someone else,” Kylie answered.

Someone who had yet to explain what she wanted or needed. Well, except to tell Kylie she needed her to kill someone. What did the spirit think Kylie was? A killer for hire?

The spirit leaned down close to her grandfather’s ear. *It’s a shame you can’t see me. You’re kind of cute.* She proceeded to lick the blood from his cheek. Slowly. And she looked at Kylie when she did it.

Kylie dropped her fork. “Stop licking my grandfather, right now!”

The spirit brought her tongue back into her mouth and stared at Kylie. *Stop fighting your fate. Accept what you must do. Let me teach you how you must kill him.*

“Kill who?” Kylie blurted out, and then flinched when she realized she’d been speaking aloud.

“Lick? Kill? What?” her grandfather asked.

“Nothing,” Kylie insisted. “I was talking—”

“She was talking to the spirit, I think,” her aunt said, her brows pinched in worry.

“About killing someone?” her grandfather asked, and shot Kylie a direct look.

When Kylie didn’t answer, Malcolm glanced around the room as if nervous. His expression of fear reminded her so much of the other supernaturals at Shadow Falls.

That’s when a thought hit. She’d come here thinking she’d fit in, and yet, even living on a compound of about fifty acres in Texas hill country, with about twenty-five other chameleons, she still didn’t fit in. And it wasn’t just the ghost whispering, but the fact that she was so much further advanced than the four other teens here. And they weren’t overly thrilled to be shown up by the newbie, either.

The elders of the group—which included her grandfather and great-aunt and about four others—guessed that Kylie’s early development was because she was also a protector, a supernatural with amazing strength. While that sounded pretty cool, she would argue with that definition for so many reasons.

Topping those reasons was that she could only use those powers to protect others, and never herself. Which to Kylie didn’t make a lick of sense. If she was in charge of protecting others, wasn’t it important that she kind of stay alive? Who the heck had made that rule?

Kylie sighed, a sigh that felt as sorrowful on the inside as it sounded leaving her lips. Was it simply her destiny to always be a misfit?

Her grandfather leaned forward and set his silver fork and knife beside the expensive piece of china. “Kylie, I hate to intrude with your ... spirit matters,

but why would a spirit be conversing with you about killing someone?"

Kylie bit down on her lip and tried to find a way to explain without completely freaking them out. Especially when it freaked her out. She opened her mouth to say something, but was saved by a bell. A very loud bell, more like a siren. The lights in the chandelier over the table started flickering.

Her grandfather, his frown deepening, pulled out a cell phone from his perfectly pressed white dress shirt, punched one button, and held it to his ear. "What is it?" He paused. "Who?" he snapped, and cut his eyes to Kylie. "I'll be right there!"

He turned the phone off and shot up from his chair, and then faced his sister-in-law. "You and Kylie disappear. Hide out in the barn. I'll be there shortly."

By disappear, Kylie surmised he meant vanish, another thing a chameleon could do. Vanish. Like into thin air.

"What's going on?" Kylie asked, remembering the ghost saying she was about to get company.

"We have intruders." His deep, matter-of-fact tone sounded deeper, more serious.

"Intruders?" Kylie asked.

His eyes tightened. "It's the FRU! Now vanish."

Her aunt came around the table and reached for Kylie's hand. Then the woman vanished, and in a fraction of a second, Kylie looked down and her own legs had disappeared.

Chapter Two

Three minutes later, Kylie was led into the barn by her aunt. Or at least she assumed it was her. Because everyone was invisible.

Breathing in the earthy smell of stored hay, Kylie added another thing she'd learned about her powers. A chameleon had the ability to make other people vanish. Or it would appear that way, because she hadn't been wishing to vanish and it seemed her aunt's touch had done all the work.

"Are we all here?" Her aunt's voice broke into the odd, tense silence. Kylie cut her eyes around the empty barn. Not a soul was here that she could see. Of course, she couldn't see herself, either.

Listening, she heard the slight sound of feet shuffling.

"Let's do the count," her aunt's voice echoed again. "One," her aunt said.

"Two," another voice added.

The count went up to twenty-four, but there had been several pauses, and several numbers missed, before someone moved on to the next number. Kylie recognized most of the voices. Especially the four other teen chameleons, plus Suzie, the six-year-old, and her parents, who were the teachers of the groups. The numbers missing were obviously her grandfather and the other four elders.

"And I have Kylie," her aunt said. "Kylie, your number is twenty-five. Remember it and whenever we have the need to vanish, you must say it so we will know you are here."

She nodded, then remembering they couldn't see her, she said, "Okay." Her mind raced thinking about everything that was happening, from being number twenty-five to being invisible and especially to what the FRU

wanted. Were they here for her? Then her racing thoughts stopped on one subject.

Her grandfather. She was worried about his safety and the possibility of what the FRU could do to him and the other elders. Was he okay? Did she need to find him in case he needed ... protecting?

"Maybe we should go find the others," she said, her blood starting the fizzling sensation she got when she feared someone was in danger.

"No," her aunt said in a voice that left little doubt that she was the one in charge. "We wait here. That was the plan and we never stray from a plan."

Kylie heard something in her aunt's voice. Edginess, concern. Kylie's blood grew hotter in her veins.

"Have the FRU come here before? Do they know we can vanish?" Kylie asked.

"Only if you told them," Brandon snapped.

Brandon, the teen who didn't like her. Oh, he had liked her plenty in the beginning, but when Kylie pretty much told the seventeen-year-old that he was wasting his time coming on to her, he'd obviously been offended. He'd snubbed her ever since. And anytime Kylie accomplished something that the teachers taught, shifting their patterns and such, he seemed personally insulted at her success. This wasn't a competition. She just wanted to learn all she could and then ... then go back to Shadow Falls.

Go back home. The thought hung up somewhere inside her, a place very close to her heart.

"I never told them," Kylie said.

"This is no time for bickering," her aunt stated.

"She brought this on us," Brandon spit out. "We've never had the FRU break in before. And God only knows what they will do to us if they find us."

"Be quiet," Aunt Francyne ordered.

But in the silence that followed, Kylie heard what wasn't being said by the others. They agreed with Brandon. Because of her, the FRU had discovered their compound.

Guilt crowded Kylie's chest. She had never considered that her coming here could have put anyone in danger. Yet it had, hadn't it?

Her blood fizzed faster; thoughts of her grandfather being hurt—of it being her fault—made her heart race.

Kylie tried to pull her hand free. “No,” her aunt said. “You let go, you’ll become visible.”

“I need to make sure they’re okay. And ... I can become invisible myself.”

“That’s impossible,” Brandon snapped. “You can’t do that until you’re in your twenties. Everyone knows that.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. She was tired of his petty jealousy.

Footsteps sounded. Numbers were called out. She recognized her grandfather’s voice as well as the other elders.

“They’ll search in here,” her grandfather said. “Adults, make sure you hold tight to your child’s hands. Go to the south end of the property.” The sounds of people making their way out echoed through what, even to Kylie, looked like an empty barn.

Kylie felt her aunt’s hold on her wrist, directing her to walk, but then her grandfather spoke again. “Everyone but Francyne and Kylie. You two go down by the edge of the woods in the back.”

Kylie couldn’t help but wonder why she and Aunt Francyne were being singled out.

* * *

“Why?” Kylie asked after she heard the last footsteps leave, still finding it so strange to speak when no one could see her.

“When we are in a state of emergency, one never asks questions.” Her aunt’s voice rang in the emptiness of the barn. Then, still holding Kylie’s hand, the woman started moving, and in careful steps, she guided Kylie out of the barn.

She moved with her aunt, but she couldn’t remain silent. “What’s going on? Why should I be taken to a different place than the others?” Kylie asked as she moved through the barn door. The afternoon light had her pupils adjusting.

“Obviously, it is you they search for,” her grandfather answered, his voice

sounding close, but his form still invisible.

“But I’m a protector,” Kylie insisted. “If someone needs help, I should stay close.”

“I can feel you, damn it! Where are you?” a voice, a familiar voice that wasn’t her aunt’s or grandfather’s, called out behind Kylie.

Her breath caught and she looked over her shoulder. About fifty feet away, standing in the tall grass, was someone she cared about.

“Derek,” she called out. Then she remembered that no one, other than another unseen chameleon, could hear her when she was invisible.

“We should go.” Her aunt gave Kylie’s hand a tug, but she didn’t budge. Stiffening, Kylie soaked up Derek’s image, hungry for anything that was linked to her life at Shadow Falls.

His light brown hair resting on his brow stirred in the wind, giving him a carefree look, but his green eyes, with flecks of gold, held concern. What was he doing here?

“Where are you, Kylie?” he asked, and the breeze whisked his words away.

She remembered what her grandfather had said about who was here. This wasn’t the FRU.

“Go to the creek!” her grandfather demanded. “You should not have told them where you were.”

His accusation and his tone put Kylie on the defensive. While she couldn’t see her grandfather, she could imagine his expression—stern and uncompromising.

She turned to where she heard his voice. “I didn’t tell them, and no, I will not leave. You lied. It’s not the FRU.” The feeling of betrayal hit.

“When I told you it was the FRU, I was repeating what I was told by those guarding the gate. But even still, it is not a lie. They both work for the FRU.”

They? Who else was here? She heard footsteps coming from the house. Her first thought was it could be Lucas. Her heart gripped at the possibility of seeing him. The pain of his disloyalty weighed heavy on her heart and still tasted bitter. Yet as those footsteps grew closer, she could not turn away any

more than she could stop breathing.

Looking back she saw Burnett James, one of the camp leaders. Not Lucas. Disappointment swelled in her chest, but she refused to believe it was due to Lucas not being there. She didn't want him to come. Didn't want to see him, not now and maybe not ever. Even as the thought whisked through her mind, she felt her heart race with the lie.

But she knew that at least some of the disappointment she felt was about Burnett. She hadn't said good-bye because she knew he would have tried to stop her from leaving. Now she wanted to go to him and embrace him. Apologize for neglecting the courtesy of a simple good-bye.

"Kylie." Her aunt spoke again, and gave her hand a slight tug. "Your grandfather knows what is best. Listen to him. We must go."

Kylie inhaled and tried to not let her emotions control her. But it seemed almost too late. Her head spun as too many feelings swirled inside her. Loneliness, regret, and anger at being lied to. "He knows what is best for him, but maybe not so much for me."

"You must trust him," her aunt said, her grip on Kylie's wrist tightening. "Come, please. We only want to protect you."

"I don't need protecting from Burnett or Derek." She spoke calmly. "And it appears my grandfather needs to trust me, as well. I didn't tell anyone where I was. I gave you my word and I didn't break it." She heard the hurt resonate in her voice.

"That's not important," her grandfather said, but Kylie disagreed. Before she could voice her feeling, he continued, "What is important is that they will try to force you to go back. If we leave now, we will avoid a confrontation."

"She's around here somewhere," Derek called back to Burnett. "I can feel her. Seriously, she's here somewhere."

Kylie focused where she thought her grandfather stood. "No one will force me to do anything that I do not want to do. Not them ... or you," she added. "My plan all along was to go back to Shadow Falls. I told you that from the beginning."

"A plan that I also told *you* I do not agree with." Her grandfather's voice rose slightly.

Kylie, lured by the sound of footsteps, looked over her shoulder again. She watched as Burnett drew closer. Proud, strong, a bit too headstrong. In so many ways, he reminded her of her grandfather. Inhaling, she glanced back to where she'd heard her grandfather's voice earlier. "I came here of my own free will and when I choose to leave, I will."

"You are too stubborn for your own good." Her grandfather's voice boomed from nothing.

"And I fear I might have inherited it from my grandfather," Kylie snapped. Then she glanced back at Derek and Burnett.

"Come with me, Kylie," her aunt pled, and she held tight to Kylie's hand.

"No," Kylie repeated, and watched as Burnett drew closer. He stopped beside Derek, only fifteen feet away from Kylie. She longed to run to him and throw herself in his arms.

"The pizza in the main house was still warm," Burnett said. "Are you sure she's here?"

"I'm certain," Derek answered. "And she's upset about something, too."

Not seen or heard, but still felt, Kylie thought. How odd was that? Her aunt started patting Kylie's hand as if the gentle touch would convince her. But Kylie was beyond convincing. "Please let me go," she told her aunt. But her aunt held on.

"Is she in danger?" Burnett growled.

Derek closed his eyes as if internally trying to touch her emotions. When he opened his eyes, he looked at Burnett. "I don't think so," Derek answered. "She's frustrated and I sense ... loneliness. And ... she's feeling ... something ... something like being torn between two loyalties."

Tears welled up in Kylie's eyes. Leave it to Derek to always get her emotions right. She knew her grandfather and aunt cared about her, knew they only wanted what was best for her, but how could she not make herself visible to Burnett and Derek? Why did she feel as if doing so would be seen as disloyal to her grandfather?

She'd tried to play by their rules, she had. But enough was enough.

Burnett looked around and Kylie would swear he looked right at her. "Are there others here?"

“I’m not sure,” Derek said. “I can only sense Kylie because...” He didn’t finish, but she knew the answer. He could sense her so well because he loved her.

Burnett stood a little straighter. “Mr. Summers, I need to speak with you. Now!”

“How do you know he’s here?” Derek asked.

“If Kylie’s here, he’s around.” Burnett shifted his vision back and forth. “Show yourself.”

Kylie heard her grandfather move in beside her.

“You belong with us, child. Just let them leave,” her grandfather said.

His invisible shoulder brushed against hers. Even though she was angry at him, his touch and the tenor of his voice reminded her of her father’s. The ties binding them to each other could not be denied. “I can’t,” Kylie said.

“Let them leave and we will talk about this in a rational manner later,” her grandfather offered, and she could hear in his voice that he tried to temper his mood.

“I am being rational,” she said. Her aunt’s hold on her hand tightened and Kylie had to fight not to jerk away.

“No, you are not,” he said.

Suddenly, Kylie’s own mood was beyond tempering. Maybe he hadn’t actually lied to her when he’d claimed it had been the FRU, but no doubt he had planned to get her away so she wouldn’t know who had arrived. Since when did he feel he could decide who she could and couldn’t see?

The answer came no sooner than the question whispered across her mind. *Since I came here.* She hadn’t missed how limited her connection to the outside world had been since she’d arrived. No phone. No computer. And it wasn’t just her. The chameleon lifestyle encouraged isolation.

“No.” She touched her aunt’s hand. “Release me.” She spoke slowly but in a tone she hoped they understood was serious.

“Do as she asks,” her grandfather said, and he sounded defeated. Kylie had only blinked when his image started appearing before her eyes. It wasn’t like a ghost materializing. It was somehow different. As if the air parted and he was pulled back into the world.

Her aunt released Kylie's wrist and she felt a slight tingling in her feet and she looked down and watched as her feet and legs became visible.

"Wow," Derek said. Lifting her face, she saw him stare at her, and she fought the urge to throw herself into his arms.

Glancing at Burnett, she saw surprise appear in his eyes as well. His gaze met hers briefly, then he focused his attention on her grandfather, who stood protectively at her side.

"Why have you come here?" her grandfather asked, his tone dark and menacing. Immediately, she knew his stance was out of protection for her.

"Kylie's life is in danger, and if I can find you, so can the rogue who's after her."

"It is not the rogue who I fear the most," her grandfather said, leaving little doubt he considered the FRU, as well as Burnett, the biggest threat.

"You are letting the past blind you from seeing the truth," Burnett said. "Yes, the FRU would like to test Kylie, and some of us have decided not to let that happen, but it is Mario and his team who have already killed trying to get to her."

"I will protect my own," her grandfather said, his wide shoulders drawing tighter.

"How? By turning invisible? Do you not know that Kylie has already been taken hostage by this man, and she's discovered that Mario is a chameleon just like you and that means he knows about your trick. And if he knows about it, that makes you all that more vulnerable to him."

"I know this," her grandfather said, sounding defensive.

"Then you should know enough to be scared. Mario has not spent the last fifty years hiding as you and your friends have been moving from one place to another. He's been killing the innocent. He has taken the powers you have and mastered them to slaughter others. Even his own grandson died at his hands in front of Kylie because the boy defended her. If Mario will sacrifice his own blood, he will think nothing of killing his own kind."

"Wait," Kylie said, trying to keep up. "How do you know Mario is back?" Burnett glanced briefly at Kylie. "He has been spotted."

"Spotted by whom?" her grandfather asked, disrespect coloring his tone.

“The FRU? Like we would believe them?”

“I see that you have reservations,” Burnett said, his words slipping from thinned lips pursed in what appeared to be anger. “But you must understand —”

“You dare to ask for my understanding?” Her grandfather’s face grew red with fury. “What I understand is that you and your kind killed my wife. Because of you, I never knew my son. What I understand”—he pounded his chest with his fist—“is now you wish to do the same to my granddaughter!”

Kylie saw Burnett try to hold himself in check, but he couldn’t hide the bright anger filling his eyes. She had to intervene, but how? Unfortunately, Kylie had no time to come up with a plan. Her grandfather took a step toward Burnett.

“Stop.” Kylie attempted to move between the two men. But too late.

No one stopped.

Her grandfather swung his fist and Burnett took the blow square on the jaw.

While not nearly as young as Burnett, her grandfather didn’t lack strength, and Burnett hit the ground. The sound of pure fury leaked from someone, and Kylie assumed it was Burnett. Before a second passed, her grandfather dove on top of Burnett and the scuffle continued.

Derek barreled forward, but two male chameleons appeared out of thin air and grabbed him by each arm.

How had things gone so wrong, so fast?

Chapter Three

“Stop this!” Kylie felt her protective mode start to kick in, the familiar fizzy-like feeling moving through her body, but for the life of her, she didn’t know where to apply the strength. *Torn between two loyalties*. Derek’s words rang in her head. Chameleons were her own kind. Her grandfather was blood. Yet Burnett and Derek were ... they were family, too.

Out of nowhere, another figure appeared, this one snatching her grandfather off Burnett in an extremely rough manner. Her grandfather managed to stay on his feet but swung at the newcomer.

Feeling forced into action, even before considering what she was doing, she moved in, grabbed the newest member of the fight by his T-shirt, and tossed him away from her grandfather. The helpless figure was about ten feet in the air and making his way down to the ground—fast—when his blue eyes found hers and Kylie realized who she’d tossed.

Lucas.

So he *had* come.

The memory of him kissing his fiancée flashed in her head and echoed painfully in her heart. And for a flicker of a second, she wished she’d tossed him twice as hard.

She turned away, barely managing to catch her breath, when her gaze found Derek, still struggling against the two chameleons who held him. “Let him go,” she seethed to the men. She recognized them as part of her grandfather’s group, but it didn’t matter. She wouldn’t let them hurt Derek.

Her words hadn’t completely left her lips, when suddenly the guys who held Derek dropped to the ground like dead flies. Derek scowled down at

their bodies and stood straighter, almost with a sense of pride that he'd accomplished something.

Seeing the lifeless bodies on the ground brought on a wave of panic. What had Derek done? She'd wanted them to release Derek, but she hadn't wanted them ... She remembered Derek's ability to mentally knock people out, but leave them basically unharmed. Or at least she hoped they were left unharmed.

Swinging back to her right, she refused to look at Lucas, but she heard him getting to his feet, and she felt him staring. Felt his gaze begging for just a glance. He could beg all he wanted; he wasn't getting it.

Yet less than two weeks ago, she would have given him her heart. Who was she kidding, she *had* given him her heart. That's why this was so hard.

Blinking, she refocused on her grandfather, who looked prepared to charge Burnett again.

Burnett, blood oozing from his lip, stood up. His expression and body language held ferocity; he was a man about to even the odds, but the one hand he held out suggested an attempt at peace. Thank God someone had sense, because with her broken heart replaying a painful song over and over in her head, she didn't think she was completely in control.

When her grandfather took another step forward, Burnett spoke up. "You and I have no fight between us. Stop this before someone gets hurt."

Kylie, realizing she needed to react, rushed to her grandfather's side. "He's right," she said. "Stop, please!" She wrapped her hand around his arm. Heat filled her chest. The warmth traveled down her arm and into her fingers. Then she felt it flow from her touch into her grandfather. She instinctively knew that she had passed the emotion of calm to her grandfather. And it was obviously working, because he dropped his head down and breathed in as if to collect himself. Chin still lowered, he must have spotted the men Derek had caused to pass out, because he hurried to them.

"They're fine," Derek said, and stepped away from her grandfather as if he half feared the man might come at him. But the signs of aggression her grandfather had worn minutes earlier were gone.

Kylie recalled the calming touch she'd passed him. Had she instinctively

transformed into fae? She had to have, hadn't she?

Lucas took a step closer, not that she gazed at him directly, but from her peripheral vision she noted his movements. She attempted to tap into some of the serene emotions that she'd just passed to her grandfather. But it didn't work. The pain of Lucas's betrayal rose in her heart, crowded her better judgment, and knotted in her throat.

Her grandfather spoke up. "Everyone leave but Kylie and Mr. James."

"So you can attack him again?" Lucas asked, his tone hard, angry. And yet she could swear she heard remorse in his tone, too. She imagined his expression, his eyes filled with shadows of regret, but she still didn't look at him.

"Do as he says," Burnett ordered. Kylie could tell that, like her, Burnett recognized that her grandfather had seen reason.

People started walking away. Kylie again sensed Lucas moving, but his footsteps faltered as he moved in behind her. His scent filled the air she breathed, and his whispered question reached her ears. "Do you hate me so much that you can't even look at me?"

If only she could hate him, Kylie thought.

Then he continued in a voice meant only for her. "I never cared about her. Only you." The sound of his footsteps moving away sounded like the last beats of a sad song.

Physically he had left, but his words hung on. They filled Kylie with wave after wave of emotion. She knew Lucas spoke the truth—knew because, still being fae, she felt his sentiments—felt them seep into her skin, slip into her heart, and swell to the point of pain. But knowing he spoke the truth didn't change anything.

Whether he'd intentionally set out to hurt her or not didn't alter the fact that he had. How could he not have known how devastated she would be to learn he'd promised himself to someone else? Could he not see how hurt she'd be, knowing that for the months they'd been together, he had been seeing this girl, and at least pretending to care about her?

Right then, someone else's footsteps moved behind her. She felt the light touch of fingertips brushing across her shoulder blades. A slow, soft touch,

not meant to seduce, not meant to draw attention. Meant only to soothe.

The warm calm of the touch left little doubt of the person's identity. Derek.

The pain in her chest lessened and she blinked the beginnings of tears from her eyes.

Trying to gain control of her wayward emotions, she stood there, eyes closed, concentrating on the feel of sun on her skin and the breeze against her cheeks.

"Kylie?" Burnett's voice had her jerking open her eyes.

Her grandfather and Burnett stood in front of her. Concern darkened both of their eyes.

"You okay?" her grandfather asked.

"Great." She produced a smile, one that probably came with as little believability as had her one word.

"Then come," her grandfather said. "We need to talk. At the house and over tea."

As she moved in step beside them, she saw Burnett give her a quick glance and she knew he'd picked up on her untruth. She wasn't great. She wasn't even marginally okay. Then she saw something else in his gaze. Or had she read it in his emotions? Fear. Fear of disclosure, as if he worried she wasn't going to like what he had to say.

Little did he know, she didn't like much of anything being said lately. Then instantly, she realized she'd been thinking only of herself. Selfishly, she'd focused on only her own pain. There was a reason Burnett was here and it might not be just about her.

Coming to a sudden halt, she grabbed the vampire by the elbow. "Is everyone okay? What ... what happened?"

* * *

Five minutes later, Kylie sat at the dining room table and waited for her aunt to serve them iced tea before the conversation started. She just prayed it wouldn't lead to more of what had happened out by the barn. The tension between Burnett and her grandfather was slowly building again. Kylie's,

however, had already hit its peak. Someone had better start talking or she was going to lose it. And by someone, she meant Burnett.

He'd postponed answering her question until they got somewhere to ... talk. Which basically put Kylie on high alert that she'd been right. Something more than just Mario had happened. Someone wasn't okay.

On the walk to the house she'd gone crazy imagining the worst. Now sitting here, cold pizza centering the table, she fought back a sense of nausea as different versions of the worst threw darts at her heart. She knew Derek and Lucas were okay. And yeah, she shouldn't care about Lucas, but she still did.

Holiday had to be fine or Burnett wouldn't have been able to function. He loved her too much not to have been a physical mess if something had happened to her. That left ...

Her thoughts immediately went to her two closest friends—friends her grandfather had insisted she not speak with for a while. But because he'd relented on her conversations with Holiday, she had tried to accept it. Now ... if something had happened to them ... Oh, God! Without knowing the answer, tears stung Kylie's eyes.

Kylie's mind turned first to Della. The stubborn vamp was on a mission for the FRU. Had something gone bad? Was Della okay?

Kylie recalled telling Della she didn't like her working for the FRU, but when Della came right out and asked her if she wanted her to decline helping them, Kylie hadn't told her no. She had known how much Della had wanted to work for the agency.

But now ... if something had happened to Della, Kylie would forever regret her answer.

Worry chewed Kylie's patience down to a fine thread.

"Is it Della?" she finally bit out, as the glass of tea was set in front of her and her aunt left the room. "Did something happen to her?"

Burnett looked at her. "No, Della is fine ... as far as I know. She is still on the mission."

"Then who ... what happened?"

Burnett cupped the cold glass in his palm, but didn't sip from it. If it

wasn't blood, he seldom drank anything except the strong coffee she'd seen him consume on some mornings. "After Mario was reported having been seen in Fallen, there was an incident. We aren't sure it's connected."

"Was anyone hurt?" The words stung as they left her lips, but somehow she knew with certainty someone hadn't walked away unscathed.

He turned the glass in his hands twice before answering. "Helen was attacked."

Kylie's breath caught. Helen, a half fae, was the shyest, most docile person at Shadow Falls. Who in the hell would hurt her? The answer bounced back like an unwanted echo. Mario.

"Is she ... okay?" The word *alive* lingered on her lips, but she feared saying it because, damn it, it would have hurt too much.

"Yes," he answered. "She's going to be fine. And we don't even know if any of this is connected."

"So it wasn't this Mario, seeking Kylie," her grandfather said.

She looked at her grandfather and then said the obvious. "Burnett wouldn't be here if he didn't suspect that."

Burnett begrudgingly nodded. "We suspect it." He glanced at Kylie. "But there is really no proof to substantiate it. She was attacked from behind. She can't remember what happened."

"How bad is she?" Kylie asked, praying Helen wouldn't have scars—emotional or physical.

"She's stronger than any of us thought." He hesitated. "Her injuries were serious, but not life threatening. As you can imagine, Jonathon isn't leaving her side. Her parents are there at the hospital and there have been some awkward moments. Apparently, Helen hasn't told them of her newfound love."

Kylie envisioned the tall, lanky, and pierced vampire holding Helen's hand while her parents looked on. "I can also imagine that he's beyond pissed and wants revenge."

"I see you know Jonathon very well." The slightest hint of a smile passed Burnett's lips. But the smile didn't linger. "We have guards at the hospital, just in case the attacker returns."

“Should I go there?” Kylie asked.

“No,” Burnett and her grandfather said at the same time.

Burnett continued. “If it was Mario, this could have been his ploy to get you to go to the hospital.”

The thought that she and she alone was the reason Helen had been attacked sent an achy feeling crowding into her chest. Then anger crawled in and found its own spot in the tight space. She was so damned tired of people suffering at Mario’s hand because of her. But how could she stop it? That was the million-dollar question and one Kylie decided needed to be answered. And sooner rather than later.

Burnett sat up straighter and refocused on her grandfather. “It was after Helen’s attack that I got worried about Kylie’s safety. I figured if I could find you then I’m sure he can. I think Kylie would be safer back at the camp.”

“And I don’t agree,” her grandfather said.

“You don’t agree?” Burnett seethed out the question. “Mario has made it clear, he wants Kylie to either join his group of rogue chameleons or he plans to kill her. He’s threatened by her power as a protector.”

“Again, I know this,” her grandfather insisted. “You are not the only one who Kylie confides in. But if this attack on the other girl was to draw Kylie out, then it means he doesn’t know where she is.”

“But for how long?” Burnett asked. “Mario isn’t one to let up.”

“Perhaps, but if he’s already found his way into the camp to get to this girl, why would you have me believe that he couldn’t do it again to get to Kylie?”

“But—” Kylie spoke up, yet Burnett’s direct glance at her seemed to ask for her to let him deal with this. She clamped her mouth shut, although it irked her to do it.

“I see your concerns,” Burnett said. “However, the attack didn’t take place on camp grounds.” He gave the glass of tea another twirl in his hands and looked down at the amber-colored liquid as if debating whether to drink it. Then he raised his gaze. “Another factor to consider is that we have more bodies to help fight this rogue and his followers. And while I know the idea probably enrages you, I also have the FRU’s assistance. With the office in

Fallen, near the camp, I can have a hundred trained people there in a matter of minutes.”

Her grandfather frowned. “You are right, it enrages me.” He paused and Kylie saw him grinding his teeth before he spoke again. “I must tell you that the only reason I sit at the table with you is because my granddaughter holds you in such high regard. In the absence of her real father and the situation of her home life, you have in many ways stepped into the role of a father figure for her.”

Burnett ran his finger over the condensation of his tea, almost as if uncomfortable at hearing how highly Kylie thought of him.

“I pray you deserve her respect.” Her grandfather breathed in again. “That said, your logic here confuses me. You claim to be keeping my granddaughter from the FRU and yet you would call them to assist in protecting her. How is this feasible?”

“I’m assisting in preventing them from testing her simply because I’m not sure the tests are one hundred percent without risks. I believe their eagerness to find answers might prevent them from completely considering Kylie’s best interest. But please don’t take this to mean that I think they are capable of doing what they did to others in the past. The FRU isn’t perfect, Mr. Summers, no organization is, or ever will be, but it’s not the same organization that it was back then.”

Silence filled the room. The tension hung thick in the air.

“Let me take Kylie back to Shadow Falls where I believe she is the safest,” Burnett continued. “I will have guards waiting and watching for Mario to make his move. When he does, we will be ready. We will catch him and put a stop to this once and for all.”

“And we can do the same,” her grandfather added, his tone tight again.

Burnett’s grimace deepened. “Look me in the eyes and tell me honestly that you believe you and your people are capable of handling this.”

Her grandfather laced his fingers together—tight—and set his gripped hands on the table. Then he stared at his hands as if weighing Burnett’s words.

When he raised his gaze, he met Kylie’s eyes, and then returned his frown

to Burnett. “I do not agree with your plan, nor your assessment of my or my people’s ability to protect one of our own. Albeit I may be holding on to my prejudices of the past. Prejudices I am certain will be a part of me until I take my last breath.”

He cleared his throat and let go of a sigh. “However, if my granddaughter has told me anything since she’s been here, it’s that she is her own person. So while I hope she will listen to my counsel on this, I’m aware that the decision will be hers. I have lost too much family in this life and I care too much about her to push her away by trying to hold on too tight.”

Tears stung Kylie’s eyes again. She reached over and touched her grandfather’s hands. He turned his palm over and held her hand. His gaze found hers. “Stay here, Kylie. Stay and continue to learn who you are and where you belong.” His touch, so much like that of her father’s, sent warmth through her.

And a part of her wanted to give in. But at what cost?

Chapter Four

Before Kylie spoke, she saw in her grandfather's expression that he already knew her decision. And she saw the pain she was causing him. She felt it, too. His pain.

"You won't lose me. Where I live won't change anything. I'll always be your granddaughter. But I think Burnett has made some good points. I need to go back." It was, she thought, the only choice she could make.

Shadow Falls was her home, but that was only half the reason for her decision. Deep down she knew that Burnett was right. As gifted as her grandfather and his compound of chameleons were, they had spent the majority of their lives avoiding confrontation, not preparing for it. They were no match for Mario and his murdering kind.

Problem was, Kylie wasn't sure Shadow Falls could take on Mario, either. And if they did, how many more like Helen would be hurt, or worse, killed? It wasn't as if it hadn't happened before.

* * *

As she matched Burnett's steps to the front gate, they remained quiet. Night was encroaching on them. Part of the western sky, with shades of pink, hinted at the sun's departure. When they arrived at the gate, he looked at her. "I'll call your grandfather to set up a time to pick you up tomorrow."

Kylie nodded; she had insisted she have time to say good-bye to her grandfather. But now her heart didn't want to see Burnett leave. They hadn't really gotten to talk. That last fifteen minutes had been her grandfather asking

how Burnett had found them. Burnett explained that it had been through the real estate office. When her grandfather had sold his house, Burnett was able to find out who had handled the sale, and through sales records he'd discovered another property her grandfather had owned.

Now with good-bye on her lips, she wasn't ready. "Promise me that Helen's really okay."

"It is as I told you. She will heal."

"And things with Della's mission are going okay? She's not in any danger?"

"My last communication with her confirmed everything is well."

Kylie nodded. "And Holiday's okay?"

"She's worried. But she's always worried about you guys. It's her natural state of being."

"But things between you two are ... good?"

He smiled. "Yes. Very good."

Burnett's smiles were few, so she could guess how good it was.

"And Miranda?" Kylie asked.

"Lonely," he said. "With both her roommates gone, she's feeling rather out of sorts. She, as well as many others, will be happy to hear you are returning."

"Right. With no one there with evolving patterns to check out, I guess it's pretty boring."

Burnett shrugged. "I think you would be amazed how many people have inquired about you. You aren't nearly as unaccepted as you perceive, Kylie."

"I miss everyone, too," she admitted. "Can I hug you good-bye?"

He arched a brow in disapproval, and Kylie immediately knew why. Burnett wasn't one to completely let someone off the hook.

"I didn't think I warranted a good-bye hug," he said, reminding Kylie that she hadn't said good-bye to him when leaving the camp.

"I was wrong," she said, accepting she deserved this comeuppance. "I just knew that you would argue with me. It would have made leaving even harder."

"I would have argued. I would have insisted it was wrong," he said. "And

I would have been right.”

“Maybe not all right. I have learned some things. Plus, he’s my grandfather and she’s my great-aunt. My time here hasn’t been a complete mistake.”

“I understand your need to learn about yourself and I agree, there is a time to reunite with family, but not when your life is in danger.”

Kylie looked at him. “So one’s welfare is more important than ... family. Like Holiday’s your family?” She knew she had him.

He didn’t even try to bullshit his way through that one. “I concede.”

“Wow, this is a rarity.” She smiled.

“Well, enjoy it,” Burnett said. “Then again, you knew my one weakness and used it against me.”

“Loving someone isn’t a weakness,” Kylie said. And then concern chased the levity of the moment away. “How certain are you that Mario did this to Helen?”

“Enough that I’m here,” he said. “And enough that I will have guards monitoring this place tonight. Mario has seen your power, Kylie. You threaten his existence.”

And yet, she felt powerless against him. She looked past the front gate and saw two figures. Two figures she recognized as Lucas and Derek. They stood a good fifty feet apart as if they weren’t even together. Or as if ... they were stationed to ... Were they going to serve as guards? The idea that Lucas might be the one watching out for her, when he’d been the one to hurt her so deeply, sent another wave of pain to her chest.

“Not Lucas,” she muttered.

“Not Lucas what?” Burnett asked.

Kylie felt a little childish for feeling the way she did, and even more for voicing it, but she didn’t want to have to think about him being this close tonight. She’d have to deal with him being close tomorrow when she returned to Shadow Falls, but not tonight. “I don’t want Lucas guarding me.”

Burnett opened his mouth to say something, then shut it as if he thought better of it. Then, with a frown, he nodded.

Kylie ignored the look of disapproval and went in to collect her hug.

Burnett's embrace, even cold because of his vampire core body temperature, sent a warm feeling right to her chest. Knowing that tomorrow she would go home made letting go easier, but knowing that she would be forced to be in Lucas's presence made thoughts of her homecoming bittersweet.

* * *

Kylie started back to the house, but as she drew closer she grew leery of the conversation that would no doubt take place inside. Needing a few minutes to come up with a way to help her grandfather and aunt understand, she passed the house and started toward the gazebo. The sky glowed a hot pink and the setting sun bathed the scene before her in a golden hue. As she moved between the live oak trees, her gaze caught on the Spanish moss swaying ever so gently in the breeze.

She wondered if her grandfather would feel compelled to move now that Burnett had explained how easy it had been to find him. She hoped not. As discontent as she'd felt here this week, the beauty of the property hadn't gone unnoticed. The echoes of nature seemed to announce the coming of nightfall—a bird, a few crickets.

Then the pre-night seemed to hold its breath and the peacefulness of the moment shattered at the sound of a snapping twig. Kylie's heart skipped a beat as her gaze shifted toward the line of trees. Why the slight noise felt intrusive, she didn't know. It could have been just an innocent creature making its way back home before dark.

Yet it didn't sound innocent.

Suddenly a shadow appeared and then disappeared between the trees. Kylie couldn't explain it, but instead of running from the figure, she felt compelled to go to it.

Starting for the trees, she saw the figure again, a feminine silhouette, darting in and out of the shadows. For a flash of a second, Kylie thought she recognized *her*.

Kylie came to an abrupt stop.

How could that be? How could she be here? What was she doing here?

She'd followed him. She had to have followed Lucas. Why else would his fiancée be here?

Unsure if she wanted to confront this girl, she turned to leave. She got only a few steps before she heard someone's feet hitting the soft earth even with Kylie's own steps.

"What do you want?" Kylie bit out, without looking at the person who now moved beside her.

"To talk," the person answered, but the voice wasn't right. It wasn't the light flowery tone she'd heard promise her soul to the person Kylie loved. It wasn't Monique.

Kylie stopped and looked at Jenny, the seventeen-year-old chameleon from the compound. She had dark hair, and was the right height. Had Kylie mistaken her for...?

"Was that you?"

"Was what me?" Jenny asked.

Kylie looked again at Jenny's features, a straight nose, square chin, and light grayish green eyes, and remembered the vague feeling that she looked familiar. Not like she knew her, but just that she looked like someone she knew. "You ... were in the woods?"

"I ... guess. I was coming from our house."

Kylie envisioned a quick glimpse of the person she thought was Monique. It hadn't been Jenny—or had it? "Did you see anyone else?"

"No. Why? Was there someone else out there?"

Kylie looked back at the woods. "Probably not," she said, but she wasn't completely convinced. Being werewolf, Monique could be very quiet if she willed it. Or very fast getting away. Kylie returned to walking, her mind racing faster than her pace.

"So ... do you mind?" Jenny asked.

Lost in her thoughts, Kylie glanced up. "Mind what?"

"If we talk," Jenny said, and she gripped her hands together as if worried about something.

"I..." Kylie looked back up at the house. "I need to speak with my grandfather and aunt now, but why don't you stop by in a bit." Kylie noted

again Jenny's worried expression and she found it odd that she was even asking to speak with her. Jenny hadn't been rude to Kylie during her time here, but she hadn't been friendly, either. "Is something wrong?"

"The rumor is that you're leaving. Are you?"

Kylie nodded. "Yes. Why?"

Jenny nipped at her bottom lip as if nervous. "When?"

"Tomorrow," Kylie answered.

Voices came from her grandfather's house. Kylie looked toward the door.

"I ... gotta go." Jenny darted off in a hurry. Kylie turned back to the house and noticed that on her grandfather's porch stood the four other elders, as if they'd just stepped out to leave.

Kylie looked back and tried again to convince herself it was Jenny and not Monique she'd seen. But she wasn't completely buying it.

As she headed to the house, the elders passed her. All nodded a quick hello and kept walking, but just in passing Kylie felt the tension radiating from them. Somehow Kylie sensed that they had been at her grandfather's discussing her. While she'd been relieved that her grandfather had made at least some level of peace with Burnett, it didn't mean the other elders had. And that, Kylie realized, could mean trouble. If not for her, for her grandfather.

* * *

Kylie hesitated as she stepped into the house. Having been here thirteen days, she still felt as if she should knock. Not that her aunt or grandfather made her feel unwelcome, but she just didn't have the sense of belonging. Maybe because, deep down, she knew she didn't fit in here. She belonged at Shadow Falls. She recalled Burnett saying that her coming here was a mistake. And even though it didn't feel right, she wasn't prepared to call it that.

Voices drifted from the dining room and she moved that way. As she entered the hallway, the voices stopped. Stopped too quickly, as if they knew she was there and didn't want her to hear them. She paused at the threshold. Her aunt and grandfather sat at the table looking at her. She wished she knew the right thing to say. Yet a part of her knew that no matter what she said, it

was going to hurt them. Maybe Burnett was right. Coming here had been a mistake. If for no other reason than the pain she'd brought on her grandfather and aunt.

"I'm sorry if I've caused problems. I'm sorry that—"

"No worries, child. Sit down," her aunt said. "Do you want me to heat your pizza?"

"No, I'm not hungry." Kylie sat down and gazed at her grandfather. "Are the elders upset at what happened? Are they upset at me, or you?"

Her grandfather sighed. "Upset, yes, but not at a particular person. They do not like change, and lately there has been a lot of change."

And mostly because of me. Kylie bit down on her lip. "I know someone who told me that it's when things don't change that a person should start to worry."

"I'm betting this person wasn't a chameleon," her grandfather said.

"No," Kylie answered.

He nodded. "Right or wrong, we have a tendency to like our comfort zones."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

The wrinkles between his eyes tightened. "Stay with us and continue to learn what your heritage means," he said. "You've only scratched the surface of what there is to learn."

"Malcolm," her aunt said. "Do not put the girl in a bad situation."

"I worry that the bad situation is the one she will go back to," he said.

"I'll do most anything to make this right, but I can't stay," Kylie said, feeling her throat tighten.

"I'm sorry." He held up his hand. "Your aunt is right, I'm putting pressure on you and I shouldn't. I have already said my piece. But I will say that I'm going to miss you."

"And I'll miss you," Kylie said. "Will you remain living here?"

He shrugged. "If the other elders get their way, we will leave."

"Because they don't trust Burnett?" Kylie asked.

"I'm sure that's part of it," he said.

"How will I get in touch with you?"

“Hayden Yates is still working at your school.”

Hayden was the chameleon whom her grandfather had hired to keep an eye on Kylie. For some reason, when she left, she had just assumed he would leave, too. “He stayed on as a teacher?”

Her grandfather nodded. “He convinced them that you tricked him into taking you off the grounds. They still don’t know what he is, and it needs to remain that way.”

Kylie nodded, but she couldn’t help but be suspicious. Burnett wasn’t that easily tricked.

“Actually, Hayden speaks highly of how things are run at the school.”

“See,” Kylie said. “It’s really not a bad place.”

* * *

That night, not knowing what time Burnett would come for her, Kylie packed her bags. Then she stretched out in the bed with the softest sheets and down comforter she’d ever felt, flipping through the pictures of her dad. You would think being with her grandfather would make Kylie miss her real father less, but no; it seemed to work just the opposite. Seeing this man who looked like an older version of her dad made her miss him more.

Finally, after spending too much time wishing things could have been different, she lay there and stared at the ceiling. She worried about how leaving her grandfather might hurt him. She worried about Della, and even a bit about Miranda feeling abandoned by both of them. She worried about her mom off in England, probably doing the dirty with a man who gave Kylie the creeps.

Oh, goodness, she had to push that image out of her head really fast, or she was going lose what little pizza she’d eaten.

She worried about how she was going to cope with Lucas.

But you aren’t worried about me?

The cold hit so fast Kylie’s breath caught when the frigid oxygen hit her lungs. She grabbed the comforter and pulled it all the way up to her chin.

“Should I worry about you?” Kylie asked, and looked over to where the ghost stood. Her hair hung loose and dangled almost to her waist. She wore

the same white gown covered in blood.

And she looked ... dead. Deader than before.

Kylie didn't understand. If a ghost had an option to look dead, or not so dead, why didn't they choose not so dead every time?

No, don't worry about me. I'm already dead. See? She pulled her skirt tight and showed a dozen or so bloody slits in the white dress. It looked as if someone had taken a knife to her and hadn't known when to stop.

"That's terrible." Kylie looked away for a second and then back. "Who did that to you?"

The ghost didn't answer; she just kept looking at the holes in her dress. *Actually, it's not so terrible. And to be honest, the person you should worry about is you. Because if you don't start listening to me, you're going to end up dead. Just like me.*

"Listen to what? Listen to you go on about my killing someone, you mean?" Kylie asked, frowning.

Yeah. She continued to stare at the holes in her dress. *And don't make it sound like a terrible thing. Taking a life is not the worst thing in the world.*

"Okay, I'm curious, how many people have you killed?"

The spirit looked up as if considering the question. And it seemed to take her too damn long. As if she actually had to count. "You really did it, didn't you? You killed more than just one?"

I'm up to twenty-something, but I know I've missed a few. Some didn't seem to count very much.

"What were you? A hit man ... a hit woman?"

No, well, sort of, I guess. I didn't profit from my work. I just took care of someone else's problems. And a few of my own. Blood suddenly appeared on her hands. She held them up and stared at them. Blood dripped from her fingertips. Some of it fell onto her already bloody dress and some dripped to the beige carpet. The smell, the coppery scent, filled the room and almost made Kylie gag. She supposed she should be happy that it didn't smell good to her right now.

"Are you trying to take me to hell with you? Is that what this is about? I've heard about some evil hell-bound spirits doing that. But I'm not going

there, and I refuse to help you kill someone, so just give it up. You got that?” Kylie closed her eyes and tried to think positive thoughts the way Holiday had said could prevent a ghost from getting control of you—from taking you places you didn’t want to go.

She felt the cold ebb away, but the spirit’s words whispered in her head. *I don’t want you to go to hell. I want you to send someone else there.*

“Go away! Go away! Go away!” Kylie muttered both aloud and in her head. “I’m not killing anyone for you. Nope. Nope. Not me.”

The cold was gone, and Kylie took in a deep breath. But the cracking sound at her window had the breath seeping out in a squeal and made her jump at least three inches off the bed.

Kylie’s gaze shot to the window but she didn’t see anything.

Once the initial panic slaked off, her mind envisioned the blue jay—the one she’d pulled from death. Had the thing followed her here?

Getting out of bed, she moved to the window, and with thoughts of hell-bound ghosts still too close to her mind, she cautiously pulled back the white lacy drapes. Out of nowhere, a distorted face appeared pressed to the glass pane.

Kylie screamed.

Chapter Five

“Kylie? Are you okay?” Her grandfather’s voice sounded at the bedroom door at the same time she was able to make out the face at the window. *Jenny*. The young chameleon who had spoken with Kylie earlier and acted so nervous. The one Kylie thought might have been Monique. What was she doing at the window? What could she want this late?

Jenny’s gaze shot to the bedroom door and she shook her head. Panic filled her face, making her eyes widen, and her expression pleaded for Kylie not to tell her grandfather that she was there.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I must have been dreaming,” she lied, and then hoped her grandfather wasn’t in vampire mode and could read her heartbeat. Glancing back at the window, she saw relief flash in the girl’s green eyes.

“Sleep well, then,” her grandfather said from behind the door.

“I will,” Kylie said. She waited until she heard the footsteps moving down the hall and then inched to the window and opened it.

Jenny pressed a finger to her lips and motioned for Kylie to come outside.

Before she did as Jenny requested, Kylie poked her head out and glanced around. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but she just didn’t want any surprises. Jenny’s presence already surprised Kylie enough.

Just as she started to crawl out, Jenny stopped her and leaned in. “Is that your packed bag?”

Kylie looked back at her suitcase sitting on a side chair. “Yes.”

“Get it,” Jenny whispered back.

Kylie’s breath caught. “Why?”

“I have to get you out of here.”

Say *what*? “No.” Kylie shook her head. “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“No you’re not. Or at least you’re not going where you think you’re going.”

“What are you saying?” Kylie asked, and part of her wanted to slam the window shut, because instinctively she knew whatever news Jenny had to share, it wasn’t going to be good.

* * *

Ten minutes later, traipsing through the very back of her grandfather’s property, her old brown suitcase in hand, Kylie still couldn’t come to grips with what Jenny had told her.

“I can’t believe my grandfather would do this.”

“I told you, it’s probably not really him doing it. It’s the other elders. To be honest, your grandfather is the most tolerant of all of them.”

Kylie stopped. “But he wouldn’t go along with it. He would not let them just kidnap me and keep me against my will.”

“Look, to be honest, I don’t even know if he knows. They could be doing this behind his back. But you and I both saw the other elders there talking to him.”

Anger and doubt rose inside Kylie so strong that tears stung her eyes. “But leaving like this is ... It feels so wrong. I should go back and talk to him.”

“No! If you go back, there’s a good chance they’ll find us. I know the schedule of the guards, and if we don’t hurry they’ll catch you leaving.”

Kylie inhaled. The smell of the forest filled her lungs and she tried to rationalize. The night seemed to crawl between the trees and the air felt thick. “Why? Why would they do this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re a protector and you belong to the chameleons.”

“I don’t belong to anyone!”

“I didn’t mean ... I know you don’t really belong to anyone. But that’s the way they feel.” Jenny stepped closer. “They’re wrong, they’re all wrong about so many things. Why do you think I’m doing this?”

She looked at Jenny and the girl’s question vibrated in Kylie’s head.

“Why *are* you doing this? And don’t say it’s just because you think they are wrong, or because you like me or something, because you haven’t said more than a few words to me. My gut tells me it’s more and my gut is usually right.”

She glanced away but not before Kylie saw the guilt in her eyes.

“Is this some kind of a trap?” Kylie started looking around.

“No, it’s not a trap,” Jenny said.

Kylie heard conviction in Jenny’s tone, but she wasn’t vampire and couldn’t be sure if the girl lied or not. She peered harder at Jenny. “Either you explain yourself right now, or I’m turning around and going back.”

“Explain what?” Jenny asked, sounding frustrated.

“Explain why you would help me when you don’t even like me.”

She huffed. “Look, I didn’t like you because Brandon did. I’m supposed to be matched with him, and while it makes me furious that they think they can tell me who I should fall in love with, it still pissed me off when he started falling all over you.”

“Matched with him? You mean the elders try to arrange marriages?”

“They try to do everything. They are all crazy. Well, not your grandfather, completely, but...” Jenny rubbed her hand on her jeans as if nervous at telling her true feelings. “They keep us sheltered away from everything. They say it’s because they don’t want people to see us until we have the ability to hide our patterns. But look at you. You lived in the regular world; you weren’t killed or thrown into slavery.”

“Slavery?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah, they use fear to keep us compliant. To convince us to stay here and not go out into the world.”

Kylie shook her head. “I haven’t heard anything about this.” But she suddenly realized how isolated she’d been since she’d come. She’d been so overwhelmed, she hadn’t realized.

“They’ve been careful what they say in front of you. But you have to believe me. They want to keep us here. To protect us, they say, but ... sometimes I think what we should fear the most is being suffocated by this way of life. And if they find out you don’t agree with them, there’s hell to

pay.”

“Which brings me back to my original question,” Kylie said. “If you’re so afraid, why are you doing this?”

She averted her eyes away again.

“What are you not telling me?” Kylie insisted.

Jenny exhaled. “It’s Hayden.”

“Hayden Yates?” Kylie asked.

“We talk sometimes. My parents don’t know. The elders don’t know. And you can’t tell anyone.”

Kylie did the math in her head, comparing Hayden’s possible age and then Jenny’s. “He’s too old for you.”

Jenny’s green eyes widened. She shook her head. “He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my older brother.”

Kylie tried to compute this new information. “Then why would your parents not want you to talk to him?”

“Because he left. When a chameleon leaves they’re supposed to cut all ties to the family so they won’t expose us.”

“But my grandfather contacted Hayden,” Kylie said.

“Like I said, your grandfather is the lesser of the evils here. Your grandfather actually lets me talk to him sometimes.” Jenny frowned. “But we don’t have time to stand around and talk. I’m serious, if we don’t go now, the guards will catch us.” The sound of footfalls coming, coming fast, punctuated Jenny’s warning.

“Damn,” she said. “Run. Just keep going south and you should come to the edge of the property. You should make it before the guards do if you hurry.”

“But—”

“Go! I promised my brother I’d get you out of here!”

The urgency in Jenny’s tone had Kylie bolting, but she only got a hundred yards when her chest constricted with a bad feeling. A bad feeling about leaving Jenny. Kylie felt the subtle change in her body at even the slightest thought that someone might be in danger. She wasn’t leaving the girl, not until she made sure whoever hurdled toward her wasn’t a threat. Swinging

around, she started back.

“Damn it!” a gravelly sounding voice exploded in the dark of the forest. A voice that sounded familiar. “Get off of me.”

“Leave her alone,” Jenny screamed. “She’s going back where she belongs.”

Kylie’s feet pounded harder against the ground as she hurried to the edge of the trees. She hadn’t come to a complete stop when she recognized the voice. She saw Derek with a very angry Jenny clinging to his back, her hands over his eyes and her legs wrapped around his waist.

Derek yanked her hands from his eyes, but Jenny just shifted her hold around his throat.

“Where is Kylie?” he growled, and whirled around, as if half attempting to find her and half trying to throw off his assailant.

Kylie almost smiled at the sight of Jenny clinging to Derek’s back. The smile faded when she saw him become still and close his eyes as if concentrating. She knew he was about to do that thing in his mind that would leave Jenny unconscious. “Stop. I’m here,” Kylie belted out.

“You know him?” Jenny asked, her legs still clinging to Derek’s back.

“Yes. I know him. Get off of him,” Kylie suggested, not completely sure Derek understood Jenny wasn’t a threat.

Jenny slipped down and then quickly stepped back, as if now the moment of panic was over, she felt a sense of fear. Derek turned, no doubt scowling at the girl, if Jenny’s expression was any indication. After only a second, his angry posture weakened. The two of them clashed gazes, neither of them looking happy, but assessing each other.

“Then ... then go, both of you.” Jenny waved her arms and quickly diverted her gaze away from Derek. “Go before the guards find you.”

“What’s going on?” Derek asked, and finally looked away from Jenny to Kylie. She saw his gaze cut to the suitcase in her hand.

“She says the elders are going to try to stop me from leaving.” Kylie felt the pinch of betrayal as she said it. Was her grandfather in on this or not?

“But Burnett said—”

“You do not have time to talk about this!” Jenny snapped.

Derek looked at Kylie as if waiting for her to make the call.

“We should go,” she said, and sadness fluttered inside her about leaving this way. About not knowing if her grandfather had betrayed her or not.

She cast Jenny one more look. “Thank you,” she said.

Jenny offered Kylie a shy smile and nodded right before she and Derek took off.

She kept her pace even with Derek’s, knowing he couldn’t keep up. The suitcase in her hand felt light in her firm grip, but the bouncing back and forth felt cumbersome.

“I could’ve knocked her off. You know I just didn’t want to hurt that girl.”

“I know.” Kylie bit back a grin. What was it with guys and their egos?

Their footfalls seemed to bounce off the trees and fill the darkness. But the mood suddenly felt different. While she couldn’t explain it, her skin felt ultra sensitive and her blood seemed to pulse a bit fast. Fear. Danger. It built inside her, like a slow fire, and the scent of it seemed to fill the air, stinging her flesh.

And from the quick glance Derek shot her, Kylie knew she wasn’t the only one feeling it. Their pace suddenly increased.

* * *

They got within a hundred yards of the gate in less than five minutes. Kylie could have made it in half that time, but Derek couldn’t. As they drew closer, Kylie spotted the gate. They could easily jump over. Kylie was about to tell Derek the plan, when suddenly she remembered. Just because she couldn’t see the guards didn’t mean they weren’t there.

She grabbed Derek’s arm and pulled him behind a tree. “Wait,” she whispered under her breath.

“It’s clear,” he said, and looked back around the oak’s trunk.

“We don’t know for sure,” she said. “They’re chameleons.”

His gaze shot back to the fence, his brow wrinkled with puzzlement. She saw the exact second he realized what she meant.

“How could we know if ... they’re invisible?” he asked.

Kylie suddenly recalled that while she couldn't see anyone when she was invisible, she could hear them. "Let me check on something." She closed her eyes and concentrated on disappearing. For a second she feared it wouldn't work, but then the odd kind of tingling started with her feet and went to her knees.

Derek's eyes grew round as she faded. The second she couldn't see herself, she concentrated on listening. Her gaze moved between the trees, trying to see anything in the dark. Beside her, she could hear Derek breathing. She glanced at him, saw him still staring as if finding her disappearing act a bit too much. Then she heard it. Footfalls.

Shit.

Someone was coming upon them. It had to be the guards.

Panicked, she searched for the right thing to do. They could hear her whether she was invisible or not. But at least she couldn't be seen. But what about Derek?

Remembering something she had learned, she yearned to be visible again, and when she appeared, Derek just eyed her in a bit of amazement. She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "They're close by." She took his hand and laced her fingers through his. Normally, Kylie wouldn't worry so much about facing the guards. Chameleons weren't known as fighters, but the feeling of fear that still pricked her skin said she shouldn't take chances. Not now, not when they were so close to escaping.

She leaned closer to his ear. "I'm going to make you invisible with me. You have to be very quiet, because while they can't see us, they will be able to hear us. You understand?"

"Wait? You're going to make me—"

She cut off his words by pressing a finger to his lips. Then, not really knowing if she could do it, she closed her eyes tight and thought of nothing but disappearing—and taking Derek with her.

Slowly, her legs started to fade, and then she saw Derek's hand start to shimmer. She heard his light gasp when he saw it, too. It didn't occur to her until right then that the whole invisible thing might not work the same for non-chameleons. What if this hurt him? She almost let go of his hand, but

instead she listened to her gut and her gut said it was okay.

Dear God, she hoped her gut didn't let her down now.

As the vanishing slowly climbed up her body, she saw his arm completely disappear. She held tight to his wrist and felt him brush his thumb on the back of her arm. When she looked up into his eyes, she saw his gaze was directed at her mouth. He leaned in just a bit. Oh, crap! Thankfully, before his lips pressed against her, he was visually gone. And so was she. As she felt his breath on her lips, she shifted back just a bit.

"Can you hear me?" She breathed the words, her mind still on the kiss that almost happened. Why did it feel so wrong? She didn't need to be loyal to Lucas now. But she did need to be loyal to what felt right, and that almost kiss hadn't felt right. Maybe not all wrong, but not right, either.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

She heard his quiet reply. "Yeah. This is so cool."

Odd, how different people interpreted situations. The first time this happened to her, she'd freaked. Of course, she hadn't had anyone with her, or even known it was possible.

"Don't pull away from me or you'll become visible," she whispered. At least that's how she thought it worked. Oh, great. What if it wasn't that simple?

"Holding on to you is easy," he whispered, and he brushed his thumb over her wrist again. "I never wanted to let go of you."

"Now's not the time..."

"I know." A bit of guilt sounded in his tone.

Kylie tried to calm her racing mind that darted between the almost kiss to the fear that turning him invisible could have done some damage. Thankfully, he appeared to be fine. Now she just prayed undoing this was as easy as making him vanish. God, she hoped this hadn't been a mistake.

"Now what?" he asked in a voice barely audible, and she felt his breath against her cheek. She shifted back.

"If I understand what Jenny meant, the guards walk the property. I can hear footsteps, and I'm assuming it's them now. They aren't too close, but it sounds like there are two of them. I'm hoping they will walk on by."

“Sounds like a plan.”

It sounded like a shot in the dark, Kylie thought.

They stood completely silent and invisible. The footsteps drew nearer. Close.

Then closer. But they remained invisible. The sound of their breathing echoed too loud in the night air. Kylie tried to listen to see if their own breaths sounded.

Derek must have shifted because the sound of a twig snapping filled the air.

Kylie stiffened and prayed it didn't give them away.

“Did you hear that?” one voice asked.

Kylie recognized it as one of the chameleons' voices. She didn't know him well enough to call him by name. Not that knowing his name would help right now. If he discovered them, they would probably call the elders. And just what the elders would do was beyond her.

“Who's here?” a different voice called out, and the footsteps drew closer. So there were definitely two of them.

“Speak now if you are one of us!” the second voice said, and moved so close to Kylie she could swear she could feel the warmth of his invisible body.

And that warmth left Kylie cold with fear.

Especially when the body materialized and stood within an inch of her. Derek's grip on her fingers tightened, telling her he was sensing her fear.

The redheaded chameleon guard glanced around and called out. “Hello? Is someone here?”

Chapter Six

Another set of footsteps filled the darkness, but this one came from behind them.

“It’s just me,” a feminine voice called out several feet behind where Kylie and Derek stood, invisible and silent.

Kylie recognized Jenny’s tenor just before she appeared from the shadows. The girl had obviously followed them—to make sure they had made it. Kylie felt slightly guilty for doubting the girl in the beginning.

“Jenny Beth? What are you doing traipsing out in the woods at this time of night?”

Derek squeezed her hand and Kylie could only assume it was out of concern for Jenny. But her gut said that Jenny should be able to handle this. She almost said that to Derek, but remembered the other guard would hear her.

Jenny moved in a few more inches. “I couldn’t sleep. I stepped outside for a quick walk and then ... I saw someone.”

“Saw who?”

“I don’t know, he didn’t look familiar. Sandy brown hair, almost six feet. Medium build. Young. And when the moonlight hit him, he looked like he had light eyes.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. Why was Jenny describing Derek? Derek squeezed Kylie’s hand a little tighter, silently asking the same question.

The other chameleon materialized beside his partner. “Sounds like one of the guards that dirty FRU put on us. The one that knocked our asses out. I’d love to get another stab at him.”

Tension traveled through Derek's grip and up Kylie's arm. The need to protect him stirred in her chest.

The new guard cut his gaze toward Jenny. "Why did you stay out here with a stranger running loose?" the man asked.

"I didn't. I mean, that's why I came this way. He was between me and my house when I spotted him. He walked toward the north part of the property. I was going to Mr. Summers' home to report it."

"I knew this wouldn't end well," the guard snapped. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed. The other moved closer to Jenny. "I'll walk you home."

"I think I can make it."

"Not with strangers running amok."

Kylie saw Jenny cut her eyes toward her and Derek, almost as if she knew where they stood. And in the gaze, she seemed to send a silent message that said once she got the guys away from here, they needed to run.

It was a message Kylie didn't need to receive twice.

The one on his cell started talking to someone about finding Jenny. "She says he was headed north." He paused. "We will." He hung up and looked at the other guard. "Get her back home and join me in the north end to find this guy. Our orders are if we don't find him quickly, we'll have to sound the alarm."

"Twice in twenty-four hours, I think that's a record," the other stated with disgust.

Silence reigned in the dark. "Yeah, that's what happens when we start bringing in strangers. Protector or not, I knew that girl's coming here would stir up shit. And to think they want to keep her."

Kylie's heart pulled at hearing this. It wasn't that she hadn't believed Jenny, but hearing it somehow made it feel more real. And it hurt deeper.

Derek's touch grew warmer and Kylie knew he was attempting to console her.

One of the guys shifted closer to where she knew Derek stood. Derek shifted, obviously freaked out about someone taking up his space, even when he was invisible.

The guard glanced around as if he almost suspected he wasn't alone.

"Should one of us go check and see if she's still in her residence?"

"Yeah, we probably should," bit out the other guard.

And as soon as they discovered her missing, it would make it more difficult to escape, Kylie realized.

The guards and Jenny walked away. Kylie waited until they were out of hearing range to speak. She had words on the tip of her tongue when she heard another pair of footsteps echoing around them. Had one of the guards gone invisible and turned around? Or was this someone new?

Kylie squeezed Derek's hand, hoping to make him aware of the newcomer.

Derek's grip tightened as if he understood.

The footsteps stopped only a few feet from her. She tried to control her breaths in and out, praying the slip of air into her lungs, or Derek's breathing, wouldn't give them away.

* * *

Several very long minutes passed. Finally, whoever hung around let go of a deep, emotion-filled breath and began walking away. The crunch of twigs popping filled the air as he left. The temptation to call out her grandfather's name was strong. For the cadence of those footsteps, as well as that long sigh had sounded familiar. But she couldn't be sure, could she? Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Wishful thinking that he'd discovered her missing and was worried and came looking for her.

Wishful thinking that he didn't know what the other chameleons were up to.

But wishful thinking could land her and Derek up to their eyebrows in trouble. So she stood frozen in one spot and waited. As soon as the footsteps faded between the shadows of the trees, Kylie said to Derek, "We have to go and go fast."

"I'm not arguing," he said.

"I'm going to let go of you and I think you should just go visible again."

“You *think*?” Derek asked, and yes, there was a tad of fear in his tone. “Oh, shit. You haven’t done this before?”

“Not really,” Kylie confessed.

“Okay, let’s hope it works.” He released her hand. Kylie closed her eyes and willed herself visible. A second or two passed and she opened her eyes. When she didn’t see Derek, her heart pounded and fear swirled in her chest.

“Derek?” she whispered. Tears filled her eyes. Oh shit, had she done something terrible?

“I’m behind you,” he said.

Kylie swirled around and her breath eased out of her at the sight of him.

“You ready?” he asked, and smiled as if he’d read and liked that she’d been freaked out at the thought of losing him. Because face it, that meant she cared, right?

Not that it was a surprise. She’d never stopped caring. She just didn’t know if her caring was in the same way he felt about her.

“Ready,” she said. “We have to hurry.” And they did.

They ran, side by side. She never pushed it to a level he couldn’t make, though.

When they reached the five-foot fence, Kylie took his hand, ready to help him if needed. He didn’t seem offended. If anything, he smiled and pressed his palm against hers. The smile, and the contentment that filled his gaze, reminded her that he’d tried to kiss her and only added to her anxiety.

Was it just too soon after her heartbreak with Lucas?

Or was it just too late for her and Derek?

Realizing this wasn’t the time for contemplation, she started running faster. Holding Derek’s hand tight, they leapt over the fence.

They came down with a good thud. Derek caught her around the waist. His breathing, heavy enough that his chest moved in and out under the dark T-shirt, matched her own. Their gazes met for one second, a second that felt as if it came out of some romantic movie. The kind where soft music played in the background. The kind that ended in some hot kiss. She pulled away. “We have to go.”

Disappointment flashed in his eyes, but in a blink it disappeared. She

knew he'd read her emotions. Probably felt her confusion. And being Derek, he wouldn't push, or at least not too hard. Then again, trying to steal a kiss earlier had been pretty bold for him.

Maybe this was a new Derek?

Maybe she'd have to be a bit more careful?

Derek snatched the suitcase from her hand and they started running again. Running away from her new problems, but right back to her old ones.

* * *

They got a good mile away before Kylie gave in and stopped. She glanced around. They stood beside a road, and while she'd lost her bearings, she felt certain they were less than five miles from Shadow Falls.

In the distance, a bird called out to its mate. Soft insect sounds vibrated in the night air. The verdant smells of plant life swirled around them. The pending danger should be over. They were far enough away—the guards wouldn't come this far. But some tiny sensation in the pit of her stomach said not to be so sure.

"I should call Burnett," Derek said.

"I guess." The hint of danger stirring in her gut faded at the thought of how she would explain all this to the stern vampire. Frustration swelled inside her. Burnett would be furious and assume her grandfather had been lying all along. And yes, Kylie would admit it almost appeared that way, but she couldn't believe it. She wouldn't stop believing in him until she spoke with him—until he looked her square in the eye and wouldn't deny it. Maybe she hadn't known him very long, but for some reason, she felt she knew him. Knew him well enough to believe that if he'd done this, he wouldn't deny it. He'd own up to it, maybe claim he had reasons, but he wouldn't lie.

Again, she wondered if it had been him hanging around earlier, before they'd made a run for it. The ache in her chest, the one she recognized already as missing him, tugged at her heart.

"Hey ... you okay?" Derek asked, and ran his hand down her forearm.

"I will be," Kylie said, and she had to believe that.

"So ... you don't want me to call Burnett?" Derek dropped the suitcase

and pulled his phone out of his pocket, but he hesitated to dial, waiting for her permission.

“No, call him,” she said, accepting it was the right thing to do. She’d just have to deal with Burnett’s disapproval of her grandfather.

He punched in a button and frowned. “My phone’s dead.” He punched in a couple more numbers. “I know I charged it. Shit.” He jumped and tossed the cell to the ground. “What the hell? That thing shocked the fire out of me,” he blurted out.

Kylie watched as sparks started shooting from the phone, then a buzzing sound came from the device, followed by smoke.

“I didn’t know that could happen,” Derek said.

“It doesn’t.”

“It’s a new phone, too,” he complained. “My mom’s going to have a fit.”

Remembering some ghosts could do things with phones, Kylie put her feelers out for ghosts. No cold brushed up against her flesh. She looked around, searching for ... She didn’t know what she expected to see, but something told her the phone’s demise wasn’t an accident. As her gaze shifted from side to side, the night gave nothing up. Darkness swallowed up the terrain. The paved street looked abandoned. The street lights stood dark, not a flicker of illumination flowed from their bulbs.

Something was out there, but what? It didn’t feel like a ghost.

“We’d better run.”

He reached for her arm. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

“That makes two of us,” Derek said.

“*Three*,” a voice said beside Kylie.

Kylie turned and the spirit of the murderous woman stood beside her. “You did this, didn’t you?”

“Why would I blow up my own phone?” Derek asked.

“Not you,” Kylie said, but didn’t look away from the spirit.

No! I stopped blowing up phones years ago. I found much better ways to make my presence known.

Kylie turned to Derek. “Let’s get out of here.” He picked up the suitcase

and they started to run.

No! This way. The spirit started in a separate direction.

Stopping, Kylie reached out and snagged Derek's arm, bringing him to a jerky halt.

The spirit turned and looked at Kylie. *This way. Go to the graveyard. You'll have help. For some crazy reason all the dead people there like you.*

"Why should I trust you?" Kylie asked, and in the corner of her vision, she spotted Derek frowning. No doubt, seeing her hold a conversation with a ghost would be unsettling. He ought to try having one and see how unsettling that could be.

Because you want to stay alive.

Kylie's breath caught and she looked at Derek. "Let's go this way," she told him, praying her gut was right and she could trust this spirit. Praying this wasn't some ploy to get her at the cemetery and then take her to hell.

They ran. Ran hard. But Kylie felt something following them as they ran. Felt it from the inside out. And felt it was ready to pounce.

She saw the front gates of the cemetery. Her heart pounded against her breastbone and if she was running out of steam, Derek surely couldn't go much farther.

"Wait!" Derek stopped and reached for her.

"Why ... are we ... going to the cemetery?" His breath came out in gulps.

"I have friends there," she said.

"Dead friends," he said, not happy.

"Let's not be choosy right now."

He shot a glance at the rusty gates. "We should head to Shadow Falls. We're close."

"We won't make it," Kylie said, and something inside her said she was right. Something inside her said the thing that followed them wasn't playing around. Something inside her said it was Mario. Dear God, she hoped she was wrong.

She grabbed Derek by the arm and started running again. Unfortunately, they didn't make the gate before the man made himself visible. Mario—the super-powerful rogue who wanted Kylie dead—stood only a few feet from

them. The same rogue who'd hurt Helen, killed Ellie, murdered his own grandson, and didn't mind taking the life of any innocent being who got in his way.

The man's dark eyes shined with nothing but evil. His skin looked aged and leathery, and he wore a dark robe as if he considered himself some sort of royalty.

Memories of this man sending bolts of lightning through his grandson had Kylie's fury and protective nature raging full strength in a fraction of a second. Grabbing Derek by the arm, she pushed him behind her.

Chapter Seven

“We meet again,” Mario said, a hot, dark breeze stirring the bottom of his robe. The sky seemed to grow darker. Even the moon and stars seemed to cringe in his presence.

“Very unfortunate,” Kylie said, and breathed in. The night air tasted of his wickedness. She felt her blood fizzing in her veins and the sense of danger nearly sucked the oxygen right out of the air.

Derek shifted behind her and Kylie reached back and caught him, holding him in one spot.

Protect him. Protect him. The words repeated in her soul like a litany.

Mario chuckled as if he could read her mind. “Do not worry, child. I want nothing to do with your boy toy. He is in no danger from me.”

The old man smiled. His teeth—thin and slightly yellowed with age—appeared below his lip. The creepiness of the moment sent a shiver crawling down her backbone.

“You can calm that protective side of yours down,” Mario said, as if he sensed her defensive side surging to life. “It will do you no good. For you see, the only one I’m after here is you. I mean the weakling no harm.”

Derek yanked free and went barreling into the freakish old rogue. Kylie took a protective step forward to intervene. Mario turned invisible and Derek crashed to the ground.

Mario reappeared a few feet away. “How cute,” he mocked. “The little man wants to protect you.”

Derek didn’t hesitate to go at him again. But, like before, Mario disappeared into thin air and reappeared again a few feet from Derek.

“Stop it,” Kylie said to Derek.

He ignored her and stared daggers at Mario. “I’m not the one who’s disappearing, you bastard. Fight me like a man.”

Mario laughed, and the evilness of his tone raked over Kylie’s nerves like broken glass. “You want me to fight so your girlfriend can protect you. I am no fool, child.”

As much as she resented it, Mario was right; if he didn’t harm Derek, she couldn’t draw upon her powers to fight him. Fear settled in her gut.

“Leave,” Kylie insisted, and right then, she saw the spirits gathering at the gates, their mutterings filled with concern for her.

“Not without you,” Mario demanded, but his confidence seemed slightly lessened when he cut his eyes toward the graveyard gate. Could he sense the spirits, too? He took a step closer to her—or was it just a step away from the graveyard gate?

She took a step back. In the corner of her eye, she saw Derek reach for a large stone at his feet. She knew his plan was to anger Mario enough to pose a threat to him so she could protect them both, but Kylie wasn’t sure she could do it. Indecision filled her chest whether to stop him or not. Because like the plan or not, it might be their only one.

Mario, focused on her, didn’t see the rock coming. It hit him in the temple with a thud. But she knew it would come with ramifications. And she had damn well better be ready to face them.

Tension thickened the air around them as the rogue’s eyes brightened to a lime green color and red blood spurted from his brow. A low growl snaked out of the man’s lips as he glared at Derek.

Kylie felt the strength start to build in her muscles, but it was nothing like what she should feel to draw upon her true power.

“Come get me, you coward!” Derek taunted.

Mario wiped the blood from his forehead and the fury in his eyes faded. “You do not interest me.”

“What about me, you bastard vamp?” Lucas, appearing out of nowhere, shot out from behind the trees and took the old man down.

Kylie had no time to consider her emotional havoc. Derek, obviously

seeing the opportunity, barreled forward. Kylie moved in, her strength now full force. But her strength and speed were nothing compared to Mario's. She hadn't reached the pile of swinging fists when the rogue tossed first Lucas and then Derek off him. Their bodies were flung into the air like rag dolls. Breath caught at the sight, she bolted up into the air and snagged both of them. After only a fraction of a second, she dropped both of them to the ground and then lunged at the rogue.

Proving his abilities again, before she got to him he'd bounced to his feet and shot out of her path. She came to a startling jolt and looked around. He stood several feet away watching her as if she was nothing more than a form of entertainment.

He was toying with her. And she didn't know how to turn the tables on him.

Gripping her fist so tight her hand hurt, she forced herself to accept he was out of her league. He may be old, but his power obviously kept him agile and quick.

He stared at her and smirked, then with eyes thirsty to see more, he held out his hand toward Lucas.

"How far will you go to save them?" Kylie saw a fireball extend from his fingertips. She darted between the fireball and Lucas. She snatched the circle of flames and threw it back at Mario. He managed to dodge it, but then he tossed two more. She caught one of them and the other shot past her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the other fireball knock Lucas down. The taste of fury, bitter and salty, spilled onto Kylie's tongue. In spite of her emotional befuddlement over Lucas, her heart begged her to go to him, to assure herself his injuries were not bad. But the need to stop Mario had her facing him again.

"Will you die to save him?" A grin filled his aged gray eyes. "Which one will you save first?" Mario studied her as if amused, definitely not afraid, and apparently so occupied with tormenting her that he didn't see Derek coming at him again. And neither did Kylie, or she would have stopped him. Stopped him before someone died.

The moment Derek crashed into Mario, the man reached for Derek and

tightened his gnarled fingers around his neck. Kylie surged forward, her fury, her need for revenge strong. Wrapping one hand around Mario's throat, she used her other hand to peel the old man's hands from Derek's neck. The second she felt Derek slip free, she used both her hands on the rogue's throat.

"Let go!" the voice echoed in her ear at the same time the ghostly cold shimmied down her spine. *"Stop!"*

Kylie ignored the spirit. This was so not the time.

She heard Derek gasp for air. Now it was Mario who could not breathe. She felt his tendons roll beneath her tight grasp. Her goal was simple. Stop him. Stop him now and forever. All she had to do was squeeze a bit tighter.

She would crush his windpipe with just a little more force.

She would send him to hell where he belonged.

Her mind went to Ellie, who Mario had taken too young from this world. She thought of this man's grandson, who had died knowing his own blood had brought him to his death.

Mario deserved this death.

A thought raked through her mind. Killing wasn't easy. Not even when it was the right thing.

"Let him go!" the spirit yelled. *"You are blind. Nothing is as you see it!"*

She could see just fine, thank you! She tightened her hold on the old man's neck, trying to convince herself to finish what needed to be done. The raspy sound of Derek bringing air into his lungs echoed behind her. Mario's arm swung at his sides, trying to find something to hang on to. Trying to find life.

She heard Derek blurt out her name, his voice hoarse, but she ignored him. Ignored everything but the fact that she was about to take a life.

Suddenly, a sick feeling filled her stomach—as if something was terribly wrong. And that's when she saw Mario. Standing several feet back and smiling. Her breath caught and her gaze cut to the face of the person she was in the process of killing.

Lucas.

Mario's laugh echoed around her.

Panic shot through Kylie like raw pain. She released her hold around

Lucas's neck. He fell into a heap on the ground, but Kylie didn't remove her gaze from Mario.

Lucas shifted at her feet. Tears filled her eyes at the realization of how close she'd come to taking the life of someone she loved.

"I should kill you now," Mario said, "but it's so much fun to see you suffer."

Kylie's next intake of air shuddered in her lungs.

"Oh, he lives, but for how long?" Mario asked, his tone expressing the excitement he felt at the pain he'd caused her.

The wickedness in the man seemed to flavor the air. She had no idea how Mario had traded places with Lucas, but what mattered was stopping him from doing more. And if she couldn't think of something quick, he would take her down. And she wouldn't go down alone.

Her blood raged faster, the air she breathed tasted carbonated with emotions raging though her like viruses. Then fear, like a liquid trying to drown her, rose in her chest.

Her pulse raged with horror that this was a battle she could not win. For one second, she accepted defeat and mourned. Mourned not for her life, but for Derek's and Lucas's. They had come here to save her, and now would die for their efforts. And then others would follow. Mario wouldn't stop.

A voice seemed to come with the wind. *You are not alone. Ask and you will receive.*

Were the death angels here? She focused on Mario, but prayed for assistance. Prayers without faith, her heart seemed to whisper. Doubt filled her and echoed in her soul. If the death angels were going to help her, would they have not already been there? Why would she feel so alone, so unprotected? Would they not have offered her help before she almost killed one of her own?

Like a flash of lightning, she remembered the dead at the gate, and something Holiday once said floated through her mind like a thought she needed to grasp on to. *Sometimes I think all the dead are my death angels.*

Kylie drew in a breath of hope. *Help me.* The plea echoed in her mind. *Be my death angels.*

A loud, bone-chilling creak echoed in the dark. The gate started to open. The squeal of the rusty metal being forced to move rang in her ears. Then the dead came barreling out by the hundreds. Male, female, young, old, they all came running, their hands outstretched. Their eyes haunted. But their expressions didn't beg for help, they offered it.

The icy feel of their presence burned her skin. The air in her lungs seemed too cold to breathe. But even in her pain, she saw she wasn't alone. And that offered her hope. Hope she clung to.

Mario's face, old and wrinkled, grimaced in anguish. Pain, perhaps the same cold ache filling her body, reflected in his gray eyes. He slung his head back and roared. Steam rose from his mouth and danced above his lips. He caught his breath and bolted backward a good ten feet.

As if the distance offered him a reprieve, his gaze turned to her. Kylie tightened her eyes and saw his pattern. He was for sure a chameleon. Oddly enough, with her vision slightly unfocused there was something about him that felt different. Familiar in a different way. The thought seemed important, but like a storm cloud that promised to return, it blew past.

"You might have won this time, but my moment draws near," he spat out. "You will come to me, Kylie Galen, come to me willing to die, to suffer at my hands for my pleasure, because the price will be too great! Your weakness will take you down."

Her weakness? What was her weakness? Kylie wondered, but with her mind churning with pain and hope at the same time, the question remained unasked, and unanswered.

Instead, she focused on the hope. Hope that she had spared Lucas and Derek. And somewhere in the depth of her soul, she wanted to be spared, too.

The spirits still crowding around rushed at Mario again. Purposefully. Their intent—to protect her—showed in their concerned and ash-colored faces. Holiday had been right. All spirits were in some way death angels—death angels being spirits of supernaturals. Spirits who while known to protect the innocent, were mostly feared for their stern judgment of those misusing their powers. A quick glance at the graveyard gate and Kylie saw even more phantoms stumbling out. Some moved slow and uncertain, as if

they had just been awoken from a deep sleep.

“Thank you,” Kylie managed to say, even though her teeth chattered and the cold of the presence of too many dead made being alive difficult.

As the spirits re-gathered around the rogue, Mario roared again and the sound of his disappointment and agony was the last thing she heard before the icy throbbing in her body became too much. Her vision blurred, ice coated her lips, and she felt herself being pulled into a dark spiral of nothingness.

Chapter Eight

“We wait on Burnett.”

“We get the hell out of here now!”

Kylie slowly became aware of the voices. Who? Wait on Burnett for what? Questions rolled around her confused mind. Where was she? Who was holding her so...?

She heard the sound of a rhythmic thump. A heartbeat? But not her own. The warmth, the heat of someone pressed close felt like heaven. She'd been so cold. Why? If she focused she could figure it out. But part of her didn't want to focus; part of her wanted to stay just like this. Unaware, warm, and feeling safe in the arms of someone holding her close.

Holding her tenderly.

Holding her as if she were treasured.

“We can't leave,” one of the voices said. The voice in the distance. Not the one holding her.

“He could come back. We should leave while the leaving's good.” She heard the words vibrate deep in the speaker's chest.

“I don't think so. You said Burnett was on his way. We don't leave.”

“Just because you're afraid—”

“I'm not afraid, damn it. I'm being rational. Kylie came here for a reason. The spirits, I'm betting they're the ones who sent that bastard packing.”

Kylie recognized Derek's voice.

Everything came rushing back. Her grandfather's betrayal, Jenny's assistance, Derek finding her, Mario showing up, the fight, and Lucas ... The familiar feel of the arms wrapped around her told her who held her, whose

warmth she now absorbed. Stiffening, she pushed herself off Lucas's chest. "Put me down."

His dark blue eyes, now glowing light orange, no doubt still sensing danger, shot to her face. "Can you stand on your own?"

"I can," she said, and when she saw the bruising around his neck, her heart clutched. Dear God, she'd almost killed him. She'd had her hands around his neck, squeezing the life out of him, and had almost finished the job.

Tears stung her sinuses, but she blinked them back. Now wasn't the time to fall apart. Later, she'd let that happen. Later, she'd have a good, long pity party. She deserved one. Just not now. Not now, she repeated in her head, trying to fight the emotional overload.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Lucas asked.

"She asked you to put her down," Derek insisted, his tone tight, no doubt reading her battling emotions.

"I heard her," Lucas growled, and Kylie glanced up from his bruised neck to his face. His dislike for Derek made his eyes a brighter orange. "I'm making sure she's okay."

"I'm fine," she lied, her emotions ping-ponging all over the place.

Betrayal.

Fear.

Her gaze shifted to his bruised neck.

Guilt.

"Please put me down," she insisted.

He did as she requested. Her knees felt weak, but she focused on not letting them turn to Jell-O, and was able to remain standing.

Lucas kept his hand out as if to catch her if her legs wouldn't hold her up. She didn't want to need him to catch her. Why was he even here? Hadn't she told Burnett not to put him on guard duty? Then she remembered thinking she'd seen Monique. Had it been her?

Her emotions did an about-face and she realized how unimportant that was at this time. Right now, she had to make sure they got back to Shadow Falls safely. Like the pity party she'd mentally scheduled, she could spend

time mourning over Lucas and her issues later.

“Are you up to heading back?” Lucas asked her.

“We’re not leaving here until Burnett shows up,” Derek snapped again.

Kylie looked at Derek and then back to the gates, which were now closed. The spirits stood guard, their faces peering out between the rusty metal bars. “Derek’s right. We stay here until Burnett shows up.”

A flash passed by Kylie and then another.

Burnett, along with about three other FRU people, as well as several of the campers, Perry included, suddenly surrounded them.

“I’m here,” Burnett said. His bright eyes seemed to say he was prepared to fight. He glanced around as if checking for danger, before focusing back on them. “And someone better tell me what the hell’s going on.”

When no one spoke up fast enough for his impatience, his gaze zeroed in on Kylie. “I was supposed to come get you in the morning.” His gaze shot to Derek. “You were supposed to be guarding her at her grandfather’s place.” He glanced at Lucas. “And you told me you were going to your father’s.”

“Well, I lied,” Lucas bit back, never one to take a reprimand easily. “I wanted to make sure Kylie didn’t need me. And she did.”

“What happened?” Burnett asked again, his tone implying he was losing patience.

“Mario,” Kylie answered.

Burnett’s eyes brightened and he glanced around again. “Are you sure it was him?” he asked.

“Positive.” Kylie shivered, remembering the wickedness she’d felt from him. She recalled the sensation that he’d enjoyed toying with her—like a cat with a mouse. But the mouse had won this time. Thanks to the dead, no one had died at Mario’s hand, but what about next time? She heard Mario’s threat ring in her head. *You will come to me, Kylie Galen, come to me willing to die, to suffer at my hands for my pleasure, because the price will be too great!*

He spoke with certainty as if he already had a plan in place. Fear tiptoed up her spine.

Burnett continued to glance around. After a few more seconds of putting out his feelers, he looked back at Derek.

“He’s gone now,” Derek said.

“I can see that.”

But was he really gone? Being a chameleon, he could turn invisible. He could still be here. Kylie almost said something to that effect, but remembered the other FRU members. And her lack of trust in them kept her mouth closed. The less they knew about her and the chameleons as a whole, the better.

“What were you even doing out here?” Burnett asked, seemingly getting more frustrated the longer he considered things. “The orders were to wait for me until tomorrow. Why do I give orders around here if no one listens to them?”

“We couldn’t. They weren’t going to let her leave,” Derek said, and looked at Kylie as if knowing how hard the truth was for her to hear. And he was right. The ache in her chest tightened.

“They?” Burnett asked. “Who was not going to let her leave?” His gaze shot between Derek and Kylie.

“The chameleons,” Derek answered.

Burnett’s focus landed back on Kylie, and her chest constricted, knowing Burnett was laying the fault on her grandfather.

“My grandfather wasn’t aware of it,” Kylie said, but for the life of her she couldn’t say it with certainty. And she knew Burnett read her white lie for what it was.

His expression softened for a fraction of a second, as if he could relate to her pain. “You should have called me.” Burnett glanced back at Derek.

“He tried,” Kylie spoke up again, unwilling to let Derek take the blame for this. “We had to hurry to try to beat the guards and then ... then when he tried to get you, Mario ... he fried Derek’s phone.”

All of a sudden, the night’s blackness was sliced by the beam of headlights. A car came to a screeching halt. Holiday’s car.

She barreled out of the Honda, her red hair hanging loose as if she’d just risen from bed. And when her teary-eyed gaze lit on Kylie, she muttered, “Thank God,” and put her hand over her lips.

Seeing the emotion in Holiday weakened Kylie’s resolve to wait until

later to fall apart. She ran up to Holiday and fell into her arms.

As Kylie buried her head on the camp leader's shoulder, she heard Burnett scold, "I thought I told you to wait at the camp."

Kylie felt Holiday tense at the reprimand, and then she raised her head. "And I thought you knew I don't follow anyone's orders."

"Does anyone listen to me around here?" Burnett asked, his frustration making his tone sound almost comical.

"Obviously not," one of the FRU agents said, and chuckled.

Burnett groaned, but Kylie heard his sheer relief. She knew he saw the protection of everyone at Shadow Falls as his personal responsibility. And she loved him for it, too.

"What happened?" Holiday asked, tightening her comforting embrace around Kylie's shoulders.

"Let's discuss it later," Burnett said. "We need to get back to Shadow Falls now."

Kylie knew that discussion would include accusations toward her grandfather. Even as she hurt thinking of that conversation, right now with Holiday's warm, comforting embrace around her, and even hearing Burnett and Holiday bicker, made this moment feel right. It felt like she was almost home.

And that felt really good.

* * *

Walking back through the Shadow Falls gate sent a warmth right through Kylie. This was where she belonged. Even the next hour of facing Burnett's questions didn't completely chase away the sensation of being home.

"I'm sorry I have to do this now," Burnett said several times. He'd already gone over everything with Lucas and Derek, while Kylie sat in the office with Holiday. They hadn't talked about what happened tonight because she knew Burnett would want to be present, so they talked about what she'd learned while with her grandfather.

When Burnett came in, the mood grew more serious. "I know you haven't slept at all tonight, but statistics say the longer the wait the more likely you'll

forget something.”

Kylie, sitting on the sofa beside Holiday, nodded. “I know.” She bit into her lip and tried to focus and fill him in on everything that happened. She covered Mario and his parting threat. Then she started at the beginning again and told him about Jenny coming to the window.

The thing she didn’t tell him was about Jenny being Hayden Yates’s sister. She wasn’t even sure if Burnett had figured out Hayden was a chameleon. Then she explained one more time about Derek showing up in the woods. She purposely told him again about the invisible person she sensed there before they took off. And she reminded Burnett that she believed this person to be her grandfather and he’d been there not to stop her from leaving, but to check on her.

“But you didn’t speak to him?” Burnett asked. “So you don’t know for sure it was him, or even if his being there meant he wasn’t behind all this.”

Kylie frowned. “I know my grandfather. I don’t think he’d do this. Even Jenny said he was different from the other elders. And I don’t want you to start thinking of him as the enemy.”

Burnett’s jaw tightened. “He cares about you, Kylie. I sensed this when we spoke. But he never hid the fact that he didn’t trust me or Shadow Falls. He very well could justify his actions because he felt your life was in danger. He may think he has your best intentions at heart, but he’s wrong. And while I know it’s difficult for you to accept this, we can’t trust him anymore.”

Burnett’s remark had her throat tightening with emotion. She understood his point of view, but she couldn’t let go of what her heart told her. And her heart told her that her grandfather hadn’t been behind the attempts to keep her against her will.

“You can’t trust him,” Kylie said. “I’ve yet to make up my mind. And why are you spending so much time worrying about him when the real villain is Mario?”

“I’m aware of who the real villain is,” Burnett answered. “But it’s because of your ... thanks to someone’s actions with your grandfather’s people, Mario almost got to you.”

“They had nothing to do with Mario’s showing up.”

“I agree, but they had everything to do with you finding yourself in a vulnerable situation.”

“I made the choice to run away.” She wrung her hands in her lap.

“Don’t you think we should call it a night?” Holiday intervened. “Let’s stop now and pick this up in the morning.”

Burnett frowned at Holiday, then moved in and knelt down in front of Kylie. He placed his palm on her gripped hands. His touch was cold, but caring and tender. The knot in Kylie’s throat doubled. When he looked at her, she saw the struggle in his eyes to keep his cool and not let his temper rule. He wanted to make demands, to call the shots. Yet Kylie also sensed he struggled to do what Holiday had tried to instill in him, to compromise and not dictate.

Staring at his hand over her locked fingers, she knew Burnett cared—knew his intent wasn’t to hurt her, but to help her. Yet wasn’t that exactly what her grandfather felt?

“Kylie, I know this is hard for you,” Burnett said. “I do. But I need your promise that you won’t be sneaking off to see your grandfather.” He squeezed her wrist. “Please. I won’t get a moment of peace unless you give me that.”

“I won’t.” She couldn’t deny him this, not when his expression practically begged for her compliance. Yet deep down she wondered if her heart said it was an untruth, and if it did, had Burnett heard it. God help her, because if her grandfather did ask her to meet him, how could she tell him no any easier than she could Burnett? Her loyalty was truly torn. She only prayed it didn’t come to that.

* * *

The eastern part of the sky was a bit lighter than the rest when Burnett and Holiday walked Kylie to her cabin. The stars sparkled in the sky as if they knew they were about to be shut down by the sun and wanted to give out a bit more light.

She should be exhausted, and part of her was, but she doubted she’d fall in bed and go right to sleep. Her mind chewed on so many things that turning

it off seemed impossible. Plus, she had an appointment to attend her very own pity party. The knot that she'd felt in her throat earlier was now caught in her heart area. In the past, Kylie had learned that nothing but a good cry could ease that kind of ache.

Obviously, the soothing effects of Holiday's touch were wearing off. Or maybe this was too much to completely be eased by a fae's magic. Some things just needed to be worked through. Things like leaving her grandfather's house without saying good-bye. Things like the fact that she'd almost killed Lucas. Things like wondering if it was really Monique, Lucas's fiancée, she'd seen tonight. Things like missing her mom, and she was halfway across the world sleeping with some creep.

Things like having a psychotic murderer wanting to take her down.

His threat rang in her head like a bad line in a song that you couldn't forget. *You will come to me, Kylie Galen, come to me willing to die, to suffer at my hands for my pleasure, because the price will be too great! Your weakness will take you down.*

And working through things like that might include shedding a few tears. Who could begrudge her that? Of course, she should probably spend some time trying to figure out what he meant by her weakness.

"How about we take a trip to the falls tomorrow?" Holiday piped up, and then as if reading Kylie's emotional status, she reached over and gave Kylie's arm a squeeze.

Kylie nodded.

"I'll figure out when's a good time first thing in the morning," Burnett added, making it clear he would be going with them.

Silence fell on them like a soft rain. The sky had turned slightly purple as if morning would be in the next hour. Burnett cleared his throat. "You do know we will have to go back to you being shadowed?"

"I figured that," Kylie said.

"Before I work out the shadowing schedule, is ... is there anyone you don't want to be shadowing you?"

"Only one," Kylie said. "And I think you know who that is."

Burnett just nodded.

Their footsteps fell on the graveled path and sent out crunching sounds in the darkness. “How is Helen?” Kylie asked.

“She’s much better,” Holiday said.

“Has she remembered anything yet? Do we know if it was Mario or not?”

“No,” Holiday answered.

“We’re still investigating it,” Burnett said, and a bit of frustration sounded in his tone. “But we know that Mario was spotted in Fallen that same morning. And with his appearance tonight, everything points to Mario being behind this.”

They got almost to the turn in the path. In the distance Kylie could make out the cabin. Not a light flickered inside. Kylie glanced to Burnett. “Is Della back yet?”

“No, not yet,” he said, and something about the way he said those three words set off alarms.

She caught him by the arm. “What happened?”

Burnett held up his hand. “She’s fine. She ran into some trouble late yesterday, but everything’s fine now. She should be back either later today or tomorrow.”

“What kind of trouble?” Kylie asked, her concern over Della giving her a reprieve from her own problems.

Burnett hesitated to answer and that made Kylie even more suspicious.

“What happened?” Kylie insisted.

“She got into an altercation with some gang members. But—”

“Are you sure it wasn’t Mario?”

“I’m positive,” Burnett said.

“Was she hurt?” Kylie’s chest ached. “I knew her working for the FRU was a bad idea.”

“She was just bumped and bruised a bit,” Burnett said.

“How bumped and bruised?” Kylie asked.

“Not so bad that I can’t say that I think her ego received the most damage,” Burnett replied.

“She’s really fine. I promise,” Holiday added. “I spoke with her myself.”

Kylie inhaled, knowing she was probably overreacting, but her emotional

dam was almost ready to spew over. She started walking again, hurrying to the cabin, wanting to be alone before that dam broke.

Holiday picked up her speed and slipped her hand into Kylie's, bringing her to a stop right before taking the steps to the porch. "Do you want me to come in and we can talk for a while?"

"No," Kylie said, feeling like an idiot. "I just need some rebound time." She hugged Holiday, absorbing a little more of her soothing touch. When Kylie pulled back, she started to turn for the door when Burnett cleared his throat. She looked up.

The man held out his hands. "I don't get one, too?"

Kylie saw the surprise shine in Holiday's eyes, then she couldn't help it, she grinned. "Be careful, people might think you've gone soft on us."

"I doubt that," he said, and gave her a quick embrace. With his chin pressed against her hair, he whispered, "I'm going to get the bastard. I promise you."

She didn't have to ask which bastard. She knew he meant Mario.

"Thank you," she said, and pulled back. And before she really broke down and cried, she moved inside.

The smell of the cabin filled her senses. She wasn't even sure exactly what contributed to the scent, but whatever it was, it offered some calming effects. And then she realized it smelled like the people she loved. Miranda, Della. And there was the woodsy scent that she registered. A smell that belonged to ... No!

It just smelled like home, she told herself.

Della's bedroom door stood open—like a flashing neon sign that she wasn't here. The vamp, a very private person, always kept her door closed.

Kylie's gaze shifted to Miranda's door.

"Rebound time," she whispered to herself. If she was going to fall apart, she wanted to do it alone. She started to her bedroom, had barely opened the door when she heard the slight creaking of the wood floor. She wasn't alone. Her gaze shot up to the corner of the room and she saw the figure standing there.

Saw and recognized the figure.

Maybe she wasn't going to get that rebound time after all.

Chapter Nine

Kylie twirled around on her Reeboks, probably leaving skid marks on the wood floor, and started out of her room.

“Don’t go,” Lucas said. “Please! You’re going to have to talk to me sooner or later.”

Later would be really nice. Then anger made her clutch her hands. It wasn’t right. She stared at the wall, still not wanting to face him. “Why? Why do I have to talk to you? I don’t owe you anything. Not an explanation, not an apology. I’m not the one who...” Her throat tightened and she just shut up. She heard him shift behind her.

“I know ... I screwed up. I admit that. I ... should have told you. No, that’s wrong, I should have never let it go that far. I should have told my father to go screw himself in the beginning. I’m at fault here, but I didn’t do anything ... else. I didn’t sleep with her. I kissed her twice. You saw one of those times. And both times I was put on the spot. I only did it to try to convince my dad that I would go through with the marriage. But I never, not for one damn minute, planned on marrying her.”

That knot in her throat tightened. Her eyes stung right along with her heart. She shook her head, and managed one word. “No.” She wasn’t even sure what she was saying no to. Then she turned and faced him.

It didn’t matter what she said, because he wasn’t listening to her. He stood there staring at her in his own world of hurt and pain.

“You love me,” he said. “I know that.”

Now was when she should be saying no, but she couldn’t get the word out. Oh, it sat on the tip of her tongue, but it felt super-glued in place. Sure it

would have been a lie, but wasn't it okay to lie at times like this? When the truth was just too painful. When the truth felt like it could tear you apart.

"I also know you're punishing me. And it's working, because I'm hurting like hell. Not that I don't deserve it." He reached up and ran his hand over the back of his neck.

Kylie blinked away a wash of tears. Even in the darkness she could see the bruises around his neck. Bruises she'd put on him. She gripped her hands at the memory of just how close she'd come to crushing his windpipe.

"I didn't mean to choke you," she spit out. "It was a trick on ... Mario's part. I don't know how he did it but—"

"I know that. I don't mean ... punishing me with this." He ran his hand over the bruises. "This isn't anything compared to what I feel inside. I'm talking about you not wanting to talk to me, not wanting me close to you. You have no idea how much it hurts to stand right here, this close ... Can you even imagine how hard it is to stand here and know you don't want me to touch you?" He moved in a step as if testing her.

While it was only a few inches, his scent came with him. She remembered inhaling his particular smell when she walked in. She should have known. Should have known that part of the scent of home that had welcomed her, was his essence. He was home to her. Or he had been.

Now she felt homeless.

He must have gathered a bit more courage because he took another step closer.

She inched back. And that little inch said so much.

"See," he said, and his intake of air sounded painful. "But I know you still care because ... because you saved my life. You could have stepped out of the way and just let Mario kill me. You didn't. You caught the fireballs that were meant for me."

His emotion echoed in the room, and she'd give anything if she didn't have to feel this. How much more emotion could she take in? Wasn't there a limit? Surely she'd reached hers.

"Yeah, I saved your life, but don't make me regret it." She waved toward the door. "Leave. I don't want you here." And it was the truth. She didn't

want Lucas, the guy who'd betrayed her, here. She wanted the guy she'd trusted, the guy she'd thought would go to the end of the world to protect her. And yet they were one and the same.

He took one more step. She saw his Adam's apple go up and down. It looked painful to swallow.

"I hurt you," he said. "I know that, and I'm willing to take whatever it is you want to dish out at me. I deserve it. That's what I came here to say. That I accept what I did was wrong. But I didn't do other things that you might think I did. And when you're over being mad, I'll still be here. I don't care how long it takes."

She glanced away, remembering him standing up in front of his family and friends. He'd worn a fancy tux and looked so handsome, so much like a man and not a boy. The image of him reaching for Monique's hands played across her mind and she heard the promises he made. The kind of promises you didn't break.

A wave a fresh pain washed over her. She looked at him again. "You gave her your soul."

He shook his head. "No, you're wrong. I didn't give her my soul. I lied. I couldn't have given her my soul. Because my soul was already given away. You took it when I was seven years old." His voice shook. "And if I had any of it left, you took the rest of it when you walked into Shadow Falls that first day. In the were culture, it's believed that there is only one soul mate. And you are mine, Kylie Galen. I knew that then, and it hasn't changed."

Her vision blurred with tears. She inhaled, hoping to get her watery weakness under control. But she felt a tear slip from her lashes onto her cheek.

She swiped it away. Her breath shuddered as she drew needed oxygen into her lungs. Why did it hurt to breathe?

You are mine, Kylie Galen. His words echoed in her heart. She couldn't deny that part of her wanted to go to him, to make him say that over and over again until the pain bubbling in her chest went away. Until she could look at him without remembering how it had felt to see him making promises to someone else. But she couldn't go to him, because she knew the pain wasn't

going to go away.

Not now.

Maybe not ever.

She couldn't be sure.

He paused and she saw the same pain she felt in her chest reflected in his eyes. Her own pain doubled knowing she hurt him. But wasn't that his fault? Why should she feel guilty that he was hurting now?

"I'm sorry that I caused you this hurt," he said. "And as mad as you are at me right now, you need to realize that I'm madder at myself. I did this to you. To us. I hurt the most important person in my life. If someone else had hurt you this badly I'd rip their heart out."

He stood there and just stared. The silence in the room seemed too loud. Or was it the pain echoing in the room that pierced her ears?

"I'll go now," he said, and she couldn't remember ever hearing him sound so defeated. So lost. "I've said what I wanted to, and just know I'll give you all the time you need to forgive me. But not forgiving me, that isn't an option. Because I love you."

She moved out of his way and he walked out the door. She went to the bed. Sat down. Kicked her shoes off. "Kitty, kitty?" she said, wanting something to hold on to. But Socks didn't come out. He really didn't like weres. Right now, a part of her agreed with him.

She brought her legs up, hugged her knees to her chest so tight it hurt.

Then she waited.

Waited for the tears to flow full force.

Waited for some of the pressure building in her heart to fade. But the tears didn't flow. The pressure remained.

Closing her eyes, she bit down on her lip. Why couldn't she cry? Was she just too emotionally exhausted?

And confused?

Yes, she was so damn confused.

How could Lucas suddenly see how wrong he was now, and not have seen it earlier? How could he have stood up there and vowed his soul, promised to marry someone else if he loved Kylie?

But why would he lie? Why would he come here and tell her all these things if they weren't true?

She sat there in the dark room for several long minutes. She felt alone. Lonely.

A crazy and somewhat childish thought ran through her head: *I want my mama*. But her mama wasn't here. Not at Shadow Falls. Not even in the country. Her mom was in England banging some guy that Kylie hated.

But she could still call her. Heck, maybe she'd even cause a little hiccup in John's plans to seduce her mother. That made calling even more tempting. She wanted John to know that her mom wasn't alone in the world.

She reached for her pocket and then groaned. She'd left her phone at her grandfather's.

"Damn it," Kylie muttered. As the frustrations of her lost phone bounced around her brain, her thoughts went to Jenny, to her conversation about talking to Hayden, and to some of the accusations she'd made about the elders. Were the young chameleons really being forced to live in a world of isolation? That seemed so wrong.

Just like that she felt compelled to find Hayden Yates. He would have answers. Maybe he could even assure her that her grandfather wasn't behind this. Popping up, she started out, then immediately slowed down when she got to the door. Oh, just friggin' great! She was supposed to be shadowed.

Burnett would flip if he thought Kylie was out wandering alone at night. But damn it, she needed answers. And sometimes you just had to break the rules. She went outside, quietly shutting the door so not to wake Miranda. Moving down the porch steps, she started toward the path that would lead to Hayden's cabin. He'd probably still be asleep, but she didn't care.

She only got a few feet when she saw someone move out from the trees. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw who it was.

The thought that came to mind was a phrase her Nana had often said when she'd found herself in a bad situation. She was up shit creek without a paddle.

“I ... I’m sorry,” Kylie mumbled.

“Don’t you even try to talk your way out of me being pissed!” Burnett growled. “Not a word!”

“I just...”

“That’s two words and I said not one!” he snapped, and he swiped his hand through the air for emphasis.

Kylie bit down on her lip, and wouldn’t you know that’s when the tears started flowing. Big, fat, and fast tears. She sniffled and wiped her cheeks with the back of hand. Her breath caught in her chest. But damn it. Why couldn’t this have happened when she was alone?

“Those tears do not affect me, young lady!” He pointed a finger at her. While she couldn’t hear his heart beat to the rhythm of a lie, she heard it in his voice. They did affect him. Not enough to stop him from him being mad, but enough that his voice tightened with emotion.

And knowing she’d disappointed him added another layer of pain to her chest. Just what she needed ... more pain.

She hugged herself and tried to stop crying. But the tears kept coming. He didn’t say anything. Just paced, back and forth in front of her.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Staring at her with complete discontent and disappointment the whole time. She started to move back to her cabin, and he growled. Just a growl. No words, but enough inflection to know he didn’t want her moving. Obviously, her punishment was to stand here and accept the fact that she’d let him down.

In the back of her mind she wondered if this was how Lucas had felt.

She swallowed another trembling breath. “I just...”

“Did I say you could talk?” he asked. He did three more pacing laps, as if working off steam, before he looked at her again. “Where were you going?”

When she just looked at him, he bit out, “Answer me.”

“You said I couldn’t talk.” She wiped at her cheeks again.

“Where were you going, Kylie?”

Dear God, she didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t tell him the truth. She’d made a promise to her grandfather never to give up Hayden Yates.

Yup, she was really up shit creek and not a paddle in sight.

“Were you going to see Lucas?” Burnett asked.

She started to nod, but felt her heart race at just the thought of a lie.

“So it wasn’t Lucas,” he seethed, obviously hearing her heart and knowing her temptation to spout out untruths.

He stepped closer and his dark eyes studied her. Studied her too closely. Up close, she saw again the disappointment in his eyes, and the knot in her throat rose again.

She tried to think of what to say, something to help this, something that wouldn’t give anything away. Something that wouldn’t be a lie. “I just—”

“Don’t talk to me if you’re going to lie.”

Okay, so her heart wasn’t going to even let her white-lie her way out of this one.

“I want the truth,” he said. “Were you going to meet your grandfather?”

“No,” Kylie said with honesty, and with it came an enormous amount of relief.

He studied her closer. His eyes tightened. “Okay, I’m going to ask you a direct question and I want a yes or no answer. Don’t you try to talk around the truth, because I’ll know.” He paused for effect, or maybe just to collect his thoughts. “Were you going to see Hayden Yates?”

Kylie’s mind raced. What did Burnett know? When her grandfather had told her that Burnett believed Hayden’s lie that Kylie had simply tricked the teacher into thinking she had permission to leave, she hadn’t believed that Hayden had fooled Burnett.

He knew something. But just how much, and what he knew, remained unknown.

“Okay, your silence pretty much answers it for me. Come on.” He motioned for her to start walking.

“Where to?” she asked, afraid of what he was going to say.

“You wanted to see Hayden, so let’s go see him. And then you two are going to tell me what the hell is going on, or somebody’s ass is grass! And I’ll be smoking it!”

Chapter Ten

Kylie had heard the term “walking the green mile” when convicts walked to their execution, and the trek to Hayden’s cabin sort of felt like her green mile. Burnett didn’t speak. She barely heard him breathe. And yet his rock-hard posture moving beside her told her of his impatience. Her loyalty to her grandfather and Burnett had her heart torn in a game of tug-of-war.

“Can we go talk to Holiday first?” Kylie asked, knowing that maybe Holiday could calm Burnett down and make him understand.

“No.” Burnett’s one word came out coarse. “I’m going to get the truth.”

But at what price, Kylie thought. Would Hayden realize that Kylie hadn’t just turned him over? She hoped so. But would her grandfather understand her breaking her promise to him?

She didn’t think so.

Like the man moving so brusquely beside her, her grandfather was not so forgiving.

As they came to the bend near Hayden’s cabin, Kylie desperately searched for a way out. “Do we have to wake him up? Can’t we just—”

“He’s already awake,” Burnett said with sternness. “He’s tossing and turning in bed worrying about something. Was he expecting you this morning? Are you already late?”

“No,” she muttered.

They kept moving and got all the way up the cabin’s porch steps and suddenly Kylie realized something. Anger stirred her gut, and she grabbed Burnett by the elbow. “That’s right, you can hear everything!”

“And your point?” he asked, obviously noting her new disposition. And

yes, being angry gave her guilt over being caught hiding secrets a slight reprieve.

“Earlier, when you dropped me off at my cabin, you knew Lucas was there, didn’t you? You knew he was waiting to talk to me!”

Guilt whispered across Burnett’s brow. “He pleaded with me to give him ten minutes.”

“And you gave it to him. You thought that was your choice to make,” Kylie accused.

Burnett frowned, but the guilt didn’t completely fade from his eyes. “If I remember correctly, you put your two cents in Holiday’s and my romantic affairs.”

“Neither one of you ran off and got engaged to someone else!”

He didn’t flinch, but in his expression she saw her argument hit his conscience. “Everyone deserves their chance to explain themselves,” he offered, but his tone lacked complete conviction.

“There’s no explanation for what he did,” she bit back.

Burnett inhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay, I concede I might have been wrong allowing him that privilege. And I will forego any such actions in the future. And now maybe you and Hayden can make amends by explaining what you two are keeping from me!” He arched a brow at Kylie, raised his fist, and banged on Hayden’s door so hard it shook the hinges.

Once he’d taken his mood out on the door, Burnett cut his eyes to her again. She saw his mind churning, searching for answers. It was the first time she got the feeling that Burnett didn’t know as much as she feared he might.

“Be forewarned,” the vamp said, “if I learn that there’s anything romantic happening here, I’m sending him packing ... less a few body parts.”

Kylie’s mouth dropped open. “Romantic? Oh, please, he’s old. He’s as old as you.”

Burnett’s brow creased. “Which is my point.” His frown deepened. “Not that I’m *that* old.”

* * *

Hayden opened the door and his gaze zipped from Burnett to Kylie.

Burnett growled. Then the vamp stepped across the threshold as if he ran the joint. Which he did.

Hayden wasn't happy about Burnett's grand entrance, but he didn't attempt to stop him. He backed up, allowing Burnett to come all the way inside.

Kylie swallowed, not sure how this was going to play out. Burnett was going to be furious, and as soon as her grandfather learned Burnett was on to Hayden, he would be furious.

"Okay, let's get one thing straight," Burnett said, getting things started. "No one is leaving this room until I have answers. And I don't care if I have to use force to get them." He stared directly at Hayden. "And since I don't hit girls, I'd suggest you start explaining."

Hayden tilted his head up. "Explaining what?" he asked, not showing the least bit of intimidation.

Kylie had to admire Hayden for it, too. She loved Burnett and knew he wasn't unfair or unjust, but she still had a quiver in the pit of her stomach. The man had intimidation down to an art. And one he excelled at.

"What's the tie between you two?" Burnett asked.

"Tie?" Hayden asked.

"At first Kylie was certain that you were the one behind the dead girls, and then suddenly you are her ally. You lied when you told me she asked to be let out at the cemetery."

"I did let her off at the cemetery."

"Then you lied about her coming to you. I know Kylie, and she wouldn't have just gone to you for help without a reason, without a connection of some sort."

"I'm her teacher," Hayden answered. "I thought helping a student in difficult situations was a plus around here."

"And I thought you were smart enough to know when to come clean!" Burnett's eyes glittered with specks of angry green. "The only reason I haven't already kicked your ass out of here is that I want answers first. So start talking!"

Kylie, afraid this might get out of hand, moved between the two men. “Can Hayden and I have a moment of privacy?”

Burnett’s expression hardened.

“Please,” Kylie said. “I ... I think it will help get to the bottom of this.”

Burnett’s jaw tightened to the point it looked about ready to crack.

“And when you come back, I’ll have answers for you.”

His frown tightened. “I’ll be right outside the door.”

“But you can still hear—”

“That’s all I’m giving you!” he demanded.

She suddenly realized that was enough—for she and Hayden could go invisible and their chat wouldn’t be overheard by intruding vampire ears. She nodded and watched the angry vamp step out. As soon as the door closed, she pressed a finger over her lips and then grabbed Hayden’s hand and took him into the invisible realm with her.

“You can already do this?” Hayden’s voice echoed but he remained unseen.

“Yes.” Kylie held on to his hand, so she’d know where he was.

“That’s amazing, Kylie. Do you realize how far advanced you are? When did you—”

“Sorry, but we don’t have time to talk about that right now. What are we going to tell Burnett? I think we should come clean.”

“He’ll insist I leave,” Hayden said. “And you’ll lose my protection.”

“First, I don’t need protecting from anyone here. But I don’t want you to go, I want to have someone I can go to if I have questions. Second, I’m not sure Burnett will make you leave. But if we don’t tell him, he’s for sure going to send you packing. Our best chance of you getting to stay is telling him the truth.”

“I see your point,” Hayden said. “But...”

“I didn’t tell him, you know. He doesn’t even know you’re a chameleon. He just—”

“I know,” Hayden said. “He’s been suspicious of me since before you even left.”

“That’s my fault. I—”

"I know," Hayden said.

The sound of the front door slamming brought Hayden's words to a halt. Burnett stormed back into the room, his eyes glittering with fury.

"That man is impossible," Hayden said.

"God damn it!" Burnett's words rang out. "Kylie! Where are you!"

"I'm going to talk to him," Kylie said to Hayden. "You stay invisible." She released his hand and willed herself to be seen.

Burnett's scowl landed on her immediately. "Where is he?" he bit out.

"He's here. We're still talking. In private, like I asked."

"You can make others invisible?"

She nodded. *Not that I had to make Hayden invisible—him being chameleon—but Burnett doesn't know that.*

"This is foolish. I want answers!"

"And you'll have them if you allow me this time!" she demanded, not backing down. "I'm asking you to trust me as you have asked me to do so many times in the past."

He growled and turned his gaze to the ceiling as if pleading for patience. Kylie willed herself invisible again.

"I'm right here," Hayden's voice came beside her. "So exactly what all do you want to tell him?"

"Everything," Kylie said to an empty spot, but she trusted he was there. "That you were sent here by my grandfather and that you're a chameleon. And that you want to stay on here." She paused. "And it wouldn't hurt to add how impressed you are with this place. If we can get him to see you as our ally then maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Hayden asked.

"I don't know if it's possible, but I was thinking that a lot of the younger chameleons like Jenny could benefit from Shadow Falls."

"I've entertained that thought myself," Hayden said. "But the elders wouldn't—"

"Okay, time's up!" Burnett snapped, and started moving around the room. "Get your asses back here now."

"One more minute," Kylie insisted. "We're almost done."

“He can’t hear you,” Hayden said.

“Oh, yeah.” She paused, questions for Hayden racing through her mind, but Burnett was about to flip. And a flipping Burnett wasn’t easy to deal with.

“Are you ready?” Kylie asked. “I have so much more to talk to you about, but for now ... I think we should deal with this. Wait!” Kylie snapped. When she didn’t hear him, she called for him. “Hayden?”

“Yes?” he asked.

“Do you think my grandfather was in on the plan to kidnap me and keep me from Shadow Falls?”

“No. I don’t think he was. He’s been very worried about you—even called six times until you arrived.”

Relief fluttered through her. “Will you tell him I’m sorry for ... not saying good-bye?”

“I will.”

“Kylie!” Burnett growled.

Taking a deep breath, she willed herself visible again. Hayden appeared at her side.

Burnett didn’t look impressed. He came at Hayden and grabbed him by his shirtfront. “Disappear again and I’ll see that you disappear permanently.”

“Calm down.” Kylie moved beside Burnett. “Hayden isn’t the enemy. It’s because of him that we were able to find Holiday when Warren had her. He’s actually the reason I was able to escape tonight.” Kylie saw Hayden look at her as if surprised she knew this piece of the puzzle.

Burnett released Hayden and then studied his forehead. “You are a chameleon?”

Hayden’s body posture stiffened. “You say that as if it’s an insult.”

Burnett’s shoulders grew tighter. “I say that as if you’ve been lying to me.”

Hayden brushed off his wrinkled shirtfront. “I came here to make sure Kylie wasn’t being sold out to the FRU by someone who has a problem throwing around his authority.”

Burnett frowned. “I am the authority here. And I ran a background check

on you. Everything states that you are half vampire, half fae. You are even registered as such.”

“I am,” Hayden said.

“But it’s not true.”

Hayden didn’t blink. “It is how I choose to live my life.”

Burnett shook his head, as if trying to understand. “But according to my research, Kylie’s grandfather is listed as human by the FRU. And the few chameleons I saw outside the compound wore the human pattern. I thought that’s what all of you let the world think. For that matter, why do you choose not to live in the compound with the others? Are you rogue?”

Hayden’s posture tightened. “Are you rogue because you do not live within a community of vampires? One should live their life as they choose, is this not so? I simply prefer to live on my own and I chose to live it as a supernatural and not a human.”

“So you just picked a species and fake that pattern?”

“I haven’t done anything wrong to be judged by you,” Hayden said.

Burnett still looked confused. “How many like you exist? Living as a different type of supernatural?”

“Not enough for us to feel comfortable with coming forward,” Hayden said. “Not when history has proven what can happen.”

Kylie saw Burnett try to absorb what he was hearing and file it away. “So when you saw I held no threat to Kylie, why didn’t you come forward then?”

“So you could send me packing, or worse, have me arrested?”

Burnett might throw his weight around more than Hayden, and even outweigh him by quite a bit, but verbally Hayden held his own. And that fact wasn’t appreciated by Burnett.

“You work for Kylie’s grandfather?” Burnett asked.

“Work for him? No. Was I assisting him? Yes. As you know from the checks you ran on me more than once, I worked as a regular high school teacher for three years in Houston.”

“Are you still assisting him?” Burnett’s question hung in the air as if the answer would decide something.

“Depends on what you mean by assisting. Am I trying to go against you

to cause Kylie any harm? No. But am I still keeping a watchful eye on her and answering the concerns of her worried grandfather? Yes.”

“The same worried grandfather who had planned to kidnap her?”

“My grandfather wasn’t behind that,” Kylie said before Hayden could answer. “And I don’t want you to send Hayden away, either. Please, Burnett, do this for me.”

Burnett looked at Kylie. “I don’t know if I can work with someone who doesn’t know where his loyalty lies.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “You mean like you and the FRU?”

Burnett’s eyes tightened. “My loyalty has always been to protect you.”

“But you still work with them, too. Because as you say, you see the good the FRU does. Well, Hayden is the same. He wants to protect me, but he understands my grandfather has good intentions. Why can’t you accept this?”

Burnett frowned, but Kylie could see her point had hit home. “I will take it under consideration and discuss it with Holiday.”

Hayden nodded, his expression saying he wouldn’t beg to stay on. Not that Kylie blamed him for not wanting to plead, but she didn’t have so much pride that she wouldn’t. Her life would just be easier with Hayden here, and it would help with her connection with her grandfather. She really, really needed Hayden.

“My rules, however, still stand,” Burnett continued. “No matter what I decide with Mr. Yates’s future at Shadow Falls,” Burnett said, focusing on Kylie, “you are not to run off to see your grandfather. You will have shadows, and if I have to personally guard your cabin every night to prevent you from going against the rules, I will.”

Kylie nodded, accepting she’d have to earn his trust back.

Burnett shifted his attention back to Hayden. “And if I choose to let you stay on at Shadow Falls, I will expect you to abide by my rules and help me keep Kylie in check. And assist me in learning how to cope with a rogue of your own kind.”

“If you decide I can stay on, I’ll consider your offer,” Hayden said, the edge in his voice stating he obviously hadn’t warmed up to Burnett’s demeanor. Not that Kylie could blame him. It had taken her a while to warm

up to the vamp. Until she learned how much he cared. “But I can tell you this, Mr. James, I refuse to be treated with disrespect.”

“Disrespect?” Burnett growled.

And then everything went to hell.

Burnett and Hayden exchanged colorful verbal blows. According to Hayden, Burnett was a prick, and according to Burnett, Hayden was an overconfident jerk who had lied.

She didn’t know if she felt confident the tension wouldn’t elevate to physical blows, or if she was simply too tired to care anymore. If they broke each other’s noses, so be it. She didn’t think they would kill each other. Then again, she could be wrong.

But she was suddenly too tired to try to stop them.

Her knees wobbled and her eyes grew heavy. She had to sit down before she fell down. Ignoring the two arguing men, she walked across the room and plopped down on Hayden’s sofa.

Feeling a chill wash over, she hugged herself. She was so tired it took a minute to realize the cold wasn’t just a natural reaction from being exhausted. It also took a second to realize the men had stopped arguing and were staring at her.

Kylie ignored the men to deal with the spirit. “Not now,” she muttered, and stared right at the coffee table in front of her, not wanting to have to face the ghost and her nonsense talk of murder. And not really wanting to face Burnett or Hayden, either.

“Not now, what?” Burnett asked.

“Nothing,” Kylie said, and the ghost stepped in front of her. Her pale pink dress hung heavy, soaked in blood. Lots of blood. At least it looked like blood.

Kill or be killed. The spirit’s words wiggled through Kylie’s mind.

Kylie leaned back and looked the spirit in her cold dead eyes. *Right now, I’ll have to go with “be killed.” I’m just too tired.*

“Are you ready to go back to your cabin?” Burnett glanced around as if aware they had a visitor, but he couldn’t see her. Not that he really should be able to see her ghost, but he had been able to see Hannah, Holiday’s sister, so

Kylie wasn't sure.

"Can you see her?" Kylie asked.

"See who?" Hayden asked.

"A ghost," Burnett answered Hayden.

"Shit!" Hayden mouthed, and took a step back.

"No, but I can feel her," Burnett said, and his concerned gaze stayed locked on Kylie. "You're not going to pass out, are you?"

"I don't think so," Kylie answered.

"Good. Are you ready to go back to your cabin?" Burnett asked again.

"Yeah," Kylie said. As she went to stand up, she saw Hayden's phone on the coffee table. Recalling she wanted to call her mom, she picked it up and shot Hayden a glance. "I'm gonna borrow this," she told him. "I left mine with my granddad."

Hayden frowned. "Just don't call my girlfriend like the last time you borrowed my phone."

She moved over to him, ignoring the spirit who she felt standing by the door, and hugged Hayden. Maybe she shouldn't have, because he stiffened. *What is it with men and hugs?* she wondered.

"Thank you," she said, pulling away.

"Yeah," he answered.

She glanced at Burnett. He looked upset, as if she'd just hugged the enemy. "You know, the problem with you two is that you are too much alike."

Both of them made some scratchy noise in their throat as if to deny it. Kylie just rolled her eyes and started out. And her ghost, carrying a bloody sword in one hand and ... and somebody's head in the other, cut in front of Kylie. The head, apparently freshly severed and still pouring blood, dangled and bounced against her hip as she moved.

Kylie gasped and came to an abrupt stop. The spirit turned around, and smiled. Then, holding the body part up by a handful of dark hair as if it were a trophy, she gave it a good shake. *I told you, killing is a piece of cake.*

She shook the head. The eyes wobbled as if loose in their sockets, and blood squirted out of the neck. Kylie let out a frightened squeak.

Swinging around, Kylie slammed into Burnett and buried her face in his shoulder and hung on. “I’m too tired to handle body parts,” she muttered. “Make her go away. Please, make her go away.”

Chapter Eleven

Five minutes later, the ghost gone, Kylie walked up her porch steps and turned to say good-bye to Burnett behind her.

He studied her with compassion. He hadn't apologized for being so hard on her, and he probably wouldn't. No doubt, he thought she deserved it. And in a way, she guessed she did.

Burnett reached around her and opened the door. "Promise you'll go to bed and not try to wander off again?"

"I promise," Kylie said.

"And try to trust me," he said.

"I do."

"No, you don't," he said, sounding defeated. "If you trusted me I wouldn't just now be finding out about Hayden."

"Someone made me promise not to tell," she said. "If you had promised someone something, wouldn't you try to honor that?"

He sighed, probably offering her the best understanding he could. "But you need to be careful what you promise people." He glanced around, looking a little leery. "Is she still gone?"

Kylie knew who he meant by "she." She looked left and then right. "I don't see her anymore." But deep down she worried the spirit wouldn't stay away too long. Tomorrow she needed to confer with Holiday about how to get rid of the ghost permanently. Holiday was right. Kylie had no reason to help someone so evil.

"Do you know what she wants? Or who the head belonged to?" Burnett asked.

“I don’t know. It could have happened years ago for all I know. But as for what she wants, yeah, I sort of know.”

“And that is?” he asked.

“She wants me to kill someone for her.” Kylie was too tired to put the sarcasm in her voice.

Burnett scowled. “Who?”

“She hasn’t made that clear yet,” Kylie said.

“They don’t ever ask too much, do they?” he said, but sarcasm rang in his voice. Obviously, he wasn’t as exhausted as she was.

Kylie shrugged. She went to step back, but this time it was Burnett who surprised her, when he moved in for a hug. It was short, but sweet, and she realized she needed it.

“Do you want me stay a while?” he asked, looking awkward after the show of affection.

“No,” Kylie said, letting him off the hook.

“Do you want me to get Holiday?” he asked. “I will.”

“No, I’m fine. I just want to go to bed.” Her gaze cut to the sky; it was almost morning. She really needed some sleep. And she was exhausted, physically, but the walk back had kick-started her brain again. Touching Hayden’s phone in her pocket, she remembered she also wanted to call her mom. She moved up the porch, looking back once to see Burnett standing at the steps, gazing at her with parental concern.

She remembered her grandfather saying Burnett had stepped into the role of a father, and in a way she supposed he had.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. Not that she felt all that certain.

“Promise me you won’t leave the cabin,” he said again.

“I promise.” She shot him a half-faked smile and shut the door.

Once she heard his footsteps leaving, Kylie leaned against the door and just stood there. Then something caught her eye at her bedroom door. Her heart sank when she saw the steam billowing up from the slit at the bottom, telling her she had company.

Oh, boy. Had she brought more show and tell? What body part had she dragged along this time?

But damn, Kylie didn't want any company.

Or at least not that kind of company. She needed a friend. She needed one of her best friends. She looked over her shoulder at Miranda's door. No steam was billowing out from the bottom.

Turning around, she opened her friend's door. It was early, but something told her Miranda wouldn't complain.

* * *

A much-needed smile bubbled up inside Kylie at the sight of the sleeping witch wearing her smiley pajamas and spooning a huge teddy bear like it was her lover. Kylie took in the witch's blond hair with streaks of pink, green, and black scattered over the pillow, and just like that she felt her heart lighten at the sight of her good friend.

As she took another step, the wood floor creaked as if announcing Kylie's presence.

Miranda's shoulders twitched, but she didn't roll over. "I thought we were going to wait to have sex," she muttered.

Kylie's smile widened. "I think that might be wise. I'm not sure our relationship could handle it right now."

Miranda swung around, bringing the teddy bear with her. Her sleepy eyes now popped wide open.

"Besides," Kylie added, "I think you and the teddy bear might have already done the deed."

Miranda squealed, threw the bear at Kylie, and bolted out of the bed. "I thought you were Perry." Giggling, the girl wrapped her arms around Kylie extra tight. "I can't believe you're home. I'm sooo glad you're back." She released Kylie, took a step back, and looked at her as if half afraid she wasn't real. "You *are* home, right? This isn't a dream?"

"It's not a dream," Kylie said, though part of her wished most of the night had been.

The witch's smile faded and she stomped her foot. "Do you have any idea how miserable I've been? First you up and leave me and then Della runs off to play superhero! I should be furious at you and not happy to see you."

“No, don’t be mad. Let’s just be happy that I’m back.” Kylie snagged the three-foot bear from the floor and tossed it back on the bed.

Miranda gave her an evil look. “Are you back to stay? No more running off on me?”

“No more running off,” Kylie said.

“Pinky promise?” Miranda asked, and held out her pinky.

What was it with everyone wanting promises? Kylie looked at the girl’s little finger, which was a witch’s weapon. “I don’t know if it’s safe to pinky promise you when...”

“It’s safe. It’s a promise between witches. And since you are part witch, it’s the most unbreakable promise you can make.”

“Fine. I promise.” Kylie held out her pinky to make the promise valid. And in spite of it being a silly gesture, the moment their little fingers locked, a surge of emotion filled her chest. Maybe pinky promises between witches were more than just a childish gesture. Or maybe she was just so damn happy to be home.

“I missed you so much!” Kylie reached out and squeezed the girl’s forearms.

“Me too.” Miranda bounced back on her bed. “Now, sit down and tell me everything that happened.” She squinted her eyes and checked out Kylie’s pattern. “You’re back to being that strange pattern again.”

“I think that strange pattern is a chameleon.” If Kylie was the least bit paranoid, like ninety percent of the other chameleons, she should be trying to hide that pattern. But it was a little late for that, wasn’t it? Too late to start pretending to be something she wasn’t? Everyone here had seen her. And for that matter, could she pretend? Sure, she’d been able to change the pattern a couple of times, but how did one maintain it? According to what she’d learned, most chameleons weren’t able to do that until they were in their twenties.

And by God, she wasn’t going to let anyone lock her away until her pattern quit misbehaving. Her heart went back to Jenny and the other teens at her grandfather’s place. Suddenly, Kylie got a feeling that helping the young chameleons was part of what she was meant to do. But as Hayden had said,

convincing the chameleon elders seemed impossible.

“But you can transform yourself into most anything, right?” Miranda’s question drew Kylie out of her thoughts.

“Sort of,” Kylie answered, and tried to keep her mind back on Miranda. “But it’s still kind of tricky.”

“What crazy stuff can you do now?” Miranda asked. Her green eyes glittered with excitement.

Kylie shrugged and dropped down on the bed beside Miranda. “Nothing new, just a little more control over what I can do. Oh, wait, there is one thing. I can make other people invisible.”

“Seriously? Make me invisible now. Do it. Do it.”

“Please, not now. I’m exhausted. Plus, I’m not sure ... I mean, it’s still kind of scary to do it.” She remembered being scared shitless at the thought that she’d somehow lost Derek in the invisible world tonight.

Then, almost wanting a distraction from talking about herself, she reached for the bear and hugged it. “So you and this bear have a thing going, huh? It looked pretty serious when I came in here.”

Miranda smiled. “Perry gave it to me to keep me company when he wasn’t here. Though this guy’s not nearly as good of a kisser as Perry.”

Kylie smiled. This was what she had missed. Just having someone to talk to, to giggle with. “That’s sweet,” Kylie said.

“Yeah,” Miranda said, and then asked, “Can you glow anytime now?” She pulled her knees up to her chest.

“No,” Kylie said. “That only happens when I heal people.” Or pull them from the dead, she thought. Realizing the crazy powers that seemed to come and go, it all scared her. She really hoped Hayden and Burnett could work out their differences. It would really be nice to have Hayden here to help her if things went wonky again.

“Too bad, the whole glowing thing was totally cool. I mean, I can make myself glow, but it’s not as cool as when you did it. I don’t know why, but it’s different.”

Kylie shook her head. “It wasn’t that cool, believe me.”

“Yeah, it was.” Miranda made a funny face. “Everyone agreed that you

looked like an angel. They were even wondering if maybe you didn't have a little angel in you."

"I'm no angel." *Just ask Burnett.*

"Everyone is still talking about it," Miranda said.

Great. But even at the thought of being everyone's topic of conversation, and getting all the awkward stares from some of the other students, she didn't dread it as much as she would have before. Face it, she was thrilled to be back, even if it did mean she was still considered a bit of a freak.

Pushing all that aside, she focused on Miranda again. "So what have I missed since I've been gone?"

"Everything. It's been crazy. Oh..." A frown appeared in her eyes. "Did you hear about Helen?"

"Yeah." Kylie nodded. "Holiday promised me she's fine."

Miranda made another face. "Did you hear who they think did it? That Mario creep was seen—"

Kylie nodded again. "I know."

Miranda frowned. "I think it was him, too. I had started feeling that weird presence again. Like someone was hanging around. Gave me the creeps. And I was all by myself, too."

"I know what you mean." An ugly shiver walked down Kylie's spine as she remembered her confrontation with Mario earlier. Then Kylie looked at Miranda. "And I'm sorry. It's my fault he's here."

"It's not your fault. He's evil."

"Yeah." And he was. Soon, Kylie knew she'd have to tell Miranda about what happened tonight, but she didn't have the energy to go into it now. "You don't feel him now, do you?"

Miranda tilted her head to the side as if putting out some kind of internal feelings. "No."

"Good." Kylie pushed back the feeling that he could come back anytime. She really wanted to believe that Shadow Falls was safe, but was she only fooling herself?

"You okay?" Miranda asked, studying her.

"Fine. How's school going?"

“We got a new history teacher. To replace that creep, Collin Warren. A cool guy. A were. He’s young. Like only twenty. He was a whiz kid, but you wouldn’t know it now. You should see Fredericka! She’s all over him.”

Kylie nodded but didn’t want to get caught up in bad-mouthing Fredericka. They had kind of made peace. “And what other craziness has happened?”

Miranda arched her right brow. “Nikki happened, and if she doesn’t stop happening I’m gonna give her a case of big fat pimples.” She held up her hand, wiggled her pinky, and scowled.

It took a moment to remember Nikki was the new shape-shifter who had a thing for Perry. Kylie frowned, thinking about the Meet Your Campmate hour she’d spent with the girl. The girl for sure had it bad for Perry. “Yikes. How’s that going?”

“It better not be going anywhere! I get so furious at Perry. I mean, he swears he wouldn’t touch her, but I think he’s eating up the fact that some girl has a thing for him. And I can tell that he likes it that I’m jealous. He mentions her in unimportant conversations. As if he likes to see me get all riled up.”

Kylie bit down on her lip and wondered if Lucas hadn’t been a bit thrilled that Monique had a thing for him. Or did Monique even have a thing for him? Was Lucas really telling the truth about them never doing more than just sharing a couple of kisses? Had it been Monique who Kylie had seen?

The questions came at her so fast, she wanted to mentally duck.

Miranda dropped back on the bed with a bit of drama, and Kylie realized her mind had taken her back to her problems when she should be focused on Miranda.

“Do you trust him?” Kylie asked. “If you do, then you have to stop fixating on it.”

Miranda pursed her lips as if thinking. “Is that what you did with Lucas?”

“That’s different,” Kylie said.

Miranda propped herself up on one elbow. “Are you okay? God, I know that had to hurt.”

“I will be okay,” Kylie said. “Eventually.” She stared up at the ceiling and

tried to push her heartbreak back. It wasn't as if she didn't have a ton of other issues to worry about. Like the ghost carrying around severed heads who was probably waiting for her in her bedroom. A shiver ran down her spine from the memory.

Miranda shifted and rested back on the bed again. "You know after you left he came to talk to Della and me?"

Kylie turned and looked at Miranda. "He did?"

"Yeah. I think he hoped we would try to talk to you about him. Convince you to forgive him."

Kylie refocused on the ceiling and reached for the teddy bear and hugged it. "I'm sorry he bothered you."

"He didn't bother us," Miranda said. "I don't know if you want to hear this, but ... he was really hurting. I'm not saying you should forgive him, but he swore to us that the only reason he was going through with the engagement was to get on that stupid were Council."

"I'm not sure the reason is important," Kylie said. "It's the fact that he did it. And behind my back. Not that I would have accepted it if he'd told me, but..." Her throat tightened. She hugged Miranda's teddy bear closer.

"I know." Miranda paused. "Della pretty much told him the same thing. And she gave him hell. The kind of hell only Della can dish out. Told him he was a piece of monkey shit and that he should go have himself castrated." Miranda let go of a deep sigh. "When Della first started unloading on him, I thought I was going to have a were/vamp fight on my hands. I mean, I thought he was going to come unglued. Weres don't often take lip off of a vampire, not that kind of lip. But he didn't even react. He stood there and took everything she said. Later, even Della said she couldn't help but admire him for taking his punishment like a man."

The knot in Kylie's throat doubled. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." Silence filled the room. Miranda finally spoke up. "Then let's talk about something else. Something good. Did you know Holiday and Burnett are planning on having their wedding here at the camp?"

"No, I didn't know." That news did make Kylie feel better. "When is it planned?"

“They haven’t set a date yet. I got the feeling she was waiting on you to come back. However, it will probably be soon. I went to see Holiday the other night, and Burnett’s things were all over the place. I think he’s staying there now. They’re so hot for each other. I’ll bet they have sex three times a night.”

Kylie made a face. “Do people really do it that much?”

“I don’t know,” Miranda said, “but I hope so.”

They both started giggling. A warmth filled Kylie’s chest. “Burnett and Holiday deserve to be happy.”

“Don’t we all?” Miranda said, and then sighed again. “I’m gonna say this and then I’ll shut up. I know you are really angry at Lucas and I don’t blame you for it, but ... maybe you shouldn’t completely give up on him. You wouldn’t let me give up on Perry.”

Kylie shook her head and frowned. “Two weeks ago you were telling me that I should give him the boot and go back to Derek.”

“That was before I saw how hurt Lucas was. I think he loves you.”

Kylie shook her head. “I really don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it. I just want ... I need to call my mom and then I want to go to sleep. Will you hate me if I leave now?”

“You aren’t going to school today?” Miranda asked.

Kylie gave it a thought. “No, I think I’m going to play hooky. I haven’t been to bed yet.”

“Oh, then go to sleep.” Miranda looked at her. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not telling me everything that happened?”

Kylie frowned. “Because I’m not, but I’m just too tired to get into everything now. I’ll tell you every horrible detail later.”

Miranda nodded. “How horrible?”

“Really horrible.”

“Okay.” Miranda frowned. “But I may pop in and just look at you every now and then. I’ve really missed you.”

Kylie smiled. “I missed you, too.”

“You can borrow Teddy if you want.” Miranda smiled.

“I think I will.” Kylie reached over and squeezed Miranda’s hand.

“Thanks.” She stood up and walked out, holding on to the oversized stuffed animal as if it could be her salvation.

If nothing else, she could use it to hide her face so she didn’t have to look at severed body parts.

Chapter Twelve

Thankfully the ghost must have gotten tired of waiting, because Kylie found her room warm with Socks, her black-and-white tuxedo kitty, resting peacefully on her pillow.

When she joined Socks on the bed, the cat scooted over, giving her room, then with his front white-socked paw, he swatted at the teddy bear Kylie still held.

“Okay, I guess holding you is better.” She set the bear on the floor. The cat climbed up on Kylie’s chest and she gave the kitten some much needed attention. After several minutes, Kylie sat up, shifting the feline to rest at her side. “Sorry, buddy, gotta call Mom. But don’t worry, I’ll probably be short and sweet. She’s much too busy with John to spend time talking with me.”

The moment the words were out of Kylie mouth, she realized half her problem with John. She was jealous. She felt her relationship with her mom had just found solid ground when John had come along and snagged her mom’s attention. Was it wrong for Kylie to want to be the most important thing in her mom’s life for a while?

Probably, Kylie answered her own question. Especially when she was living away from home. Her mom had every right to need a life of her own.

But if Kylie’s jealousy was only half the problem, what was her other issue with the man? Plain and simple, she just didn’t like him. She reminded herself that Burnett had done a background check on the guy and nothing suspicious came up.

Kylie remembered how shocked Burnett had been to discover that Hayden wasn’t everything his background check had revealed. Maybe Kylie

shouldn't put too much stock in Burnett's checks.

Then again, maybe Kylie should stop trying to paint John as a bad guy and start trying to accept him as a part of her mom's life. Especially when he seemed to be the only part of her mom's life that was making her happy. Her mom deserved to be happy, didn't she?

Kylie dialed her mom's number, determined to play nice.

It rang once. Then two more times. Normally her mom picked up quickly. Kylie worried she might be interrupting some romantic interludes. She frowned and looked at the time. It had to be almost lunch time in the UK, surely they really weren't ... doing the deed, or as Della would have called it, having a nooner.

She pushed that thought from her mind as quickly as she could, and instead let her mind wander to Della. Burnett had said the little vamp had run into some type of altercation. Seeing Miranda had been super soothing, but having them both here would be just what the doctor ordered.

Another ring of the line brought her attention back to the phone. She expected it to switch to voice mail at any moment. Was her mom okay? Resentment stirred inside her for John again. If something happened to her mom on this trip ...

"Hello?" Her mom sounded ... distant. Somehow unwelcoming.

"Everything okay?" Kylie asked, her hand tightening on Hayden's phone.

"Kylie?" her mom said. "Whose phone are you using to call me?"

Realizing this to be the reason for her mom's delay and odd distant tone, Kylie sank back on the pillow. However, the aloofness in her mom's voice reminded her of when she'd been younger and tried so hard to win her mom's approval. A time when Kylie questioned her mom's affection for her. But that was the past. They had found a new place in their relationship. Or they had before now. Kylie prayed John's presence didn't change that.

"Where's your phone, young lady?"

"Oh ... I..." She had think of a lie quickly and make it sound convincing. Her mom might not be able to hear her heart race with a lie, but she had some maternal lie detector that got Kylie in trouble more times than not. "I misplaced my phone last night, so I borrowed a friend's." For all intents and

purposes, it wasn't really a lie.

"Well, that explains why you didn't return my call last night," her mom said in a scolding tone. "Oh, goodness, do you realize how much it's going to cost to replace your phone?"

"I ... think I might be able to find it. And I'm sorry." Kylie stroked Socks when he moved to brush his face against her chin. "Is something wrong? Why were you calling me?"

"No, just ... your dad was worried."

Stepdad, Kylie wanted to correct, but didn't.

"He said he called you three times late yesterday and you hadn't responded. And then he called me three times while John and I were ... I mean, while I was in bed."

Ew! Kylie's capacity for being grossed out hit maximum overload, triggering her brain to block out all inappropriate mental images. "I'm sorry," Kylie offered, and then bit down on her lip. She'd told herself she had to give up hoping her mom and stepdad might get back together, but it was tough at times. Still, where it mattered most—a place where she cherished the memories of what her family used to be—a spark of hope existed.

"Three times is ridiculous," her mom said. "Especially when he knew what time it was here."

"I know," Kylie said, but thought, *Give it a break, Mom! He was worried about me!*

"Well, it's time your dad learned I'm not his phone buddy," she said.

"I'm sure he will in time," Kylie said. "I'll get in touch with him today and see what he wants."

"Do that," her mom said, and paused. "Wait. If you didn't know I called earlier, then what's up? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to check in. I hate thinking you're so far away."

"I know ... I sort of feel like that, too. I miss you. Not that I'm not having a great time. England is gorgeous, Kylie. Maybe when John and I come back next time you can come with us."

Next time? Were they already planning another trip? "Yeah," Kylie muttered, and reminded herself she was playing nice.

“Guess what, baby?” her mom asked.

Fear suddenly filled her chest. *God, please don't let her tell me they got married or something.* “What?” Kylie asked, her voice sounding like she'd swallowed a frog.

“John asked me if—”

“No,” Kylie snapped.

“No what?” her mom asked.

“You don't know him well enough.”

The line remained silent for a beat too long. “What do you think he asked me?”

Kylie cringed. “I don't know,” Kylie said, and realized she probably was too tired to have called her mom. Too exhausted to hold a logical conversation—especially one where she had to pretend to like someone she didn't.

“He wants me to come work for his company,” her mom said. “He's willing to pay me almost double what I'm making now.”

Okay, so her mom working for the man wasn't as bad as her marrying him, but Kylie didn't like that, either.

“I thought you liked your job?” Kylie said.

“I do, but ... twice as much money and free travel. I mean, that's hard to turn down.”

“But ... but you're”—*banging him*—“you're dating him. Isn't that like sexual harassment? I mean there's laws against that, aren't there?”

“Not if the relationship is consensual,” her mom said. “John and I talked about how my working for him could be difficult. But he pointed out that I wouldn't be working directly under him. So, it wouldn't really be like we were working together.”

Kylie could hear it in her mom's voice. Her mind was made up. She was going to take the job. “Yeah, but I just don't know if it's wise to work for someone you are ... dating.”

“I think John and I are mature enough to deal with this.”

Yeah, like he behaved so mature the last time you brought him here when he socked Dad and started a whole free-for-all fight in the lunch room. Kylie

bit her lip to keep from saying anything hurtful.

“I guess I just don’t know him that well,” Kylie said.

“Which I plan to remedy the next time you’re home,” her mom said. “I thought maybe we could all go somewhere for a weekend.”

Please no! “I ... don’t think we need to do that. I ... to be honest, I kind of like knowing those weekends are for just me and you.”

“But you need to get to know him, Kylie. He’s a great guy. I just know you’d love him if you really got to know him.”

“Yeah, and that’s fine. But let’s not ... not rush it, okay? All in good time.”

Her mom got quiet again. “You okay, baby? I just realized what time it is there. What are you doing up at five thirty?”

“I had some homework I had to catch up on,” Kylie lied again. “And I’d best get going and start working on it, too.”

“Do you have boy problems again?” her mom asked.

Along with a ghost-carrying-a-severed-head problem. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“What happened, sweetie?” her mom asked.

“I’m fine. Actually, I prefer not to talk about it. Maybe later.”

Her mom’s long sigh came through the phone. “I’m here when you’re ready...”

“I know, and I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

It was by replaying her mom’s words over and over in her head that Kylie finally fell asleep.

* * *

“Where are we going?” Kylie asked Derek as she felt that haziness of being in a peaceful dream state. Correction, being in a dreamscape. And right then, the peacefulness of it floated off. It had been a while since she’d done this, but she instantly realized this wasn’t her dream. She hadn’t gone to Derek. He had come to her. And now he was leading her somewhere—walking ahead of her but with his hand held behind his back holding hers, and leading

her down a path. A wooded path.

She tried to get her mind to work on a more alert level. What time was it? How long had she been asleep? She had to stop this.

But then Derek looked back over his shoulder and smiled at her. She lost her train of thought and got caught up in the world she was in. A safe world, her mind said. She looked up. The sun sent soft morning rays of light dancing through the trees.

“We’re going to our rock. You like it there, don’t you?” His hand gave hers a slight squeeze. His palm felt warm in hers. Comforting. Odd how just holding someone’s hand could feel like a hug—like a warm embrace. Then again, she was talking about Derek. He had all those fae powers that made his touch ... more.

Meaningful.

She vaguely remembered him trying to kiss her earlier on the escape from her grandfather’s place and thinking he wasn’t going to be as easy to keep at bay. Did she really want to keep him at bay?

The answer seemed to be somewhere between her heart and mind and she couldn’t draw the conclusion. But this was just a dream, a part of her offered up as an excuse. Later she’d figure it out. She would, she promised herself.

“You always liked going to the rock before,” Derek said.

“Yes, but...” She stopped and glanced down at herself. She was dressed in a pair of cut-offs and a T-shirt. But she was barefoot. It felt good. A soft bed of moist grass and earth beneath her feet. Definitely a dream. If real, she would be feeling the pebbles and thorns. This wasn’t real. Not really. But she needed to be careful. She wiggled her toes and tried again to wake up enough to figure out what was right and what was wrong.

Derek turned, still holding her hand, and faced her again. “Just come with me, Kylie. Give me this, please.” She could already hear the trickle of the stream flowing through the earth, splashing over stones that had been smoothed by time. The smell of the grass, the woods, and the tall trees scented the air she breathed.

A breeze stirred Derek’s hair. “Give me some time to be with you.”

She stared at him through her own hair dancing in front of her eyes. Saw

the pleading in his gaze.

The word *no* rested on the tip of her tongue, but then she saw the bruises on his neck. Bruises that looked just as bad as those on Lucas. Not that she'd given those bruises to Derek. Mario had. But it had been because of her. He'd thrown himself at Mario to protect her.

Derek had been willing to die for her.

He loved her.

"Please," he said, and the sound of his voice echoed in her heart like a sad song.

Going with him didn't feel completely right, but telling him no didn't feel right either.

"Just to talk," she said, and arched a brow.

"Right." He grinned and the gold flecks in his eyes glittered. She remembered that look, too. A sexy devil-may-care look that hinted he was up to something.

He turned around and she continued following him. In a few minutes, they arrived by the stream. He waved toward the rock.

"Your chariot awaits you, my dear lady," he said in a formal voice, and gave her a bow as if in some school play.

He looked so cute, she couldn't help but grin. "You're being silly."

"Yeah, but if that's what it takes to make you smile, I'll be silly all day long. You had a rough night. You deserve a little fun."

"I do, don't I?" she said, and then hopped up on the rock. On her chariot.

He jumped up on the rock right after her. His shoulder brushed against hers. She couldn't help but remember the first time they'd come here. It had looked so magical, so much like a fairytale, something from a painting in a children's book. Of course, back then that had happened a lot when she was with Derek, and it didn't have to be just there.

Kylie looked around at the woods and sights. No fairytale feel dominated the place. Maybe the fairytale feel didn't happen in dreams.

Not that it wasn't pretty or soothing to be here. The sun sent a golden color between the trees and their stirring leaves. The air smelled morning fresh. It felt nice to be sitting next to Derek, to feel his shoulder gently

pressed against hers. Couldn't she relax? She wasn't going to let anything happen. They were here to talk, she reminded herself.

She looked at him and felt the tickle of attraction making her stomach flutter. For the first time, she noticed the subtle changes in him over the last few months. The boy she had once come to the rock with was almost gone, and a man had taken his place. The hair resting against his brow looked a little darker. He had a masculine profile, a strong jaw line, and beautiful lips.

He looked down at her. "You know, it was really cool when you turned me invisible."

"Yeah, but it scared the crap out of me when I didn't see you right away when I brought you back."

"I know. I could feel your emotions." He hesitated. "But that was kind of cool, too," he said. "Actually, that was the coolest part."

"No it wasn't," she said. "Seriously, it scared me."

"I know, but that's what made it so cool. Because that's when I knew for sure. That's when I knew you still loved me."

His words echoed in her head and bounced around her heart. He leaned down. His finger brushed across her cheek. His breath whispered across her temple. Oh damn, Kylie thought. Here she was again, up shit creek without a paddle.

* * *

The touch moved across Kylie's chin.

Gentle.

Caring.

Loving.

She remembered dreamscaping with Derek, but couldn't remember how it ended. The touch came again. The feel of bedsheets pressed against her side. Oh crap, was she still with Derek? In bed? What the hell had she done?

She jerked her eyes open, scared that ... that ... Yellow eyes stared right at her. Yellow feline eyes. And a white paw now rested on the tip of her nose.

"Socks." She chuckled with relief, her heart pounding with distant memories of the dream playing peek-a-boo with her mind.

“Hey, baby,” she muttered when the cat’s paw swatted at her nose. “So you really missed me when I was gone, huh?”

“Everyone did,” a voice came from the other side of the room. Before she could force her brain to identify the voice, or to even know if it was male or female, she’d bolted out of the bed and stood wide-eyed, staring at ... Okay, she took a deep breath. No reason to panic. It was just Holiday.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I just slipped in to check on you. I was getting a little worried. You’ve been out for hours. I checked on you two or three times and you didn’t even stir.”

Kylie blinked and looked at the clock on her bedside table. Three o’clock. “I didn’t mean to sleep that long.”

“I think you were exhausted,” Holiday said, then frowned. “Burnett told me about the whole Hayden episode.” Socks jumped off the bed and started doing figure eights around Holiday’s ankles.

The camp leader ignored the cat and continued to stare at Kylie.

“About that,” Holiday said. Her expression told Kylie that she was about to get a reprimand. Holiday didn’t reprimand very often, so when she did, it always seemed to hurt twice as much.

And sure, Kylie might deserve it, but still half asleep, she didn’t know if she could take it standing up. She plopped back on the bed, reached for the teddy bear, and hugged it.

“You can’t hide stuff from us, Kylie.”

Yup, here came the scolding.

Chapter Thirteen

“I know I shouldn’t have hidden it.” Kylie’s chest tightened. “And I know Burnett was really disappointed in me and you’re probably mad at me, too. And I get why. I really, really do. But...” She took a deep breath as the scolding look in Holiday’s eyes remained strong.

Hugging the teddy tighter, she continued, “Can’t you understand that I promised my grandfather not to expose Hayden? I wouldn’t have kept that promise if I thought he was bad or trying to cause any harm. He’s not a bad person. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have found you that night Collin Warren kidnapped you. And if I hadn’t found you when I did, I probably wouldn’t have ... been able to save you. He helped save your life.”

Holiday frowned. “I’m not saying he’s a bad person, Kylie. And it’s not that I don’t understand why you would feel compelled to keep your promise, but Burnett is right to protect you. We need to know what’s going on.”

“Well, now you know everything. I mean, if Burnett told you.”

“He did,” Holiday said.

Kylie bit down on her lip and then pushed the teddy bear aside. “Have Burnett and Hayden spoken again? Did he tell you that they were at each other’s throats last night? Burnett said he was going to consider whether he was going to let him stay on. *Consider!* And then Hayden said he would then *consider* if he *wanted* to stay on.” She let go of a deep gulp of air. “Burnett acted like a jerk.”

Holiday frowned. “When it comes to protecting people he cares about, Burnett always comes off a little strong.”

“A little? Really?” Kylie rolled her eyes. “You can say that with a straight

face?”

A slight smile pulled at the camp leader's lips. “Okay, maybe a lot, but most of the time, he's right.” She pulled her red hair around to one side and started twisting it.

“But he's not right about this. And here's the thing. I'd kind of like it if Burnett didn't run Hayden off. I know he lied to get hired, but it would mean so much to have ... to have someone around who understands what it means to be a chameleon. I mean, you're great. You've been there for me from the beginning, and so has Burnett, but it's like you've told me many times, you don't know anything about chameleons.”

Holiday nodded. “I know it would be good to have Hayden here, and I told that to Burnett, too. And I promise you, he's taking that into consideration.”

“You're going to let him decide?” Kylie asked, not liking that. “What happened to you being the head honcho around here?”

“Now that we're really together, we've decided that Burnett gets the final say on anything that impacts the security of Shadow Falls.”

“Oh, hell! You know he can be so damn unreasonable at times. You just admitted that yourself,” Kylie said. Had loving Burnett messed with Holiday's head? Kylie had heard that love turned you stupid; now she knew it for sure.

“True, he can be unreasonable. Yet I can be too easy,” Holiday admitted. “And on the security and safety of our students, I'd rather err on the side of caution. But don't worry. I really think Burnett feels that having Hayden around would be good. Not just for you, but to help us figure out precautions against ... future attacks.”

Kylie pulled her knees up and hugged them. She knew by “future attacks,” Holiday meant Mario. While Helen still couldn't recall anything of her attack, Kylie knew in her heart it had been Mario. A wave of doom and gloom bit down on her gut and some of last night's events flashed in her head. She looked up.

“I don't think I can handle Mario hurting someone else.” She gripped her hands. “First Helen, and then I nearly got Derek killed last night. And Mario

almost had *me* doing the killing where Lucas was concerned.”

“I know,” Holiday interrupted, as if she knew just repeating it would be hard for Kylie. “That has to be hard to take. But it just emphasizes what Burnett says about you being careful. He’s done tons of work to the security system since you’ve been gone and he really thinks it’s infallible.”

That should have made Kylie feel safe, and it did, but ... “So I’m a prisoner here,” she said, thinking if things didn’t change it would get as bad as living on her grandfather’s compound.

“No, not by a long shot,” Holiday insisted. “I knew you would feel that way, and Burnett and I have already discussed it. You are not prohibited from leaving, but until things calm down, Burnett wants to be with you when you go anywhere. I don’t know if he told you, but Mario was spotted in Fallen. So Burnett’s adamant about being with you if you leave. Do you think you can handle that? He just wants to make sure you’re safe, Kylie. You’re special to him.”

Kylie nodded. “I know, and I love him, too.” She recalled her conversation with her mom. “But what about parents’ weekend in a few weeks? My mom is already making plans. She wants John and me to ... bond.” Kylie’s mind created an image of being forced to be polite to her mom’s boyfriend for a whole freaking weekend. Good lord, the last time she saw the man, she’d completely lost it and was slinging insults at him left and right. It was like she couldn’t stop herself. He brought out the bitch in her big time.

Holiday dropped on the edge of the bed. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” But Kylie saw the concern flicker in her eyes.

Kylie hugged her knees tighter. “To be honest, I wouldn’t mind not being able to make that weekend. So if you can find a way to call that off, I won’t fight you on it. You’ve got my word.”

Holiday sighed with sympathy. “Now ... what’s this about a spirit carrying around a head?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “You mean your ghosts don’t do that?” she asked with sarcasm.

Holiday chuckled, even though Kylie hadn’t really meant it to be funny.

“I had one toting around his own arm and leg for a while. He’d lost it in an accident and wouldn’t put it down. It was pretty gross.”

“Lucky us,” Kylie said, but then she thought about the spirits at the graveyard, and felt bad for being so cynical. Most of them were simply lost souls looking for a little help.

Holiday reached over and pressed a hand on her arm. “Lucky them to have us,” she said as if she’d read Kylie’s mind, or at least her emotions. “But not all of them deserve our help. I’ve told you this before, you can send them away. You have every right to say no to some of them.”

“I know, and I tried, but I guess I didn’t do it right. Or maybe I didn’t try hard enough.”

“From what Burnett told me, I think sending this spirit away is a wise thing. What’s this about her wanting you to kill someone? Has she told you who it is?”

“No. She’s short on facts like all ghosts. I’m not even sure if she knows the answers.”

“Does she feel evil?”

Kylie thought about it a minute. “Yes and no. I mean, she’s not an angel. She admitted she’s killed a lot of people. Most of the times when I see her she has blood on her hands, but it almost seems like she feels guilt for it. Or at least sometimes she does,” Kylie said, remembering how callously she’d carried around the severed head. “But I don’t think she’s out to hurt me. I even asked her if she was trying to take me to hell.”

Holiday raised a brow. “And you think she’d admit it if she was?”

“No, but she didn’t out and out deny it as if it was a lie. She matter-of-factly told me that she wanted me to send someone else to hell. And I think the whole head thing was because I started ignoring her. She just wanted to get my attention.”

“And I bet it worked,” Holiday said.

“Pretty much,” Kylie said. “Kinda hard not to pay attention to that.” She shivered, remembering the image of the head.

“I still think sending this one packing might be a good thing.”

“I know, and last night I was even thinking it was a good thing to do, but

there's one thing that makes me question doing that."

"What?" Holiday asked, and brought one of her legs up on the bed.

Kylie sighed. She hadn't really been too concerned about this earlier, but right now it seemed like something she should consider. "She says that if I don't do it, if I don't kill this person, that I'm the one who's going to die."

Holiday's brow tightened. "Okay, that does kind of put a new slant on things. Do you get the feeling she's trying to protect you, or just cause harm to someone else?"

Kylie considered the question. "I think she's doing both. I don't know why she would want to protect me. But then again, last night when Derek and I were leaving the compound, she's the one who told me to go to the graveyard. I think she was helping me."

Holiday frowned. "Okay, keep her around for now. But for God sakes, be careful. You've already got someone from this world trying to hurt you, you don't need someone from the afterlife trying to do you harm, too. You are too special for anyone to want to hurt you."

Holiday's words repeated in Kylie's head and she had a flash of someone else saying words so similar. Someone with green eyes and golden flecks, and warm ... lips. Suddenly, she recalled part of the dreamscape, an important part of it. The part where Derek kissed her.

"Oh, crap!" she muttered, and dropped her head into her hands. "What have I done?"

"What?" Holiday asked.

Kylie looked up at her. "In the dreamscapes, the person who initiates the dream is in control, but the person who is brought into it, she can stop things from happening, right?"

"Right. As long as she feels strongly about it not happening."

"Shit," she muttered again, because she recalled feeling confused about what she did and didn't want. Confused about what was right and what was wrong. And if she was confused in the dream, then she might have let things happen that shouldn't have happened.

"Oh, damn," she said, and tried to remember the rest of the dream. Then she looked back up at Holiday. "Shouldn't I be able to remember

everything?”

“Yes, except...” She made a face as if she didn’t think Kylie would want to hear the rest. “Except when you’re really exhausted.”

“Which I was. Just freaking great,” Kylie mumbled.

“Calm down. After you have something to eat and relax you’ll probably recall everything.”

“I don’t know if I want to remember,” she muttered. “Oh, hell, yes I do.”

Holiday frowned. “Do you want me to talk to Derek about this?”

Kylie’s brow wrinkled. “I didn’t say it was Derek.”

Holiday gave her a don’t-be-silly look. “You two and I are the only ones who can initiate a dreamscape here. It had to be him.”

Kylie bit down on her lip again. “Okay, it was him, but no, I don’t want you to talk to him. I should handle this myself.” She let go of a deep puff of air. “He thinks I’m still in love with him.”

“And you’re not?” Holiday asked.

“No,” Kylie said. And she meant it. She did. Yes, she really did. So why did she sound like she was trying to convince herself of that? “I don’t want to talk about Derek.”

Holiday studied her. “Do you want to talk about Lucas?”

“No,” Kylie said.

“Okay, but if you need to talk about him or anything, I’m here for you.”

“I know.” Then, just to make a liar out of herself, the words slipped from her lips. “I realized I loved him right before all that happened.” Her heart felt like it folded over on itself. “I was going to tell him the next time I saw him. Then, the next time I saw him he was promising his soul to Monique.”

Holiday pursed her lips as if hesitant to say what was on her mind. “I don’t think he meant it.”

“I don’t care if he meant it; he shouldn’t have done it.”

“That’s true. And I won’t tell you what to do, but I do believe he’s telling the truth about his intentions. And I’m just saying that if you still care about him, I don’t think he’s a bad guy.”

Kylie drew in a deep breath. “I asked my mom once if she still loved my dad. She told me she didn’t know. That maybe once she got over being mad

at him, she'd have to see how she felt. Maybe that's what will happen with me and Lucas. But for right now, it's royally pissing me off that everyone is telling me what a good guy he is. It makes me feel like I'm the one who did something wrong." Tears tightened her throat, but she swallowed them and stiffened her spine.

"I'm sorry." Holiday held up one hand. "And you know you didn't do anything wrong. And I'll not say another word."

"Thank you."

Her gut suddenly let out a loud growl letting her know it was as unhappy as she was ... and empty. She gazed back up at Holiday. "I need to eat something. I think my stomach is gnawing on my backbone right now."

"Here." Holiday reached over to the nightstand and handed her a paper bag. "I brought it to you earlier, thinking you'd need some food."

Kylie pulled out the plastic baggie and saw half a sandwich with a bite out of it.

"Sorry, I got hungry while I was waiting on you to wake up."

When Kylie unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite, Holiday reached back into the bag and pulled out a bag of opened chips. "I'm still hungry." She smiled apologetically and popped a chip into her mouth.

As Kylie ate the sandwich and watched Holiday eat the chips, the weight of the world sitting on her chest felt as if it lifted. Not all the way, but enough to give her a reprieve. She still had tons of issues to work through. But being back at Shadow Falls—this was right. And being here with Holiday helped make it so.

Kylie finished off the last bite of sandwich and reached into the chip bag Holiday held. Her fingers found the bottom of the bag.

Holiday made a funny face. "Sorry, I don't know what's up with me. My appetite has gone haywire."

"It's probably love," Kylie said. "You're just shining with it. Every time you say Burnett's name, your eyes start glowing."

"Actually, love does just the opposite on the appetite. You think you can live off love. No food needed."

Kylie arched a brow. "Then ... maybe you're pregnant."

Holiday licked the potato chip grease and crumbs from her fingers. “Not possible.”

“Oh, please. Miranda told me she was at your place and Burnett’s things were scattered all over. You two are planning a wedding. Miranda told me that, too. The fact that you two are sleeping together is ... is normal. And if you pretend otherwise, you’re going to look stupid.”

Holiday tilted her head to the side, offering Kylie a half-serious look. “I’m not pretending. And while I shouldn’t have to explain this—” She paused. “I didn’t say he wasn’t staying at my place, or that we weren’t ... sleeping together. I said it wasn’t possible. We’re being careful. Using protection. Which is the best advice I can give any teenager out there.” She pointed to the paper sack on the bed. “There’s a few cookies in the bag. Sorry, I ... ate some of those, too.”

Kylie snagged the paper bag and pulled out another plastic bag in the bottom that had three Oreos. She grabbed one for herself, and out of politeness, offered one to Holiday—who took it with enthusiasm.

“I love Oreos,” Holiday said, as if reading Kylie’s surprise. Then the fae pushed the entire cookie into her mouth in one big bite.

“You know condoms aren’t foolproof,” Kylie said, opening her cookie and licking at the white icing between the chocolate wafers. “Some statistics state they are only eighty-five to ninety percent effective in preventing pregnancy. Some claim that as much as ten percent of that error is human error, or in your case, vampire error, and not condom error. Like a guy pulling out too quick”—she made a face—“causing leakage, or not putting the thing on right in the first place. And if a woman has long nails...” The look on Holiday’s face gave Kylie a moment of pause. “Not that you have long nails or that Burnett wouldn’t know how to put one on himself.” Kylie felt her face heat.

Holiday blushed right along with Kylie. Then, still having a mouth full of cookie, the fae held up her hand as if to say she needed a minute before speaking.

Kylie, oddly over the embarrassment, felt proud of the knowledge she had, and kept talking between licks of icing. “And if a guy carries one around

in his wallet too long, it can tear. Then there're product failures. For whatever reason the condom breaks, or has a tiny hole in it. And you would be surprised how little sperm it takes to get a girl preggo."

Having tasted away all the icing, Kylie took a bite of the chocolate cookie and spoke around the mouthful of Oreo. "To be on the safe side, you can buy the condoms with spermicide on them. That's supposed to help kill any of those little escaping sperms. But using spermicidal condoms all the time can cause vaginal problems. So it's not recommended for long-term use."

Holiday took a deep swallow. "You..."—she swallowed again, licking her teeth clean—"sure do know a lot about condoms."

"I told you, my mom left pamphlets on my bed about twice a week. You wouldn't believe what information I have in my head. I could tell you about all the different kinds of STDs, but it isn't pretty. I don't want to think about those."

Holiday laughed. "I think when I have a kid I might ask your mom about where she gets the pamphlets."

"Oh, don't do that. It messes with a person's mind. I think that's why I'm still a virgin."

Holiday chuckled. "Which is exactly why I'll be getting my kid those pamphlets." Her smile faded. "Seriously, a teen should not take having sex lightly."

"True," Kylie said, and grabbed the last cookie and broke it half. "But too much information isn't a good thing, either." She offered one half to Holiday, who didn't hesitate to take it.

"Thanks."

"Are you sure you're not pregnant?" Kylie asked, watching Holiday pop half the cookie into her mouth as if she was starving. Or as if eating for two.

"Positive." Holiday talked around the Oreo. "Faes, or at least Brandon faes, always know when they're pregnant."

Kylie grinned. "Don't tell me, one of the signs is they get ravenous and eat their friend's food while they're waiting on them to wake up."

"No." She paused and her brow wrinkled. "Well, being hungry is a symptom, but the most common one is hiccups and burping. I had a cousin

who was pregnant and she hiccuped nonstop for eight months. It was sad.”

Holiday looked at the lunch sack as if wishing it weren't empty. “Why don't you get your shoes on and we'll go to the cafeteria and snag some more cookies. Then we'll find Burnett and go to the falls. Something tells me you could use some soothing ambience.”

The thought of going to the falls sent a warm feeling through Kylie. “Yeah, that sounds really good.” Maybe when she was there she could remember the rest of the dream. God, she really hoped she hadn't done anything stupid with Derek.

Not that she feared she'd ... gone too far—as in all the way, too far. Face it, like she'd told Holiday, those pamphlets did a number on her. Too much information really could be a bad thing. Or in this particular case, a good thing.

Then she realized that if she hadn't been so cautious where sex was concerned, she might have already slept with Lucas. She was glad she hadn't. That achy pain tugged at her chest again, and she couldn't help but wonder how much truth there was to what she'd told Holiday. When she was over being mad at Lucas, could she forgive him?

Did he deserve a second chance?

Pushing Lucas from her mind, Derek stood in waiting and popped right into the forefront of her thoughts. She recalled the kiss in the dream. Had she stopped the kiss? Or had she let herself be pulled into it? Damn! Damn! Offering Derek hope was a bad thing.

And if she had offered him hope, she needed to nip it in the bud, before it led to some irreparable damage. The kind of damage where people got their feelings hurt. And the fact that she did care so much about hurting Derek's feelings might have given her pause, but she wasn't going to let her mind go there. Nope!

Kylie snagged her shoes, slipped them on, and walked out with Holiday. Remembering Hayden's phone, she stuck it in her pocket. Last night she'd considered calling her grandfather, but not knowing what to say, or how to say it, she hadn't. And if she called him, would Burnett see it as another betrayal?

She glanced up at Holiday. “Can we run by Hayden’s cabin? I need to give him his phone back.” When Holiday looked confused, Kylie explained. “I left mine at my grandfather’s. And I wanted to call my mom.”

“Sure,” Holiday said.

They weren’t out of Kylie’s bedroom door when Holiday let out a light jumpy kind of noise. Then another escaped from her lips.

Kylie gazed at her. Holiday slapped her hand over her lips and panic filled her green eyes.

“Is that what I think it is?” Kylie asked. “Was that a hiccup?”

“Oh, shit!” Holiday said, and hiccuped again.

Kylie yelped with excitement. “I wonder if the baby will look like you or Burnett.”

Chapter Fourteen

Hayden wasn't at his cabin, but Holiday, still a little panicked by her two hiccups, agreed to walk by his classroom to see if he was there.

"I'm sure this is nothing," Holiday said, tapping her chest. "It's psychosomatic. We mentioned hiccups and it just happened."

Kylie wasn't convinced, and apparently neither was Holiday, who repeated the same thing over and over again as if to persuade herself.

"Don't you want kids?" Kylie asked, remembering what she'd learned about chameleons having a hard time getting pregnant.

"Yes, but ... Burnett's not completely on board with the idea. He says he didn't have a father, so he doesn't know how to be one."

"I think he'd make an excellent dad."

"I know he would. He'd probably be a tad overprotective, like most vampires, but still fabulous."

Thinking of another vamp who could be a tad overprotective, Kylie asked, "Is Della back yet?"

"Not until tonight," Holiday said. "But she's fine," she added, as if reading Kylie's concern. "Burnett spoke with Steve again this morning."

Kylie nodded. "And Helen's okay?"

"They let her out of the hospital late yesterday. Her parents wanted her to come with them for a while. Just to make sure she's okay. Of course Jonathon is having a fit."

"I'll bet he is," Kylie said, remembering how the two of them were practically superglued at the hip.

Holiday and Kylie came to Hayden's classroom. Kylie saw someone

moving behind the curtain. “He’s here.”

Holiday agreed to wait outside, and Kylie walked in.

Hayden, alone in the room, sat at his desk with a phone in his hand.

“Hey,” Kylie said.

Hayden glanced up and dropped the phone. “I was about to try and call you to see if you were okay. And check on my phone? Please tell me you haven’t spoken with my girlfriend this time.”

“No, I haven’t spoken with anyone but my mom.”

“And you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Kylie pulled the phone out of her pocket. “I wanted to drop your phone off. Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

He nodded. “You didn’t call your grandfather?”

Kylie’s mood went a notch down. She shook her head. “I don’t know what to say to him. I’ll call him in a day or so.” Yes, she was procrastinating, but she decided to give herself a little break on this issue. “Have you told him that Burnett knows everything?”

A frown pulled at his eyes as he nodded. “I had to chance it and use the office phone, since I didn’t have my phone,” he said.

She shot him an apologetic look. “Is my grandfather ... okay with it?”

“He’s not happy.” Hayden paused. “I still don’t think he was in on any of the ploy to try to stop you from leaving. And he seemed eager to speak to you about it.”

“I know. I believe you, it’s just ... I feel as if I hurt him by leaving, and now he’s going to be upset that I told Burnett about you. The thought of him being angry with me is ... just too much.”

“I explained the reasons we had to tell Burnett.” Hayden leaned back in the chair. It squeaked. “Your grandfather cares about you. I know he can be hardheaded, but he’s lost so much in this life—his kid, his wife. Now, he’s scared he’s going to lose you, too.”

“I know. And yet ... even if I didn’t belong here at Shadow Falls, I couldn’t live like they want me to live. Isolated from the world.”

“I know. It’s not easy.” The sudden stiffness in his shoulders told Kylie just how hard it had been on him.

“How old were you when you ran away?”

He picked up a pencil. “How did you know I ran away?”

“I was guessing,” Kylie answered.

He hesitated. “Seventeen.”

“Have you seen your parents since?”

He shook his head. “Your grandfather keeps me abreast of how they’re doing and ... he started letting me talk to Jenny when...”

“When what?” Kylie asked.

“When he started getting worried she was planning to run away.”

“Is she?”

“I think I’ve calmed her down. She just has to stay there another year or so. She’s almost mature.”

“Mature?” Kylie asked.

“Yes. When you are able to change your pattern. The rule is that if you leave after maturity, then you’re not excommunicated. You’re frowned upon, but you can visit. But the elders are trying to push her into getting married. It’s just another ploy by the elders to try to keep her living on the compound.”

Kylie felt Hayden’s pain and she felt for Jenny, too. “Don’t they see that they’re pushing the young people to leave? It’s like one of those cults that forces kids to live like it’s the eighteen hundreds.”

“They think they’re protecting them,” Hayden said. “And perhaps in the elders’ day it was the right thing to do. But things have changed and they can’t seem to see that. I’ve managed to create a life for myself and I’m not living in danger.”

Kylie nodded, but she couldn’t help but wonder how good of a life it was if he had to hide his true identity. Nevertheless, she supposed it was the better option. “Are you going to stay here?” She held her breath with hope.

He leaned back in his chair. “Burnett hasn’t gotten back to me.”

“But if he says you can stay, will you?”

He picked up a pencil and rolled it in his hand. She jumped in. “Please. I’d kind of like it if you stayed. I still have questions and it would be really nice to have you around. And ... I think I want to try to change things. You

know, help the other chameleon teens. I haven't mentioned it yet to Holiday or Burnett, but I'm just waiting for the right time."

"I'll give it some thought," he said. "But let me just say that your friend Burnett makes leaving sound like the better deal."

"He's not all bad," Kylie said. "I know he can be ... difficult. In a lot of ways, he sort of reminds me of my grandfather. And even you a bit."

"I'm not nearly as pigheaded," Hayden said. "He has no right to treat me like this."

Kylie could argue the point with Hayden that coming here and hiding his whole identity didn't instill trust in Burnett, but what good would it do? "Just promise you'll consider staying on. I really need you here."

"I'll consider it, but that's all I can promise."

* * *

With another sandwich, Oreos, and Burnett in tow, Kylie and Holiday made their way to the falls. Burnett moved with them, but the vamp kept tripping, mostly because his concerned focus stayed on Holiday, instead of watching where he stepped.

She hadn't hiccuped again, but neither had she stopped panicking. At least it appeared that way, because she hadn't lost that oh-shit look on her face. Obviously, Burnett picked up her oh-shit look, too.

"Everything okay?" he asked for the second time.

"I told you, it's just tummy issues," Holiday answered, and Kylie recognized her answer as a version of the truth, so her heartbeat wouldn't give away the fact that she lied.

"Do you need to see a doctor?" His brows tightened and the big bad vampire became a worried, normal-looking guy who cared a whole hell of a lot for Holiday.

A warmth filled her chest just looking at them. With it came a sense of accomplishment. A feeling that she'd not just played a part in getting these two together, but it had been part of her quest that she'd completed, and completed well.

"No, I don't need to see a doctor," Holiday said. "At least not yet," she

added quickly to counter another lie.

“Probably wedding jitters,” Kylie added, hoping to help the conversation move away from her tummy issues before Holiday couldn’t find another half truth to throw out.

Looking away from the couple holding hands, Kylie could swear she heard the whispering sound of rushing water over the falls. She slowed her steps and tuned her ears to listen. Yup, it was the falls, and yet they were probably a half mile away. She inhaled deeply, longing for the peace she would find behind the magical wall of water—a place where all the wrongs in life didn’t feel so wrong. Or at least they felt manageable.

“Wedding jitters?” Burnett asked as if he’d been considering Kylie’s statement. “She has nothing to be nervous about.” He almost sounded offended. “I will do everything in my power to be a good husband.”

“Brides are always nervous,” Holiday said.

“About what? It’s not as if you don’t already know all my bad habits. Or me yours.”

Holiday shot him a funny face. “What bad habits do I have?”

“You’re a cover hog.” Burnett grinned and stared with devotion at her. Kylie had seen that look on his face before, but now he wore it with pride.

“But seriously,” Burnett continued, “what would you have to be nervous about?”

Kylie noticed that when they talked, it was as if she wasn’t even here. They were so tuned in to each other, everything and everyone else disappeared. And hadn’t she felt the same about Lucas? She pushed that thought back.

“What if you get cold feet?” Holiday asked, and some of the teasing tone slipped from her voice.

Kylie remembered that Blake, Holiday’s ex fiancé, had left her at the altar—after sleeping with her twin. No doubt, Holiday probably did have wedding jitters.

“My feet are always cold. I’m a vampire,” he said in a teasing voice, almost as if he was trying to chase away Holiday’s somberness. “And if I remember correctly, you complained about that last night.” He slowed down

and slipped his arm around Holiday. “Marrying you doesn’t scare me a bit. It’s the best thing that could ever happen to me. I’d never run out on you. I’ll be the first one to the church.”

Kylie’s heart swelled at Burnett’s words.

She heard Holiday let go of a sigh in the sentimental moment. “And it’s when you say things like that I know why I put up with your cold feet.” Holiday reached up on her tiptoes to kiss him. Burnett pulled her up so he could deepen the kiss.

“Hey,” Kylie said, grinning. “You’ve got virgin eyes watching you right now.”

“Then turn your head,” Burnett said to Kylie, and he smiled. “I should be able to kiss my fiancée.”

Kylie chuckled. “Yeah, but you’d better be careful, they are going to revoke your vampire license if you get any more romantic and mushy.”

“Don’t worry,” Burnett said, his eyes pinched as if serious. “I can still be a jackass, and kick ass, when it’s called for.”

Yeah, like last night, Kylie thought. She still had a few bruises on her ego, and so did Hayden Yates, but she didn’t say it. Down deep, she knew Burnett had justifications for coming off strong with her and Hayden.

Her thoughts went back to her conversation with Hayden, but already the calm of the falls had given her a sense of peacefulness, and she was able to push her worries aside. She glanced over at the two lovebirds holding hands and walking. Maybe it wasn’t just the falls offering this sense of well-being, Kylie admitted. Being back at Shadow Falls and among her friends just felt so damn right.

Almost on cue, the sound of the falls grew louder, and a calm spread inside her chest. Kylie had to admit the falls were definitely contributing to the magical sense of ease. And after everything that happened this last twenty-four hours, she wanted to cling to that magic. Forget that seeing Holiday and Burnett reminded her that she loved someone, too. Forget that Lucas had betrayed her. Forget about running into Mario. Forget she’d probably hurt her grandfather by leaving without saying good-bye.

Oh yes, she wanted the calm that came with being in a place of grace, a

place that fed one's spirit with peacefulness. That offered one a sense of wellness.

And courage.

A voice echoed in her mind. Kylie stopped walking. The voice somehow seemed to mean something, something more than just facing her usual tribulations. As if the voice knew something she didn't.

Why would I need courage?

If it wasn't for the peacefulness, Kylie might have started panicking at the little intrusion in her head. The words didn't come with the cold chill she got when a ghost visited. Not that Kylie hadn't heard the voice before; she had, several times. In the past, she'd attempted to chalk it up to being her subconscious. But this time, it seemed more.

The peaceful sound of the falls grew stronger and took the edge off her worry. She didn't want to fret about the voice, or even the reason she might need courage. She picked up her pace.

Five minutes later, they arrived at the entrance to the falls. The serene ambience embraced her. Even the leaves on the trees seemed to whisper their greetings. The water cascading down from the cliff above filled the air with sweet moisture. The light breeze, carrying tiny pinpoints of water, scented the air with some distant flower and natural herbs.

Burnett's normal stern expression dissolved into something more peaceful. He stopped at the line of trees and agreed to wait outside, allowing them to have their regular falls experience. Removing their shoes and rolling up their jeans' legs, Holiday and Kylie both walked through the wall of cascading water.

Once inside, it took a second for Kylie's eyes to adjust. It wasn't completely dark, but only filtered light snuck in from behind the falls. Iridescent shadows in rainbow colors played on the rock walls. Cool water dripped from her hair and ran down her back, but the coolness on her skin felt refreshing, like walking through a sprinkler on a hot day.

Both Kylie and Holiday found their spots on smooth rocks just at the mouth of the water's edge. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. The reverence filling the space seemed to mandate a moment of silence.

The calm of quietness completely chased away Kylie's worries and concerns.

After several minutes, Holiday asked, "Do you have a new quest in place?"

The moment the question found its way to Kylie, a need for direction swelled inside her. "Have I really completed my other quest?" The question wasn't just meant for Holiday, but for herself.

"You know what you are, and you understand most of your powers. Was this not your quest?"

"Yes, but I'm not completely in control of my powers yet." She paused. "And I don't know everything." The unexplainable need remained and a hunger to have a plan filled her chest. She had to know where to place her focus. She needed a new quest.

The flow of the falls seemed to grow a little louder. Kylie glanced up and then back at Holiday. "You're right. I have to figure this out. How do I do that? How did I figure out what the first one should be?" She turned to Holiday, not so much panicked, but eager to get started.

"Well, you need to ask yourself what is important to you right now. Usually our quests end up being something that has weighed on your heart, pulled at your conscience, or has been on your mental to-do list that you've ignored."

Kylie inhaled another breath of calm and glanced back at the camp leader. "Okay, I know something, and I was going to talk to you about it, but I haven't had a chance to think it through yet."

"What is it?" Holiday asked.

"The chameleon teens, they ... the elders are practically locking them away on compounds. They have very little contact with the outside world. They aren't allowed to have cell phones or computers. I don't mean to make it sound as if they are mistreated. It's just that the elders are stuck in this mindset of when they were being persecuted. They think the only way to stay safe is to remain in hiding. They have a strict policy that until you can control and hide your true pattern, you shouldn't be allowed out into the world." Suddenly Kylie realized something. "They are as bad as the werewolves.

With all their backward beliefs.”

“It sounds like that.” Holiday paused and stared at the water. “That’s a big undertaking.” Her expression said her mind was reeling. “It’s hard to change beliefs that are motivated by justified fear.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “But there has to be a way, doesn’t there?”

“It’s for sure worth contemplating. It’s a good quest.”

What else? The voice inside her said. The same voice from earlier. But like before, it didn’t completely scare her. It was a question she was about to come to on her own.

Kylie pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around her shins. “There’s something else, too.” And her heart searched for what it was, but it didn’t come.

“What?” Holiday said, and inhaled as if absorbing the calm.

“I’m not sure.” Her words hadn’t completely left her lips when all the flickers of light in the cave started swirling and then shifted as if to dance on top of the water.

Kylie’s breath caught as the shimmering of different colors formed a circle. Yet even with the movement of light, the water seemed deadly still, and the surface below became crystal clear. The circle of light appeared to frame an object below the water. Suddenly, whatever it was bobbed up to the surface with a small splash and started drifting toward the edge.

Freaked out, Kylie butt-scooted back a couple of feet. She felt a little less cowardly when Holiday did the same.

The object—floating atop the water’s surface and moving as if with purpose—got about a foot from the rock’s edge before Kylie could identify what it was. Oh, hell, what did this mean?

Chapter Fifteen

Kylie twisted around on her butt, searching for the ghost and trying to feel the cold. No cold found its way in the cave. No ghost, either. None that Kylie could sense, anyway.

But the sword now inching toward her had to be from the ghost, right? She'd been carrying one around for show and tell this last week and a half.

"Where the heck did that come from?" Holiday asked, her voice filled with concern.

Kylie couldn't take her eyes off the weapon as it slowly inched closer and closer. "From under the water."

"I know, I saw, but..."

"I think it has something to do with the ghost," Kylie said.

Holiday frowned. "You mean the one toting around severed heads?"

Kylie nodded. "That would be her."

"Why do you think that?" Holiday asked.

"I'm not completely sure, but I think it looks like her sword. Minus all the blood of course."

"Oh, hell," Holiday said. "What did you get pulled into?"

"I don't know. But it wasn't willingly." Kylie bit down on her lip. If not for the peaceful ambience of the falls, she'd be completely tripping out.

Holiday picked up the sword. She turned it over in her hands. "It looks real. And old. Do you really think it's the same sword?" She shook her head in puzzlement. "Ghosts can't deliver things like this."

"It looks like it. I mean, I'm not a sword expert." Kylie reached for the weapon, and as soon as she touched it, the dang thing started glowing. She

flung it to the ground and did another scoot backward. “Why did it do that?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Holiday said, and stared back at the sword. “Did you learn anything about chameleons making weapons glow?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I think I might have remembered that.”

“Okay,” she said, still thinking. She gave the sword another puzzled look and then glanced back at Kylie. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yup.” Kylie got to her feet and saw Holiday reach down for the sword. “Wait. Can’t we just leave it here?”

Holiday rose and looked at Kylie. “I don’t think so. I think it was meant for you.”

“You know, I was afraid you were going to say that. But how do you know it wasn’t meant for you?”

“Because it didn’t glow when I picked it up.”

Kylie frowned. “I’m really tired of all this weird crap happening to me.”

Holiday sighed. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t like it.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” Kylie nipped at her lip again in worry.

Holiday half smiled. “We’ll get to the bottom of this. When we get back to the office I’ll do some research and see if I can find anything about it. And we’ll talk to Hayden, too.” She carefully picked up the sword, keeping the sharp end pointing down. “We’ll find the answer.”

Yeah, Kylie thought, but she had the distinct feeling that if they did find the answer, she might not like it.

* * *

Kylie, Holiday, and Burnett, with sword in tow, found Hayden at his cabin. He had nothing to offer. Not even a good educated guess.

Burnett asked him to pick up the sword to see if it would glow for him. It didn’t. Then, because Burnett hadn’t seen the sword glow earlier, he asked Kylie to pick it up. Carefully.

Like she wouldn’t be careful picking up something that looked like it had been used to decapitate hundreds of victims.

The moment she fit her fingers around the hand grip, the iron grew warm against her palm, and just as it had before, it began to glow. It reminded her of one of those glow sticks you bought at theme parks.

“Enough?” Kylie said, eager to put it down.

“Yeah,” Burnett said, and looked baffled. It wasn’t a look that she’d seen on the vamp’s face very often. He reached for the sword and waited to see if it would start to glow, and even looked a bit disappointed when it didn’t. Putting it back down on Hayden’s kitchen table, he gazed at Kylie’s forehead to check out her pattern.

On the walk over here, he’d surmised that Kylie had probably turned into a witch and had lost control of her powers as she had the day she’d sent the paperweight at him, bruising his boys. While Kylie almost wished it was that simple, she didn’t buy it. She hadn’t been thinking about a sword to have conjured one up.

“I’m not a witch, am I?” she asked Burnett.

“No,” he said, and shrugged.

“I told you,” Holiday said. “I checked her pattern as soon as the thing started glowing. As crazy as it sounds, I’m not sure it’s Kylie doing it. But the sword.”

“You think the sword’s possessed?” Hayden asked.

“Say what?” Kylie asked. “Swords can be possessed? Okay ... this is just too freaky for me.” She started dusting off her hands to wipe off any possessed germs.

“No, I don’t think it’s possessed.” Holiday touched Kylie to calm her. “I just think for some reason it reacts to Kylie. There’s some connection between her and the sword.”

“It’s strange as hell,” Hayden said. “I could ask Kylie’s grandfather about this. He might know something that I don’t.”

Burnett frowned at the mention of her grandfather, but he nodded, and she saw him work to pull back his discontent. “I would appreciate that.” He even sounded grateful. “Would you report back to me on that as soon as you get anything?”

Hayden nodded. “Of course.”

As they went to leave, Burnett offered Hayden his hand. Hayden didn't hesitate to take it. Kylie got the feeling that the whole sword thing might have worked in her favor for convincing Burnett that Hayden needed to stay on. Even though Hayden didn't have the answers, she could see Burnett appreciated having a go-to person for something he didn't have a lot of knowledge on.

Maybe, Kylie thought, the sword wasn't a bad thing after all. But each time she looked at it held at Burnett's side, she recalled the spirit last night carrying a bloody sword and the severed head.

And she started to worry again that whatever this was all about might lead to more bloodshed.

* * *

They went to put away the sword in Holiday's office and then they all walked to dinner. As they stepped off the porch, Kylie was seen for the first time by her fellow Shadow Falls students and was greeted by several campers. Perry came running and swooped her up in his arms, swinging her around twice. When he dropped her back on her feet, Kylie was dizzy and content. He grabbed her arms to steady her. She hadn't even realized how much she'd missed the shape-shifter until he laughed and it sent a warm déjà vu feeling through her.

"Hey, are you groping my best friend?" Miranda's voice echoed from behind Perry.

Perry released her and shot Miranda a grin over his shoulder. "Just a little bit," he said, and glanced back at Kylie. "Damn, we missed you. Miranda was driving me crazy she was so lonely."

"I missed everyone, too," Kylie said, and meant it with all her heart.

Right then, a group of weres walked past. Kylie first recognized Clara, Lucas's half-sister. She met Kylie's gaze and her posture suddenly seemed to express an attitude. Okay, so not everyone was happy to have her back. She could accept that. But then behind Clara, another person moved into view, and Kylie's gaze slammed right into Fredericka.

She didn't smile, but she didn't scowl, and then she offered Kylie a slight

nod. A welcome-back nod, maybe even a good-to-see-you nod. Kylie returned the gesture and even offered a slight smile.

For Fredericka, that little acknowledgment was probably more of a show of affection than Perry's. Especially when Clara shot Fredericka a disgruntled look for her action, and Fredericka gave her a get-over-it shrug.

Kylie drew in a deep breath. It felt good to know that while she might not have gained any friends at Shadow Falls, she'd managed to lose an enemy.

Miranda leaned in. "Did you just do what I think you did? Did you smile at that B with an itch?"

"I told you, her and I sort of came to terms," Kylie said.

"Which is a good thing," Holiday piped up. "And I think more people need to come to terms around here."

"And I think Della's right," Miranda muttered. "Kylie's just too nice." Ignoring Holiday's frown, the witch glanced at Burnett. "Speaking of which ... is Della back yet?"

"She's due any time," Burnett answered as they moved to the dining hall.

When they walked in the door, the chatter filling the large room went silent as if someone had turned off the volume. Heads turned. The only sound bouncing around the large space was forks dropping onto platters. Then, simultaneously, at least fifty pairs of eyes squinted to check out her pattern. Kylie stopped moving a foot inside the door feeling—and not liking—the limelight.

Holiday brushed the back of her hand against Kylie's. "You want me to do something?" she whispered.

"No," Kylie muttered, determined to fight her own battles. Besides, she wanted to be here, this was home, and by God, she wasn't hiding her pattern. Sooner or later, they'd get used to her. Wouldn't they? Eventually they would stop staring and accept her as one of their own.

"Well, I'm gonna do something," growled Perry. He moved forward. "You wanna stare at something?" he yelled out. "Well, stare at this!" Perry swerved around, bent to the waist, dropped his pants, and mooned every pair of those fifty sets of eyes.

"Perry!" Holiday squealed, but there was laughter behind the tone.

Burnett's chuckle bounced out of him, but then he slammed shut his mouth when he spotted Holiday's arched brow at his open show of humor.

"Don't be showing your ass, Perry!" Burnett said, his voice deep as if still trying not to laugh. "People are trying to eat."

Everyone in the entire room bolted out with laughter, even Kylie. Leave it to Perry to turn an awkward moment to one of complete humor. Kylie looked at Miranda, who was rolling her eyes, but pride sparkled behind them. And she should be proud. While pulling his pants down might have seemed extreme, it had been done with good intentions, to put a stop to an awkward moment—done to make Kylie feel better. And it had.

Pants back up, Perry turned around and winked at Kylie. As they started moving to the food counter, Kylie leaned in to Miranda and said, "Perry's a keeper."

Miranda rolled her eyes again in humor. "I know." She grinned. "And he has a cute ass, doesn't he?"

Kylie laughed again. "I didn't see his ass, it's his heart that did me in."

As Kylie stood in line to get served her hamburger and fries—which actually smelled a bit like heaven—several people came over to welcome her back: Mandy, one of Miranda's witch friends, Chris, the vampire, and Jonathon, who wore a long face, obviously missing Helen.

"How's Helen?" Kylie asked, and was suddenly washed with a bit of guilt knowing it was probably because of her that Helen was attacked. "I'm so sorry this happened."

"It's not your fault," he said, and bumped her with his shoulder. "But give me a chance to put my hands on that asshole who hurt her and he'll be sorry."

"Is she really okay?" Kylie asked.

"Yeah, she's fine. Her parents say she can come back here in a week."

"That's good," Kylie said.

"Good? That's like forever. A whole week. Seven days. I'm gonna go bat-shit crazy. She's like my drug. I'm not used to being without her." He took off, not a happy camper.

Kylie watched him slump off—his posture that of a hurt and defeated-looking boy. And she got a flashback to how she felt when Lucas would

leave. Lonely, empty. Her touchstone in life missing.

Trying to push the thought away, she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up and do a tickling tap dance. Trying to be inconspicuous, but fearing she knew exactly who was staring, she looked over her shoulder at the were table. Sure as hell, he sat there, studying her with wide, blue eyes. Eyes filled with a sad apology. Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach.

Would she ever get over being mad enough to forgive him? The question painfully banged against her chest bone with each beat of her heart.

She looked away and shot forward at the same time and ran right into a wide chest—a familiar wide chest. One she remembered leaning against last night in a dreamscape. When she glanced up at Derek's face, it was as if her brain decided this moment was perfect to download everything that happened. All the missing pieces of the puzzle of last night in the dream came hurling back.

The kiss.

His arms around her.

The gentle way he'd held her.

Oh, shit!

Chapter Sixteen

Kylie had stopped the kiss, but not nearly soon enough. And then she'd rested her head on his chest and cried because she'd felt so confused. He'd held her so close and let her cry. It had been cathartic and soothing.

It had been wrong.

Wrong because of what she saw reflecting in his eyes. Hope. Optimism that when her heartbreak with Lucas was all said and done, they'd find their way to what they'd had before.

That thought brought on an epiphany—one of those startling realizations that usually caused havoc in one's life. And yes, she felt the havoc, but she also felt ... a surge of questions and a need to understand.

Derek had cheated on her, actually slept with Ellie, unlike what Lucas had done—or what she'd thought he had done. And while she'd been hurt by Derek and felt betrayed, this thing with Lucas felt like so much more. Why?

Did it speak to how much she cared about Derek—that forgiving him had come easier? Or did it refer to the depth of her feelings for Lucas? That the feelings she held for Lucas were truer?

"You okay?" Derek asked, staring at her.

She nodded. "Just hungry," she lied, and moved in front of him in the line, so she wouldn't have to face him or the lie she'd just told.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

She considered the question, and the answer came back. *I can't be mad at you, it's myself I'm mad at.*

She'd been weak. She should have called the end to the dreamscape

before it got started. And she could have done that. So why hadn't she?

"No, I'm not mad," she whispered back. "I'm just..." Realizing they were surrounded by vampire ears that could hear all kinds of secrets, she said, "We'll talk later."

"That will work," he said. "I'm shadowing you tonight, so we should have plenty of time."

Kylie frowned. Maybe she needed to add Derek to Burnett's no-shadowing list. At least until she sorted out her feelings.

* * *

With a food tray in hand, Kylie moved to the table where Miranda and Perry sat. She sat down and glanced at Perry and again felt the wash of gratitude to the shape-shifter. "Thanks," she said.

"Anytime you need me to show my ass, I'm there for you," he said, grinning.

Kylie heard someone take the seat beside her and worried again about encouraging Derek. Picking up a fry, she looked straight ahead, trying to ignore the fae as long as possible. Her gaze shifted around the room, stopping on the were table and the four frowns being tossed her way from the weres sitting there. Frowns from everyone but ... Lucas.

A certain woodsy scent of the person sitting next to her suddenly filled her senses. The fry slipped from her fingers. Slowly, she turned her head to confirm her mistake.

Mistake confirmed. Her breath hitched a little.

It wasn't Derek sitting next to her. But Lucas.

Reverting her gaze to the plate of food, she stared at the hamburger that suddenly didn't smell or look so appetizing. "Shouldn't you be with your pack?" she whispered without looking at him.

"Actually," he said, leaning in close. So close his shoulder brushed against hers. Pain, emotional pain from just that light touch, went right to her heart. "I'm exactly where I belong," Lucas whispered.

She scooted over a few inches at the same time a tray hit the table in front of her. It hit a little too loud. She suspected the owner of the tray might be

one pissed-off fae. A glance up confirmed it. Derek dropped into the seat, eyeballing Lucas as if he was infringing on his space.

Just freaking great, Kylie thought. She considered the right thing to do, bolt out of here, knowing people were probably already watching to see what she'd do. Stay and hope no drama arose between the were and fae, and try to downplay all the gossip.

Feeling forced to pretend everything was fine, she picked up her hamburger and sank her teeth into the soft white bun. While she didn't think about how it tasted, her stomach must have approved, because it grumbled in appreciation the moment the first bite made its way down into the empty organ. She didn't give her stomach time to beg for a second bite before she went in for another. This time, the flavor of the slightly sweet bun, mixed with the cheesy beef patty and the tangy zest of ketchup, had her taste buds applauding. She really hadn't eaten right since leaving Shadow Falls.

Derek, probably reading her desire to avoid chaos, picked up his burger and started to eat. Lucas did the same. The tension let up, but not by a whole hell of a lot.

"Who's up for a game of basketball after dinner?" Perry asked.

A few voices broke in with a yes. Kylie thought both Derek and Lucas chimed in, but she didn't know for sure. She did most of her focusing on her food and avoided eye contact with anyone.

Then Derek added, "But it will have to be a short game. I'm shadowing Kylie tonight."

It was more how he said it, than what he said, that made it clear his goal had been to piss Lucas off. And it worked. Lucas gave his tray a quick shove and it flew across the table and slammed into Derek's, sending his French fries flying into his lap.

"Give it up," Lucas said. "We'll be back together in no time."

"Are you sure of that?" Derek asked.

"Stop," Kylie snapped.

"I'm sure," Lucas growled as if he hadn't heard her. "You see, I didn't sleep around on her like someone else did."

"Yeah, but I didn't get engaged behind her back," Derek tossed out.

“Neither did I,” Lucas countered. “The engagement never went through because I didn’t sign the papers after the ceremony.”

Say *what*? Kylie looked at him, shocked. She had just assumed ... “What about getting on the Council?” she asked.

“You’re more important,” he said. “I told you that already.”

No, he hadn’t told her that. Not really. And he hadn’t told her he’d backed out of the engagement, either.

“I told you it was mistake. That...” He hesitated just a second. “That I love you.”

She didn’t miss how hard it was for him to speak his feelings publicly, and you can bet every ear in the room was straining to hear, but he’d done it. He told her he loved her in front of everyone.

And it annoyed the hell out of her. Perry’s mooning had been much more appreciated.

“And why the hell couldn’t you have figured that out earlier?” She dropped her hamburger, shoved her own tray back, and left the dining hall. As she did, she heard her own footfalls on the tile floor. Which meant everyone in the room, the whole freaking camp, had just been privy to her personal upheaval. Great. Just friggin’ great.

* * *

Kylie got outside before she heard someone following her. Thinking it was Derek, and prepared to send him packing, she swung around and Miranda crashed right into her.

“Sorry,” Miranda said.

Kylie blinked away what felt like the beginning of tears. “It’s okay. You don’t have to come. Stay with Perry and finish your dinner.”

“I have to come,” Miranda said.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” Miranda nodded. “First, because you’re one of my best friends and second, because ... Burnett told me to. But I would have come anyway because of the first thing.” She hugged Kylie. “You want me to tell Perry to moon them again?”

Kylie pulled back from the hug, chuckled, and swiped at her tears. “I don’t think they could handle seeing it twice.”

Miranda giggled. “Are you kidding? It’s a gorgeous ass.”

They walked back to the cabin and Miranda talked about Perry. A lot about Perry. Like, as in nonstop. Not that Kylie minded; she’d take Miranda going on about Perry over the silence she’d experienced at her grandfather’s place anytime. So what if Miranda talked a bit too much? Kylie still loved her, loved hanging with her, too.

They got to the cabin, walked inside, and both of their gazes shot to Della’s door. Della’s closed door. And that could mean only one thing. Della was home.

Screaming, they both went hurtling inside the vamp’s room.

Della stood, completely naked, in the middle of the room with her bra in her hands.

“Jeepers! Don’t you guys know what a closed door means? Now, turn around while I get dressed.”

“We don’t care if you’re naked. We’re just so happy to see you,” Miranda said.

“True,” Kylie said.

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t have to see all of me. You’ll tease me about my little tits. Now turn around.”

“They’re not *that* small,” Miranda said, and gave Della a good hard look.

“Turn around!” Della growled, and used one hand and arm to cover her breasts and the other to cover her pubic hair.

“No so fast,” Miranda said, and pointed a finger at her. “First you got some explaining to do, girlie!”

“*Girlie*? I’m not anyone’s girlie. And explain what?” she asked, but she was grinning, obviously as glad to see them as they were to see her.

“It’s not your little tits you should be hiding. It’s that hickey below your shoulder.”

Della shifted her hand up from her boobs and hid the mark right below her neck.

“It’s not a hickey.” Swinging around, she reached for the robe on the bed

and slipped her hands in.

“Really?” Miranda asked.

“It looked like a hickey.” Kylie giggled, just so darn happy that the three of them were back together again. She didn’t even care if they started bickering, or threatening to rip off each other’s limbs. Just being here around these two ... it was what home was supposed to feel like.

“When it looks like a hickey, and smells like a hickey, it’s a hickey,” Miranda demanded.

“Hickeys don’t smell,” Della snapped.

“You know what I mean. Besides, I know a hickey when I see a hickey.” She pulled her shirt down to expose a rose-colored mark above her right breast.

Kylie laughed and then sighed. “I swear, you two are such bad examples for me. I’m not sure I can stay in the same cabin with you. You two might taint my reputation.”

“Oh, please,” Della said. “You’ve had more action than a wind-up doll on speed since you’ve been here.”

“I have not,” Kylie said.

“You’ve made out with three different guys since you’ve been at Shadow Falls.”

“Three? I have not.”

“You’re forgetting Trey came here.”

“Oh, hell, Trey doesn’t count. Besides, I’ve never even had a hickey.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Della said. “Did you know you can give yourself one with a vacuum cleaner? I gave myself my first hickey in sixth grade and told everyone an eighth grader gave it to me. It was a doozy, too.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe you made out with a vacuum cleaner.”

“Yeah, and it was better at it than my first boyfriend. He was totally hickey impaired.”

Kylie and Miranda started laughing. Then Della got somber. “Gawd, it’s so good to be back!” She jumped on her bed and bounced twice. Then Miranda and Kylie both dove onto the bed with her.

“So you aren’t going to explain the hickey?” Miranda asked, and snatched one of Della’s pillows and hugged it.

“Nope,” Della said. “No hickey talk.”

“At the very least tell us who gave you the hickey?” Miranda insisted.

“Okay. I’ll tell you.” She stopped smiling and cleared her throat. “I ran into my old vacuum cleaner. And we took a trip down memory lane. It was so romantic,” Della said, and grinned.

That grin didn’t fool Kylie. She saw something in Della’s eyes. A glimmer of pain. Della really didn’t want to talk about this.

“Was the vacuum cleaner named Steve?” Miranda asked.

Della frowned. “Forget the hickey.”

“But that’s not fair, we tell each other everything,” Miranda said.

“It’s okay,” Kylie said, enjoying the easy banter and not wanting to lose it just yet. “How about let’s talk about me seeing Perry’s ass?”

“You said you didn’t see his ass,” Miranda said.

“Wait. What?” Della asked, and stared at Kylie. “You saw Perry’s ass?”

“Just a quick glimpse,” Kylie said. “But I think everyone else got a really good long look.”

“Of Perry’s ass?” Della asked.

Miranda nodded and then told the story about how heroic Perry had been coming to Kylie’s aid by dropping his drawers.

Della smiled ear to ear. “I knew I liked that shape-shifter.”

“He is sweet, isn’t he?” Miranda sighed and got that droopy-eyed look.

“So what’s up with you?” Della asked Kylie. “Have you kicked Lucas’s ass and decided to forgive him yet? He looks like a puppy who lost his only chew toy.”

Kylie frowned. “Let’s not talk about that.”

Miranda bounced up and down on her butt. “You should have been at dinner. Derek and Lucas both sat with her. I swear, I thought they were going to go to fist city. And then Lucas told Kylie he loved her, right in front of everyone. It was sooo romantic.”

Kylie’s chest grew heavy. “It wasn’t romantic. It was ... It was sad.”

“Sad pretty much describes him when you left,” said Miranda. “It was as

if someone had reached in and yanked out his joy.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Kylie said.

“So you’re still mad at him?” Della asked. “I don’t blame you.”

Kylie cut Della a stern look. “Hey ... I respected your wishes not to talk about the hickey. Now you should respect mine.”

Miranda dropped down on her belly and grunted. “This isn’t fair. I tell you guys everything. I don’t hold anything back.”

“Believe me, I know,” Della said. “I know more about you and Perry’s relationship than the law allows.”

“Don’t start on that.” Miranda frowned.

“Why don’t we go get a Diet Coke?” Kylie offered before the two of them started bickering in full force.

They all bounced off the bed and started for the kitchen. For the time being she wanted to forget all her issues. She just wanted to sit around the kitchen table and laugh some more. Laugh with friends, tell a few jokes, and remember that no matter what issues life dealt them, it would be okay as long as they had each other.

Della got to the kitchen first. “What the hell is that?” she mouthed out.

The moment Kylie saw what rested on the kitchen table she realized that forgetting her issues wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Crap,” Kylie muttered. “Can someone please call Burnett and Holiday and tell them to get here ASAP!”

Chapter Seventeen

“How did it get here?” Holiday asked, standing a few feet from the kitchen table and staring at the sword in disbelief.

“You tell me and we’ll both know.” Kylie gripped her hands together with concern. “How ... how could this happen?”

“How?” Burnett bellowed. “It’s obvious. Someone brought it here to play a practical joke on you, but I’m not laughing and neither will they when I’m done with them.” Burnett’s frown deepened into a scowl. “Removing something from Holiday’s office to bring it here for a joke is going to get their ass in a sling.” He stared at Kylie. “Who all did you tell about the sword?”

“No one,” Kylie said. “I didn’t tell anyone. Not a soul. I’ve been trying really hard not to think about it. So it can’t be a prank.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Della mouthed off. “She hasn’t told us. And she tells us everything. Or she did.” Della shot Kylie a frown.

“She doesn’t tell us *everything*,” Miranda piped up. “Just like some people with hickies don’t tell us everything.”

Della scowled at Miranda and then looked at Kylie. “Frankly, I’d kind of like to know why we’re freaking out here. It’s just a sword.”

Burnett continued to stare at Kylie as if still contemplating. “Then how do you suppose the sword got here?”

Kylie shrugged. “I don’t know, but maybe it got here the same way it got to the falls. Magic, voodoo, or by whoever left it there.”

“You found this sword at the falls?” Miranda asked. “Who would leave it there? It looks like an antique and that usually means it’s worth a shitload of

money.”

“I don’t know that either,” Kylie said to Miranda. “But what I do know is that I really don’t like it. So just take the thing away. Nice and safe like. And maybe put it somewhere more secure this time. Like in a vault.”

“Wow,” said Miranda.

“Wow what?” Burnett asked at the same time Kylie blurted out the words. Miranda pointed to the sword. “It has an aura.”

“The sword has an aura?” Holiday moved beside Miranda, looking intrigued. Kylie took another step back because she wasn’t at all intrigued.

“What kind of aura?” Holiday asked the witch.

“Maybe Hayden was right. It’s possessed,” Burnett said.

“Wait! Can inanimate objects really be possessed?” Kylie folded her arms, not from the cold, but from feeling freaked out.

“No,” Della said.

Miranda rolled her eyes at the vamp. “Of course they can.”

“Really?” Della asked. “Cool!”

“Not cool!” Kylie snapped.

Miranda stared back at the sword. “It takes a strong witch—or a demon—to possess an object. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on.”

“Why not?” asked Holiday.

“You said it had an aura?” Burnett piped up.

“Yeah,” Miranda answered, looking proud to be the one with information. “But just because an object has an aura doesn’t mean it’s possessed. Some things, like weapons and such, will carry an aura because emotion sort of gets soaked up into the physical matter during an attack.”

“So this thing has killed a lot of people?” Kylie asked, remembering the ghost’s sword and the head she so proudly brought to show Kylie.

“Probably, but I don’t think it’s possessed. Normally when something is possessed, it’s completely evil.”

“Then what kind of aura is it?” Kylie asked.

“A little bit evil,” Miranda said, contradicting herself.

“Love it.” Della rubbed her hands together.

Kylie moaned and focused on Miranda. “But you just said—”

“I said something that is possessed is completely evil.” Miranda looked back at the sword. “This is just ... Okay, it isn’t even really evil. But I can feel that it has taken lives. A lot of them. But most of its aura is about justice, and...” She tilted her head to the side and focused on the sword like she was trying to read the supernatural pattern. Her hair, streaked with pink, black, and lime-green, curtained the side of her face. “And it sounds crazy but it’s also about ... courage.”

“Courage?” Kylie remembered the voice she’d heard on the way to the falls. “What does it mean by courage? Ask it what it means by that?”

Miranda snickered. “Auras don’t answer questions. I’m just telling you what the aura seems to exude.”

“How do you know what it exudes?” Della asked.

“The colors, the intensity of the colors, and how it moves and blends together. It’s sort of like reading a mood ring.”

“I wish I could see auras,” Della said to Miranda. “Could you like zap me the gift to see auras?”

“No,” Miranda said. “No more than you can give me your ability to fly.”

Kylie continued to stare at the sword, remembering the sword the ghost carried. “I still think it’s somehow tied to the ghost. She could have brought it here.”

“Oh, damn! Do we have a ghost here now?” Della asked.

“Not now,” Holiday replied to Della, then looked back at Kylie. “Ghosts can’t transport objects of real matter.”

“Not true. I had one knock my phone off my nightstand,” Kylie said.

“Yes, they might be able to create enough energy to nudge something small, and they can play with electronics left and right, but they can’t physically move an object from one place to another. That would take an enormous amount of energy. It’s impossible.”

“Well, that makes me feel somewhat better,” Della said.

Holiday moved closer to the table. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “And that seems to be the theme song of my life right now. Not a damn thing makes sense.”

* * *

Burnett carried the sword out. He refused to let Holiday touch it in case it came to life. Right as they went to leave, Kylie heard a light burpy sound from Holiday.

The fae bit down on her lip and her eyes shifted to Kylie. In spite of being weirded out by finding the aura-carrying sword on her table, she sent Holiday a sympathetic smile. She knew the fae was panicking about the possibility of being pregnant.

Not that Kylie saw it as a bad thing. It would be neat to see what a child that was half-Burnett and half-Holiday would look like.

When Holiday and Burnett were out of the cabin, Della and Miranda turned to Kylie. Della spoke first. “Okay ... sit down and explain why you didn’t tell us about the sword, and then tell us what else you’ve been hiding.”

Kylie started to remind Della that she kept her own secrets, like just who had given her the hickey, but all of a sudden Kylie didn’t mind telling them. As a matter of fact, it might help if she talked about it. It wasn’t as if she’d kept any of it from them on purpose. It was like Kylie had said earlier, she hadn’t wanted to think about it.

She moved to the kitchen, glancing around to make sure the sword hadn’t magically reappeared. Seeing the table clear, she dropped down in a chair with a defeated sigh.

Della went to the fridge and snagged three diet sodas and passed them out. The sound of the tops being popped echoed in the small kitchen. Then Kylie started talking. Between sips of fizzy soda slipping down her throat, she told them everything. About what happened at her grandfather’s place, to how the teen chameleons were treated. She covered leaving in the middle of the night because someone had plans to abduct her. Then she blurted out the hardest part—Mario showing up and how she’d almost killed Lucas.

“Well, not for nothing,” Della said. “Lucas did sort of have it coming. I’ll bet it felt good.”

“No it didn’t,” Kylie insisted.

“Wait,” Miranda said. “Before we get off talking about the whole boy

issue, you haven't gotten to the part about the sword." She took a big sip of Diet Coke and continued to eye Kylie over the rim.

Kylie went into her visit to the falls with Holiday.

"What about this ghost?" Della asked, and looked around. "Are you gonna wig out on us again with those vision things? I mean, the last time you had that whole episode during class and I had to break down the closet door in Miss Cane's room, it really freaked me out. I swear, now every time she sees me, she has to remind me ... 'You know, I had a key to that door.' But damn, you were screaming bloody murder in there."

"I hope I don't wig out on you again." Kylie frowned. "And I apologize in advance if I do. But I have no control over that. Seriously, if either one of you were trapped in a grave with three dead girls, I'd bet you would go a little crazy, too."

"Oh, hell yeah, I would. I'd be kicking me some dead girls' asses." Della set down her soda a bit hard and the can crunched a little. "I don't know how you handle it. It must suck."

"Yeah," Kylie said, drawing circles in the condensation on her soda can. "Sometimes it sucks to be me."

"Speaking of sucking..." Miranda glared at Della. "Do you want to come clean about the hickey?"

Della rolled her eyes. "There's nothing to tell. It happened."

"How much happened?" Miranda asked. "Did you ... you know?"

"No!" Della snapped. "I didn't 'you know.' We just made out. And afterward, I wished it hadn't happened. And it won't happen again."

"Who did it happen with?" Kylie asked, stepping right into the conversation and possibly pissing Della off. But if she was making out with Steve, then maybe, in spite of what the vamp said, just maybe it would lead to something.

Della frowned. "If I tell you, will you both swear on your lives that you won't say anything? Because if you say something, I'm gonna have to kill you and then I'll feel bad. At least for a little while."

"I swear I'll never tell a soul," Miranda said.

"Me, too." Kylie leaned forward, letting her own issues slide away to

concentrate on Della's.

Della backed up in her chair. "It was Steve."

"Yes," Kylie said.

"I knew you liked him." Miranda rubbed her hands together. "Details, we want details."

Della placed both hands on the table and leaned down low, looking up at them with an angry glare and showing a bit of her canines. "I don't give details, remember?"

"Okay, no details," Kylie said. "But explain why it was a mistake. And why it won't happen again. Because I mean, it was obviously good."

"Because ... I didn't say it was good."

"Oh, please," Miranda said. "You got a hickey, so you must have been into it for it to have gotten that far." Miranda glanced at Kylie for backup. "Right, Kylie?"

Kylie leaned her elbows on the table. "Not being a hickey expert, I wouldn't know for sure, but it would seem that way." She looked at Della. "So you weren't ever into it?"

Della let go of a low growl. "Okay, I might have been into it for a few seconds."

"It takes longer than a few seconds to get a hickey." Miranda wiggled in her chair, obviously loving that Della was finally talking.

"You are so dang pushy!" Della said.

"How long *does* it take to get a hickey?" Kylie asked.

Miranda picked up her diet soda. "A minute, give or take a few seconds, depending how hard the guy is sucking."

"Doesn't it hurt?" Kylie asked, trying to imagine someone sucking on her for that long.

"No," both Miranda and Della said at the same time.

"It kind of feels good." Miranda smiled at Della. "Doesn't it?"

"I guess." Della rolled her eyes as if hating to admit she enjoyed anything, but then the vamp grinned. "Do you want me to introduce you to my vacuum cleaner?"

"Oh, screw the vacuum cleaner," Miranda said. "Kylie should go after

Steve. I mean, she's pissed at both Derek and Lucas, and Steve's available because you aren't into him anymore, and he obviously knows how to do hickey's."

Della scowled at Miranda. "I don't think so."

Miranda wiggled her butt in her chair again. "Because you still like him. Because you want him to give you another hickey. Admit it. Just admit it."

"You're obnoxious," Della said.

"Yeah, she is." Kylie arched a brow at Della. "But the witch has a point."

"Well, she can keep her points to herself!" Della picked up her can and crushed it in her hand. And then Della's eyes went wide. "Shit!"

"What?" Kylie asked.

"It's back," Della said in a singsong spooky voice.

"What's back?" Kylie asked, but she was afraid she knew. She turned around and sure as hell, the sword was on the sofa.

* * *

Kylie hadn't wanted to call Burnett and Holiday again, but Della refused to sleep with a possessed sword in the cabin. Miranda, who told Della again it wasn't possessed, wouldn't have minded either way.

Respecting Della's feelings, and completely understanding them, Kylie borrowed Della's phone and called Burnett and Holiday.

Before Holiday and Burnett left with the sword again, he issued an order. "This doesn't go any further. None of you tell a soul, you got that?"

"Why?" Kylie asked, confused why he saw this as some sort of a secret.

"I'm already explaining too much to the FRU. And this just makes them more eager to get you in for testing. This is best kept hushed until we figure it out."

If we figure it out, Kylie thought, but didn't say it.

As Burnett and Holiday started out, Kylie followed them out on the porch. Holiday leaned in and whispered, "We're taking it, but if it's done this twice, I'm not sure it won't just do it again."

"I know." Which was Kylie's reason for not really wanting to call them this time. Hopefully if the sword found its way back, it would follow Kylie

into her bedroom and not disturb Della. Even with the chill climbing up her backbone at the thought of sleeping in the same room with an aura-carrying sword, it was better than having Della in a frenzy and making Burnett and Holiday come back again.

Kylie just hoped that Miranda was right and that the sword wasn't a weapon intent on evil.

Chapter Eighteen

“Okay, first on the agenda...” Chris, the lead vampire, said the next morning as he prepared to announce partners at Meet Your Campmate hour—which was an hour that students were paired with someone else from the camp just to encourage interspecies harmony. Chris held his top hat in front of him as if to add drama to the moment.

Kylie stood centered between Della and Miranda, and arm-locked to Miranda’s side was Perry. Miranda had spotted Nikki, the shape-shifter who was crushing on Perry, waving at him earlier, and the witch hadn’t let go of Perry since.

Kylie had also spotted Miranda’s pinky twitching. If Nikki knew what was good for her, she’d give up on Perry. Kylie didn’t believe Miranda would do something really terrible, other than pimples of course, but considering that Socks spent months as a skunk, any spell from Miranda could wind up accidentally terrible.

Kylie looked around, searching. Not for any one person—but for a certain sword. It hadn’t shown up last night. Which was a relief. Maybe it was just a fluke. She didn’t really believe in flukes, but she wanted to.

“Okay,” Chris said. “Let’s see who goes first.” To paraphrase Chris, “let see who paid in blood to spend an hour with someone.” At one time, Kylie considered the whole thing outlandish, but now she understood it was just a way to supply food, their main nutrition, to the vampires. They needed blood and this was just one way to get people to donate a pint.

It was still embarrassing to be the person someone paid blood to spend an hour with.

And damn if Chris's gaze didn't collide right into Kylie.

Not again.

Oh, just freaking great. Who was it this time? She glanced around to see if she could find Derek or Lucas. They both stood on opposite sides of the crowd, each staring at the other with accusation. Okay ... so if it wasn't those two, who?

"I'd be careful, Kylie," Chris said. "I'm beginning to think Fredericka has a thing for you."

Kylie happened to be focused on Lucas when Chris made his announcement. Shock tightened the were's face, followed by a fierce look of protection. His eyes shot across the crowd apparently looking for Fredericka. When his gaze lit on her on the other side of the circle, his scowl deepened.

The girl frowned back and started walking toward Kylie. Walking with a sense of purpose.

Kylie heard Lucas's growl and watched him stomp over with an equal amount of purpose.

Great. Now she had two pissed-off weres coming at her.

"You want me to do something about this?" Della asked.

"No," Kylie said.

"You want me to moon everyone again?" Perry asked.

"No," Kylie said, and just to be safe, she moved several feet away from her friends so no one would be tempted to start a fight or pull down their pants.

The two weres arrived at the same time. One on Kylie's left, the other on her right.

"You don't have to do this," Lucas seethed, obviously talking to Kylie. "I'll pay for her blood. But you don't have to go with me, either."

Kylie looked from Lucas to Fredericka.

Hurt flashed in the female were's eyes. "If Kylie doesn't want to go, she doesn't have to. And I'll still pay for the blood. I don't need you covering for me."

"It's okay," Kylie mumbled, feeling the eager gazes of everyone standing around. A light tingling ran up her legs and pulsed in her knees. Her heart

lurched when she recognized this as the beginning stages of vanishing. She focused really hard to stop it. The last thing she wanted to do was vanish right before all the other campers and become even more of a freak than she already was.

Lucas snarled at Fredericka, “If you lay a finger on her, I’ll get your wolf ass tossed out of the pack. I’m done making excuses for you.”

Kylie’s emotions ping-ponged all over the place. She felt sorry for Fredericka having to face Lucas’s wrath. Sorry that Fredericka had to face the knowledge that Lucas’s loyalty lay with Kylie and not her—one of his own kind. Having to face that in public had to be hard on her werewolf soul. Harder still because she loved Lucas.

But empathy for Fredericka wasn’t all Kylie felt. She felt ... shocked. This was the first time that he’d chosen her over one of his own kind.

Oh, he’d told her a thousand times, but his actions had never proven it. Not until now. The realization was so damn bittersweet. She didn’t want to feel cherished by him after he’d betrayed her. She didn’t want to feel guilty that he was hurting.

But she did.

Guilt, that ugly emotion, swelled inside her and made her chest feel heavy. But why? Was it someone’s fault when she couldn’t forgive someone else for a wrong they’d committed?

He looked at her again, his pain visible in his dark blue eyes, and then he took off—leaving her in a cloud of hurt and the awareness that, once again, all the Shadow Falls students were privy to her private life.

Fredericka watched him shoot off and then faced her. Kylie saw the blinders go down on the girl’s emotions as she tried to hide her own hurt. She swallowed as if trying to get a painful lump to go down, then she lowered her head and spoke. “I told him I’d made my peace with you but he didn’t believe me.”

Kylie nodded, and sensing Fredericka was as uncomfortable being the entertainment as she was, then started walking. Fredericka followed.

When they were out of earshot, Fredericka said, “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t care,” Kylie said.

Kylie heard wings flapping above them and remembered Perry was shadowing her. “We’re gonna have company,” Kylie said. “My shadow.” She pointed up.

“Yeah, I figured that,” Fredericka said. “Do you think he can hear us from up there?”

“Beats me,” Kylie said. “I don’t know how good a prehistoric bird’s hearing is.”

“Then let’s just pretend he can’t hear,” Fredericka said.

“Okay.” And the burning question rose in her chest. “Does Lucas know you were the one to tell me?”

“Yeah, he knows.” Fredericka hesitated. “He thinks I told you to break you two up.”

Kylie remembered Fredericka denying it once before, but ... “Did you?”

Hurt flashed in her eyes. “You don’t believe me either?” She walked a few steps without speaking. “I’m not stupid. I knew if I stopped him from going through with Monique he’d turn to you for good.”

“But you also admitted you love him, and you’ve tried to break us up before.”

“It finally got through my head how pathetic I was. He doesn’t love me. He loves you. Always has and always will. It was a bitter pill, but I swallowed it.”

Kylie inhaled and realized she believed the girl. “Okay, so why did you pay blood to see me again?”

“For two reasons,” she was said.

“And they are?” Kylie asked.

“I hear you’re good at ... giving people relationship advice.”

Kylie’s mouth dropped open. “You want advice on how to win Lucas back?”

Fredericka made a funny face. “No! I told you, I swallowed that pill already.”

Kylie remembered what Miranda had told her. “Please tell me it’s not the new teacher, Mr. Cannon.”

Fredericka looked shocked. "How did you know about me and Cary?"

Cary? So they're on a first-name basis? "Rumor has it you're hot on him."

The were frowned. "I didn't think I was that ... obvious."

"Well, you thought wrong. And let me tell you, it's not a good idea. He's your teacher."

"He's twenty. He's like some super-smart kid that finished college when he was nineteen. And I'll be eighteen next month. We're barely two years apart."

Kylie could hear Perry's wings flapping in the breeze. She cut her eyes up, and for Fredericka's sake, she hoped he wasn't listening. "Fine, it's not the age thing. It's the teacher thing."

"I don't see why that matters," Fredericka said.

Kylie let out a deep gulp of air. "It matters if he wants to keep his balls. Burnett already threatened to send Hayden Yates away minus his when—"

"You and Mr. Yates had a fling?" Fredericka's eyes widened. "I thought you loved—"

"No! Burnett thought we were."

"Why would he think that?" Fredericka made another face.

Kylie realized she shouldn't have mentioned this. "It's a long story. The point is that Burnett will be overly pissed if this new teacher gives you even a second glance."

"Why don't you let me worry about Burnett and Cary's boys and you just tell me how to ... to make it happen for us the way you did for the others."

Kylie sighed. "Why does everyone keep saying that I'm good at offering relationship advice? Can't you see what a disaster my own relationships are? If I was good at that, do you think I'd be in the mess I'm in right now?"

Fredericka shrugged. "But everyone who went to you with problems says you fixed things. Perry and that little witch friend of yours. Helen and Jonathon. Burnett and Holiday."

"How do you know they wouldn't have worked things out on their own?"

Fredericka frowned. "They all sing your praises."

Kylie shook her head. "Look, I don't think you and the teacher is a good

idea.”

“So you won’t help me?” Fredericka said. “Even after I set you straight on Lucas and saved him from having to spend his life with someone he doesn’t love?”

Kylie exhaled. “Okay, here’s my advice. Go talk to Holiday, tell her about your feelings and—”

“She’ll say hell no. She doesn’t even like me.”

“Oh yes, she does. With all the trouble you’ve caused, she’d have kicked your ass out a long time ago if she didn’t. And if you’re worried about her completely disagreeing, why don’t you start by telling her you have a thing for someone who’s only two years older and see what she says before you tell her who it is. Get her to say it’s not such a bad thing and then drop the bomb about him being a teacher.”

“You really think she’ll listen to me?”

“Listen, yes. Whether or not she’ll tell you not to do it is another matter. But she’s the fairest person I know.”

“Okay.” Fredericka seemed to be thinking. “Now what about Cary? How do I get him to...?”

“Notice you?”

“Not notice. He’s already noticed me. I know he’s attracted to me, he’s just putting up roadblocks, probably for the same reason you said. He’s a teacher and I’m his student.”

“Then why don’t you go to him and tell him that you understand that this is hard, but you really like him, and would at least like to be friends until—”

“I don’t want to be just friends.”

“Fine, but you start by being friends, and when you get the green light from Holiday, then you two can ... go run off in the woods and do the wild thing, or do whatever you want to do. You’re not going to be in school but for nine more months. So the worst-case scenario, you two build a friendship, then take it to the next level when school’s out.”

She started nodding as if she agreed with Kylie. “Hell, I’ve waited for two years for Lucas, I could easily wait for nine months for Cary—if I had to.” She smiled. “See, you *are* good at this. Thank you,” Fredericka said with

sincerity.

“Good, are we finished? I think Perry’s getting impatient.”

“No, there’s the other thing.”

“What thing?” Kylie asked.

“The thing about you needing to forgive Lucas.”

“Look, you asked for my advice, I didn’t ask for yours.” She started moving faster down the path that led to her cabin. A nice, quick run.

Fredericka matched her pace, footfall for footfall. “He loves you. Don’t you get why he walked away from getting engaged? He gave up so much for you. Maybe even his own pack.”

Kylie came to an abrupt stop and faced the she-wolf. “Why did you tell me? Why didn’t you just let him go through with it? Damn it! He shouldn’t have done it!” And right then Kylie accepted that this was part of her angst over Lucas. She hadn’t wanted to admit it. She hadn’t even allowed herself to really let it soak in. But it was there, the truth right under all the betrayal she felt. Lucas had lost everything for her. His dreams. His quests. Even if she did forgive him, sooner or later, he was going to hate her for this.

“Why?” Fredericka threw the question back at her. “Because, you fool, if he’d gone through with it, he’d have lost you. And whether you believe it or not, you are more important to him than getting on the Council. It’s you that matters most to him.”

* * *

Kylie walked in a bit late to her first period class with Perry right behind her. She plopped down in the empty seat right in front of Della. Sitting her book on the desktop, she opened it and pretended to read.

She felt Lucas’s eyes on her. She ignored him. Or tried to. Her heart started breaking all over again the second she felt his gaze fall on her.

She had a lot of thinking to do. But damn, she was still so confused.

Still so damn mad at him.

Still so much in love with him that she could hardly breathe.

“Miss Galen, it’s so good to have you back with us,” Miss Cane said.

Miss Galen? Kylie glanced up, but didn’t speak. A nod of appreciation

was all the lady was going to get. She hoped she'd be happy with it. Refocusing on the page in her English book, she didn't want to look anyone in the eye. Like Derek, who sat three seats away from her and was studying her with a shitload of worry because he could read her emotional state.

Then she felt Della lean in behind her.

"What's wrong?" the vampire whispered. "Do I need to bite some she-wolf's ass after class?"

"No."

"Your face is all splotchy. And that means you've been crying. What's up?"

"Allergies," Kylie muttered, and wished she'd skipped class. Was it too late? Too late to just get up and walk out?

"You'd think you'd know better than to try to lie to me," Della whispered.

Kylie clenched her jaw and whispered back, "And you'd think you'd stop asking questions that would put me in a position to have to lie!"

"Okay," Della said. "We'll just chalk this conversation up to Miss Galen being in a pissy mood."

Chapter Nineteen

Kylie's day hadn't gotten much better. But it hadn't gotten much worse either. She found herself finding things to be thankful for. Nana used to say whenever you start feeling like the world is taking a bite out of you, bite back by counting your blessings.

And number one on Kylie's blessing list was being back at Shadow Falls. Even with all the issues, she belonged here. Every hour or so, she'd recall how it had felt to be at her grandfather's place. And while she missed the man, and even her great-aunt, she didn't miss the cumbersome feeling that being there brought—the feeling of being in the wrong place.

Number two on that list was that the sword hadn't decided to magically appear again. Of course, it could be waiting for her back at her cabin right now, but she was thankful she didn't have to explain it to anyone for the moment. And last, but not least, on her list was that Mario seemed to have crept back under some dirty, slimy rock again.

At least Kylie didn't feel him, and Miranda agreed that she didn't sense any strangers lingering around. A part of Kylie wanted to believe he'd just stay there, but part of her still wanted to believe in Santa Claus, too.

Mario would be back. The question was, would she be ready? For the life of her, she didn't have a clue how one prepared to take on someone that powerful, that evil.

Waiting for the last bell to ring and school to be over so she could leave history, she looked up at Mr. Cary Cannon. He pointed to the written assignment on the board. His starched, white shirt stretched across his broad chest.

Giving Fredericka credit, the teacher wasn't hard on the eyes. If he would lose the tie and dress pants, and put on a T-shirt and pair of jeans, he could look like a student instead of a teacher. Tall, dark, with black eyes, he carried himself well. And taught even better. He obviously had a passion for history, because it came across in his lessons. For a werewolf, he was amazingly friendly. Probably something he'd learned in school.

Kylie had even seen the guy cut his eyes to Fredericka at least a dozen times. That told Kylie that the infatuation wasn't one-sided. She hoped so, for Fredericka's sake at least.

Three minutes later, school over, Kylie stepped out of class. Della, her official shadow, walked beside her. Kylie hadn't gotten a foot out the door when someone grabbed her around the forearm. She almost yelped, but the warmth of the touch told her it was Holiday before she looked back.

"Hey..." Holiday glanced at Della. "I need to borrow Kylie."

"Okay. Are you going to deliver her back to the cabin later? Or do I need to meet you somewhere?"

"I'll walk her back to the cabin."

Della looked a little concerned at having her shadowing duties yanked away.

And she wasn't the only one. "What's wrong?" Kylie asked as soon as Della was out of hearing range.

"Nothing's, *hiccup* ... wrong. Except that—" She pointed to her mouth. "Actually, I have a few things to discuss with you, but first things first." She let go of a deep sigh, as if to impart bad news. "I kind of told a roundabout untruth to Burnett. And I kind of need you to back me up."

"You want me to lie to a vampire?" Kylie asked. "Wow, you don't ask very much, do you?"

"No, not lie." Holiday reached back for her hair and twisted it in a knot. "He's not going to ask you anything. I just need you to follow through with something."

"I don't understand."

"Okay, here's what happened. I told Burnett I needed to run to the drugstore and he told me he'd just pick up whatever I needed."

“So I went into this song and dance about how I’d told you that you weren’t a prisoner here and I thought you might like to get out. I said you hadn’t actually told me this, but I had a feeling you needed something from the drugstore, some tampons or something.”

Kylie gasped. “You told Burnett I needed tampons?”

“No, I told him that you hadn’t said it, but I had a feeling you might need them. And thankfully it wasn’t a lie because Miranda told me while you were away that she had to borrow some of yours.”

“Okay...,” Kylie said, still not understanding what was really going on. “So...”

“So I need you to come with Burnett and me, and when you go to buy the tampons, I need you to also ... *hiccup* ... buy me a pregnancy test.”

“Oh, I get it. But what if he asks ... Wait. He won’t ask what I bought because he thinks I bought tampons, and guys can’t stand any talk of tampons.”

“See, I knew you’d get it,” Holiday said.

“That’s clever,” Kylie said.

“You have to be smart to deal with a vampire.”

They started walking. “But wait.” Kylie stopped. “What kind of test do I buy?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never bought one ... *hiccup* ... but buy two of them. Different kinds. Something that looks accurate. I’ll have Burnett with me helping pick out something for my hiccups.”

Kylie tried to think. “How does an accurate pregnancy test look any different from one that’s not accurate?”

“Just buy two, but not the cheap ones.” Holiday sighed as they made their way down the path back to the office.

“Here.” Holiday handed her a couple of bills and Kylie stuffed them in her pocket with her small wallet. “Now that’s taken care of, let me tell you the other stuff.”

Oh, yeah, the other stuff. “What is it?” Kylie asked, suddenly concerned.

“Your dad called. You need to call him.”

“Okay,” Kylie said. “Can I use your phone?”

“Yeah.” She reached in her pocket and handed Kylie her phone. “And the next thing—”

“There’s more?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah. Tomorrow you’re getting visitors. If you want them.”

“Visitors? Who?” Kylie stuck the phone in her pocket.

“The Brightens. Your real dad’s adoptive parents. They are back from Ireland and got all the messages. They’re eager to meet you.”

Chills ran down Kylie’s arms. “I’d almost given up on meeting them.”

“Well, they will be here tomorrow, at two, if you agree to it.”

Kylie swallowed. “Yeah, of course I want to meet them.” And just like that, Kylie started missing her dad again. More than that, she could swear she felt a touch of cold. Cold that reminded her of him. And oh boy, could she ever use a visit from him now.

* * *

When they arrived at the office, Hayden and Burnett were standing by the coffee machine—not talking. The awkward silence told Kylie that they’d recently halted the conversation when they heard them coming. Meaning they were keeping secrets.

Which frustrated the fire out of her, because after all, this was about her, wasn’t it? She almost called them on it, too, but realized an argument might delay the trip into town. And Holiday needed her. So Kylie buried her frustration, vowing it would be unearthed, resuscitated, and dealt with full-force later on.

Holiday cut a glance to Kylie as if she’d read the emotional marathon happening inside her. After a few nods of uncomfortable greetings, Holiday glanced at Burnett. “You ready?”

On the ride to town, Holiday drove and hiccuped the whole way. Burnett fretted over her hiccups and kept a keen lookout as if he was worried Mario would drop in.

“We should call the doctor,” Burnett said when Holiday let out another one.

“I’ll just pick up some antacid or something,” Holiday said.

When they entered the pharmacy, Kylie started to the feminine product aisle. Burnett started after her, but when he saw her walk up to the tampon rack, he turned around.

Kylie saw Holiday pull him with her to a different aisle.

Taking a deep sigh, Kylie went to look for the pregnancy tests. Feeling rushed, she scanned the different packages but was at a loss. There were numerous kinds, each offering a different promise. Realizing she didn't have time to read them all, she grabbed two and then just to be sure she got the right one, she grabbed another. Checking to make sure no one was looking, she bolted to the pharmacy counter to pay for them. It wasn't until she saw the older man standing there that Kylie realized how hard this was going to be.

The man, an elderly preacher-looking type, was going to think that the tests were for her. Oh, just great. She swallowed a big lump of embarrassment down her throat. Then, thinking of Holiday, she put the three boxes on the counter.

The man eyed her purchase, then looked up. Kylie could see the judgment in his old gray eyes as a frown marred his face. Lovely! She was getting judged for being pregnant and she was still a virgin.

"Do you know how to use these?" he asked in a very condescending voice.

Kylie felt her face flush red. "I ... will read the instructions."

"Would you like my assistant Angela to speak with you about ... anything?"

Like safe sex, Kylie bet he was thinking. "No," she blurted out. When the man just kept staring at her, she added, "Thank you."

He rang up the items slowly. Kylie's heart beat to a nice, steady rhythm of embarrassment. She opened her mouth to say: "These are for a friend." But what was the chance of him believing that?

"That will be forty-two and ninety-six."

Kylie went for the bills Holiday gave her. "Shit," Kylie mumbled when she saw she didn't have enough.

"Excuse me?" the little old man said, now not only offended that she was

pregnant but because of her language.

And he should be offended—by the language. She knew better than to curse in public. But face it, the man’s opinion of her was already in the pits, what was one little word going to matter? But still, she offered, “Sorry.”

“Do you want to buy these or not?”

She nodded. “Yes, it’s just ... I don’t think I need three. Just two.”

Frowning, he looked down at the boxes. “Which one would you like to return?”

She took a deep breath, realizing somewhere along the line she’d stopped doing that.

Then, remembering her mom’s credit card—to use only in case of emergencies—she pulled out Holiday’s phone and then the little wallet. “Never mind, I’ll take them all.”

Tossing the card on the counter, she bit down on her lip. She wasn’t sure this was the kind of emergency her mom was referring to, but getting away from this man’s judging eyes seemed pretty important.

He studied the card carefully.

Friggin’ great. Now he was suspecting her of credit card fraud.

“It’s good!” Kylie said. “I swear.”

He didn’t look convinced. “Can I see an ID?”

She heard Burnett and Holiday somewhere a few aisles behind her. Biting her lip, she opened her wallet and let him see her driver’s license. She had never seen anyone take so much time reading a license.

Fear that she was going to let Holiday down had her stomach clenching. “I’m kind of in a hurry,” Kylie said.

Finally, he dropped her license and finished the transaction. She heard someone shift behind her, and her heart tightened. She glanced down to see shoes, praying they weren’t going to be Burnett’s tennis shoes.

It wasn’t Burnett. A pair of dress shoes, the kind businesspeople wore, adorned the feet of the man standing behind her. Thank God.

The cashier pushed a receipt over to her. “Would you mind some informational pamphlets?” he asked.

“Fine.” Kylie signed the receipt then watched him drop sex pamphlets in

her bag with the pregnancy tests.

Little did he know, those pamphlets were outdated. She'd read those over a year ago.

When at last he handed her the bag, Kylie swung around to leave, but came to an abrupt stop when she saw the face of the man standing behind her.

"Oh, shit," Kylie said again.

Chapter Twenty

Holy hell! Of all the people in the world to have witnessed her buy three pregnancy tests, this was the absolute worst.

“They are for a friend,” Kylie blurted out.

“What?” her grandfather asked, and his brow wrinkled with concern when he looked at her little white sack. Okay, so he obviously hadn’t seen her purchases. But now he probably thought she was buying condoms or something. And with this size sack, she was stockpiling them, too.

All of a sudden, Kylie realized a concern bigger than her grandfather thinking she’d bought a bag of rubbers. If Burnett spotted her grandfather, there would be hell to pay.

“What are you doing here?” Kylie’s nervous gaze zipped around praying she wouldn’t spot Holiday or Burnett. She didn’t.

“I wanted to bring you this.” He pulled her the phone out of his shirt pocket. “And to make sure you believed that I wasn’t behind the ploy to keep you from leaving. I gave my word to Burnett. I don’t do that lightly. I will go now.”

Kylie couldn’t help it, she moved in for a hug and she clung to him a fraction of a second longer than she should.

For when she pulled back, she saw Burnett barreling down the aisle toward her.

Thankfully, her grandfather vanished.

“What the hell?” the cashier said behind her.

“This is why you wanted to come here!” Burnett bit out.

“Is there a problem?” the cashier asked, and then added, “Did you see...”

“It’s fine,” Kylie said, and waved at the cashier.

“I wouldn’t say it’s fine,” Burnett said. “I’m tired of these lies!”

“Should I call the police?” the cashier asked.

“No,” both Burnett and Kylie said at the same time.

Burnett took her by the arm and started leading her out.

“Are you okay, young lady?” the cashier called out.

“I’m fine.” Kylie looked back. “He’s my friend.” Never mind he wasn’t acting like it.

“What happened?” Holiday came running up.

“Let’s get out of here first,” he seethed, and glanced at Kylie, eyes bright with anger.

He led them to Holiday’s car parked right out front.

“What happened?” Holiday looked at Kylie because obviously she knew Burnett was being unreasonable.

She clicked open the car locks a fraction of a second before Burnett yanked open the back door. The angry vamp motioned for Kylie to get inside.

Kylie hesitated, not sure what to say. She knew Burnett was furious about her grandfather showing up, but that wasn’t her fault.

She held her shoulder back. “If you will let me explain...”

“Get in the car!” he demanded.

Now angry at him for being so damn unreasonable, she flung herself in the backseat. Burnett reached in and snatched the bag from her hands. And then slammed the car door shut.

Oh, hell! This was not going to go well.

Kylie peered out the window. Burnett shot around to the driver’s side of the car and motioned for Holiday to get in the passenger side.

As soon as Holiday got in, she flipped around to look at Kylie with questions in her eyes.

“My grandfather was there,” Kylie said.

“She lied to you!” Burnett snapped out. “She didn’t need any damn tampons! This was a ploy to see her grandfather!” He shook the sack at her.

“It was not a ploy!” Kylie leaned up and gripped the back of the passenger’s seat.

“She didn’t lie!” Holiday pressed a hand to Burnett’s arm. No doubt to calm the man.

All Kylie could think was she needed a touch, too. Because right now all the anger at the vampire for keeping secrets from her rose back up and was accompanied by her anger at being falsely accused. “I did not know he was going to be here!” she said, her voice an octave too high.

“She couldn’t have known he was going to be here,” Holiday said.

The fierceness in Burnett’s expression lessened, but not enough to make Kylie happy.

He stared at Holiday. “She asked to come here and you expect me to believe it’s a coincidence that he just shows up?”

“I didn’t tell him I was coming here.” Kylie bounced back on the seat and folded her hands over her chest and the whole incident reminded her of being in the car when she was a kid and angry with her parents.

“Wait,” Holiday said. “Did you tell Hayden where we were going?”

The frown line between Burnett’s eyes deepened. “You think he told—”

“You shouldn’t even be upset!” Kylie snapped. “All my grandfather wanted to do was give me my phone and tell me he wasn’t behind the ploy to kidnap me. And you get all vampire pissy on me!”

“I went pissy on you because you already lied to me several times!” Burnett shook the bag for emphasis. Shook it hard.

Kylie held her breath, fearing the worst. Then the worst happened. It almost looked like slow motion. The bag ripped and three pregnancy tests along with a pamphlet on safe sex and one on gonorrhea landed on the front seat with Holiday and Burnett.

Burnett looked down, gasped, and then looked up at Kylie. “For God’s sake!” he muttered.

“Wait!” Holiday spoke up, and then she burped. Really loud.

Burnett ignored Holiday and stared at Kylie. “If you are old enough to have sex, you are old enough to know about using protection!”

Kylie opened her mouth to speak, but she didn’t have a clue what she was going to say. Then it just spilled out. “I know all about condoms.”

He scowled tighter. “Then why the hell are you in this mess!”

“Wait, Burnett,” Holiday said. “You don’t understand. Kylie’s not in the mess.”

Burnett was too focused on giving Kylie hell to listen to Holiday’s confession.

“Actually, condoms are only eighty-five percent effective at preventing pregnancy,” Kylie said, still seething.

“If you use them right, they work! I spoke with Lucas about this very thing a couple of weeks ago. I damned well told him he’d better be careful.”

“Burnett,” Holiday scolded.

Oh, but Kylie wished she’d just shut up and let the vampire bury himself a little deeper. And right then she decided to hand him a shovel. “I didn’t buy them for me,” Kylie said. “I bought them for a friend.”

“You’re not ... pregnant?”

“Not unless these pamphlets lie and you can get pregnant by sitting on a toilet. I told you, they are for a friend.”

Burnett’s eyes rounded. “Miranda? Shit! I had the same God damned talk with Perry.”

“Sometimes this just happens,” Kylie said, much calmer now that she had a sneak preview of his comeuppance.

“Just happens?” Burnett bellowed out. “Are you freaking kidding me! If you have sex, you use protection. It’s that simple. This shit doesn’t have to happen! This is nothing but carelessness. It’s irresponsible. It’s unforgivable.”

“Burnett!” Holiday rolled her eyes at Kylie and frowned. The fae knew exactly what Kylie was up to now.

But Kylie wasn’t finished yet. “Maybe we should put a rule in place. Any male who impregnates a girl should be neutered.”

“Enough,” Holiday snapped.

“Actually, that’s not a bad plan!” he growled.

“Burnett!” Holiday said in a stern voice. “Shut up before you embarrass yourself more than you already have.” When the vampire looked at Holiday, she continued, “Kylie didn’t buy the pregnancy tests for Miranda. She bought them for me.”

Kylie flopped back against the seat again, enjoying the look of disbelief on the vampire's face a little too much. "Would you like a name of a good doctor who will schedule your little snip-snip operation?" she bit out.

Chapter Twenty-one

The thing about sweet revenge was it was never as sweet in hindsight. Burnett was ... stunned. He turned around and started the car. He drove back to Shadow Falls without saying one word. Holiday sat there hiccuping and looking as if she might cry. Obviously, Burnett's reaction wasn't exactly what Holiday had been hoping for.

Or maybe, Kylie realized, it was exactly what the fae had feared. She recalled Holiday telling her that Burnett wasn't sure he wanted to be a father. Kylie suddenly wanted to apologize for her part in announcing the fact so ... hurtfully, but the moment didn't feel right.

After parking the car, Burnett saw Perry as they walked through the gate, and called him over and asked him to see Kylie to her cabin.

"What up?" Perry asked, studying Kylie and then looking back at Burnett walking away. "I've never seen him looking so ... stunned. It's as if the lights are on but nobody's home."

"Nothing," Kylie said, and she wanted to cry, to smack herself for being so thoughtless.

As soon as Kylie got back to her cabin, she headed straight to her bedroom.

But Della shot across the room and blocked the door. "What's wrong?" Della asked. "First you come to class crying, then Holiday shows up acting all weird, and now you come in looking like a kicked puppy. And don't tell me it's none of my business, I'm your friend, that gives me all the rights in the world to butt into your personal life."

Kylie gave Della a hug. "I love you."

“Okay ... I ... I wasn’t trying to get all mushy?” Della said, and pulled back.

“I know, but you were,” Kylie said. “Unfortunately, I can’t ... talk about any of this right now. I need to make a few phone calls.” She motioned for Della to step away from the door. She did, but begrudgingly.

Kylie’s first phone call was to warn Hayden that Burnett might possibly arrive and be on the warpath.

“Why? What the hell did I do this time?” Hayden asked.

“My grandfather showed up at the drugstore. I’m assuming you told him where I was.”

“Oh, damn it! I did mention it, but ... I never thought he’d go there. I guess I’ll start packing my bags,” he muttered.

“No,” Kylie said. “Please. Just explain that you didn’t know he was coming. Just ... placate Burnett. Say anything. But ... don’t leave. I need you here. And ... don’t be too hard on him. He ... he’s having a hard day.”

“What happened?” Hayden asked.

“He had to put up with me,” Kylie said.

“Oh, that would be rough,” Hayden said teasingly, but Kylie wasn’t in a humorous mood.

Off the phone with him, Kylie called her stepdad. She talked to him a good five minutes, assuring him she was okay, and that she’d lost her phone, but now she found it and was sorry she missed his calls.

She could tell from his voice that he was upset to learn that her mom was in London. Or maybe it wasn’t just his voice telling her this, but his words. “God damn, she should have told me she was leaving the country!”

“I’m sure she just forgot,” Kylie lied, unsure of anything else she could say.

Hanging up with him, Kylie suddenly felt her left pocket vibrate. Oh, crap. She’d completely forgotten she still had Holiday’s phone.

Pulling her phone out, she saw Burnett had sent Holiday a text. Her gut said that Holiday needed to read it. She ran out of the room and hollered at Della. “Let’s go.”

Knowing Della would catch up, Kylie lit out the door. In a matter of

seconds, Della was moving beside her.

“Where are we going?”

“To the office. I need to see Holiday.”

“And you’re still not going to tell me what’s going on.”

“Sorry.” Kylie picked up her pace.

She asked Della to wait outside. The vamp rolled her eyes, but did it. When Kylie walked into the office, Holiday’s door was shut. She knocked.

“Who is it?” Holiday asked, and Kylie sensed the fae was hoping it was Burnett.

“It’s me.” Kylie opened the door.

Holiday stood behind her desk. She sighed. Her eyes were a watery mess. The fae didn’t cry much prettier than Kylie. “I’m so sorry.” Guilt caused a knot in Kylie’s throat.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. He shouldn’t have heard the news like that. I was just so…”

“Mad,” Holiday finished for her. “And you had a right to be. He completely jumped to conclusions. He has a really bad habit of doing that.” Her voice shook.

Kylie saw the pregnancy test boxes in the garbage. “Did you take them?”

She nodded.

“And?”

She nodded again. “All three say yes. What’s the chance of them being wrong?”

“Does Burnett know?” Kylie asked.

She shook her head. “He didn’t even come into the office. Didn’t say one word to me. He got in his car and left.”

“Wait. He did say something.” Kylie pulled Holiday’s phone out of her pocket. “You got a text from him. That’s why I came here. I thought it might be important.”

Holiday took the phone and hit a few buttons almost in a panic. Tears filled her eyes and she put a hand over her trembling lips.

“Is that a good or bad reaction?” Kylie asked.

Holiday looked up, tears in her eyes but with a smile. “He writes: ‘I’m at

the florist, trying to figure out which flower says I'm an idiot and please forgive me.'" She inhaled. "He is an idiot!" She hiccuped.

"But I'm *your* idiot!" Burnett said from the doorway.

Kylie looked back and saw Burnett walk in carrying the biggest, and the oddest-looking, bouquet of flowers she'd ever seen. Holiday dropped into her desk chair. A few tears rolled down her cheeks.

He moved past Kylie and set the flowers on Holiday's desk, pretty much taking up the entire desk, too. "You didn't get back to me with the kind of flower, so I got one of everything they had."

Burnett's eyes cut to the garbage, where he obviously spotted the pregnancy test packages. He looked up at Holiday. "Are we pregnant?"

She nodded and wiped her cheeks.

"Forgive me," he said with pure emotion in his voice. "I'm just scared. I didn't have a father and most of my foster parents weren't what you would call good examples. But then I realized that you are going to be such a great mom, that it won't matter if I suck at parenthood a little bit."

"You're not going to suck at it." Holiday hiccuped.

"But if I do, you'll straighten me out, right?"

She nodded. "You bet your cold feet I will."

Kylie grinned and started to back out. She almost got to the door when Burnett turned. "I owe you an apology, too."

Kylie nodded. "And I owe you one."

Burnett smiled. "Accepted."

"But no more secrets," Kylie said. "Even between you and Hayden. If it involves me, I want to know."

He sighed. "Deal. Now that we got most everything cleared up, can you leave so I can kiss the mother of my child and not worry about offending virgin eyes?"

"Make it a good one." Kylie smiled and started out.

"Kylie?" Holiday said.

Kylie turned back. "The Brightens called while we were away. They're still planning on coming tomorrow. I just wanted to remind you."

Kylie nodded and walked out, trying to figure out how she was going to

approach the Brightens.

She hadn't gotten one step on the porch when Della ran up to her and squealed. "Holiday's pregnant?"

Kylie covered the vamp's mouth with her palm and frowned. "You weren't supposed to be listening in."

"I didn't mean to," Della huffed out behind Kylie's fingers. "Burnett's voice just carries."

"Right." Kylie cut her eyes at Della in disbelief.

Della squealed again. "This is so cool."

Kylie, pushing aside her worry about the Brightens, suddenly felt like squealing, too. "What's cool?" Miranda asked, walking up.

Della looked at Kylie. "We have to tell Miranda. Just Miranda."

"Yeah, you have to!" Miranda squealed. "I don't know what it is, but I want to know."

Kylie gasped. "Okay, but you can't tell anyone."

"Won't tell a soul," Miranda said. "What is it?" She rubbed her hands together, excited to know a secret.

Della moved them away from the office, and under a patch of trees beside the trail. "Guess who's pregnant?" Della whispered.

Miranda gawked at Kylie. "But you said you'd never done it."

"Not me!" Kylie said. "Holiday."

Miranda's mouth dropped open. "Oh my! We're gonna have a baby Burnett running around? That is cool." She grinned ear to ear.

"I know." Kylie suddenly couldn't stop smiling.

Or she couldn't until someone dropped a severed head from the tree above her and it landed on her foot. Kylie screamed and kicked the head, which rolled a good six feet away. She screamed again when she saw the eyes wobbling and looking up at her.

* * *

The next morning, Kylie got up and went and sat in front of the computer to check her e-mail before heading off to breakfast with Della and Miranda. She sat there and stared at the black computer screen in a daze. There hadn't been

any dreams, no more severed heads falling from trees, and no visiting swords. She still hadn't slept worth a damn. What kept her up were all her other issues. Most of them matters of the heart.

She'd stayed awake a while thinking about meeting Daniel's adoptive parents today, wondering what she should say, or not say. She'd connected with her real grandfather, but he wasn't a parent who'd raised her father. He hadn't taught him to ride a bike, or play baseball. He didn't really know his own son, but these people did. What would they tell her about her father? Had they loved him, missed him since he'd been taken from this life too soon?

That made her start missing her dad. So she pulled out his pictures and spent a good hour just looking at them, talking to him. Yeah, she talked to him as if he were there listening to every word she said. She told him about her quests. How she wanted to find a way to help all the other chameleon teens. Now all she had to do was figure out how to do it. She told him about Mario, how she felt deep down that she was going to have to deal with him. Personally.

She confessed to her dad how much that truly scared her. Scared because of the evilness that emanated from the man, and how she didn't think she had what it would take to face him and win.

A couple of times during the conversation she could swear she felt her dad, a slight familiar type of chill—one that actually warmed her on the inside. One that whispered that she wouldn't be alone—not facing Mario, or the visit with his parents. Then she heard the words he'd told her not so long ago. *But soon. Soon we will discover this together.*

Was it fate that she face Mario and lose? Would she be joining her father on the other side?

She slipped the pictures back into their envelope, her heart beating a little faster, and again recalled Holiday telling her that she didn't think it was what he meant. Dear God, she hoped not. She wasn't ready to leave this world.

When she let go of worrying about Daniel's message—choosing to believe Holiday, or at least trying to believe her—and stopped fretting over the meeting of the grandparents, she started obsessing over what Fredericka

had said. It was because of Kylie that Lucas probably wouldn't get on the werewolf Council. She knew it wasn't her fault—he got himself in this mess—but guilt still pricked her conscience. It was hard to feel so angry and guilty at the same time at the same person. How did one deal with that? She didn't know.

She also had to deal with Derek. Nip things in the bud before things got out of control, if they weren't already out of control. She remembered lunch yesterday, which was why Kylie had Miranda bring them each back a couple slices of pizza for dinner last night. Ahh, her ol' avoidance trick was still in good working order. She should be proud. Not.

But honestly, she knew she shouldn't and couldn't continue to avoid it.

Derek deserved to know the truth. Now if she could just figure out exactly what that was, she'd tell him. Wait! She did know the truth, didn't she? Or at least part of it. Hadn't she admitted she loved Lucas? Still loved him, in spite of what he'd done. Then why had she even allowed Derek to kiss her in the dreamscape?

Was it because down deep she still held a glimmer of romantic feelings for Derek? Was it because she feared losing Lucas and not having anyone? Was it because she was angry at Lucas, and somehow felt kissing Derek was his payback? Was it because she was over-the-top stupid?

Questions.

No answers.

“Are we going to breakfast?” Della asked.

“Yeah,” Kylie mumbled, and looked at the black computer screen. “Just checking my e-mail.”

Della let out a sarcastic chuckle. “I think you need to turn the computer on first. Or do your powers now allow you to read your e-mails with the computer off?”

Kylie clicked the computer on and glanced over her shoulder to frown at Della. “Don't you remember the rule? You can't be a smartass until after breakfast. I need energy to deal with that.”

Miranda skipped into the living room from her bedroom. “I personally think she should wait and be a smartass after lunch. That gives us two meals

of energy to put up with her crap.”

“You two think you’re so funny,” Della bit out.

“We are funny,” Miranda said.

“Just a couple of comedians.” Kylie clicked open her e-mail to do a quick check. One from her stepdad.

To answer later.

One from ... Sara.

Damn, she hadn’t thought about her old best friend in almost two weeks. Funny how someone could be so important in your life and then ... then you go a long period of time without them even entering your thoughts.

It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Life took people in different directions. She’d read in some teen magazine that it usually happened when you graduated from high school. She guessed her different-path part of life had just come a little earlier. It was still sad.

An empty spot seemed to open up in her chest. A spot Kylie knew used to be occupied by Sara.

She clicked open the e-mail from Sara, praying it wasn’t bad news, as in: her cancer came back, or she thought she was pregnant again, or she’d decided to go into a convent and become a nun. With Sara, anything was possible.

Hey ... Got my hair cut. Thought you might want to see it. Don’t laugh. I’m feeling spunky now that I survived cancer. I’ll bet your friend Miranda will approve. Call me when you have a chance.

Knowing Della and Miranda were waiting, Kylie clicked open the picture for just a peek. When the image of Sara with short, spiked pink hair filled the screen, a smiled slipped across Kylie’s lips.

She heard shuffling behind her. “I’m coming,” she said, thinking any minute Della would complain. Kylie grabbed her phone and wallet, but right as she stood up, another e-mail came in. It was from her mom, who was supposed to have gotten back to the States on the red-eye flight. Obviously, she’d made it home.

“Really? I don’t see you moving,” Della said.

Okay, Mom’s e-mail would have to wait, too.

Meeting the girls at the door, Kylie glanced at her two best friends and she felt a wave of sadness. Not for what was, but for what might be.

“Promise me something,” Kylie said.

“What?” they asked in unison.

“When we graduate from here we won’t lose track of each other. We should all go to the same college. And I’m completely serious. Holiday was talking about getting some college forms and we should send them out to the same colleges. And we could get an apartment together.”

“We could become lesbians and have threesomes,” Della said, and chuckled.

“Sorry,” Miranda said, and snickered. “I’ve already seen you naked and it did nothing for me.”

“It was the little bitty tits, wasn’t it?” Della asked, grinning.

They laughed all the way to breakfast.

* * *

Derek and Lucas didn’t show up for breakfast and that was just fine with Kylie. Less drama must be good for the appetite, because she actually ate her runny eggs and burnt bacon in record time. Her phone rang just when she was about to push her tray back. When she saw her stepdad’s number, she decided to call him back a little later. She didn’t think she could take his heartbreak over her mom this early.

Her phone chimed with an incoming text. Couldn’t be her dad, the man didn’t text. Kylie waited a second before checking to see who it was from. Three words popped up.

Miss you. Lucas.

Miss you, too, she thought, but didn’t type it in. Emotion whispered across her chest.

The sound of another tray being placed on the table brought Kylie’s gaze up.

Steve, the hot shape-shifter who’d left a hickey right below Della’s left

collarbone, sat down beside the little vamp.

Della sat completely still, frozen, and stared daggers at her uneaten breakfast. If looks could kill, that breakfast would be pushing up daisies.

“Hey,” Steve said.

“You have to leave,” Della said without looking at him.

“Why?” he asked.

Della hesitated. “Because I’m shadowing Kylie and don’t need any distractions.”

That was the lamest excuse Kylie had ever heard and Steve’s expression said he knew it, too.

“So I’m distracting to you, huh?” he said, leaned against her, and half smiled.

“Leave!” She looked up, her eyes glowing a pissed-off green.

The half smile faded from his eyes, and he popped up, took his tray, and went and sat at the shape-shifter table.

“That wasn’t nice,” Kylie said.

“I know,” Della said. “I don’t know why he did it.”

“I was talking about you.” Kylie leaned forward and shot her a frown.

“Yeah, and it was a lie, too,” Perry added, sitting two seats down. “I’m the one on shadowing duty right now.”

Della made a face and stood up. “Are you finished eating?”

A few minutes later they walked outside for the announcement of Campmate hour—Della on one side and Miranda and Perry on the other. Kylie found herself looking around for Derek or Lucas. Still both no-shows. But then she felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Looking back, she saw Derek standing about eight feet behind her. His green gaze met hers and Kylie remembered the kiss from the dream again.

“Okay,” Chris said, drawing Kylie’s attention forward. “First up today we have...” He pulled a piece of paper from his top hat—which always looked silly to Kylie, but it was obviously his thing.

She couldn’t help but wonder if Chris had wanted to be a magician when he was a kid. Reading the paper, the head vampire moved his eyes around the crowd. Kylie’s heart thumped when his gaze came close to her and started

slowing down. *Not again! Who was it this time?*

Then his eyes moved past Kylie, past Miranda, and stopped. For some crazy reason, Kylie got a bad feeling. The sneaky smile on Chris's lips told her she was right, too.

"Perry, my ol' friend," Chris said. "You get the pleasure of spending an hour with Nikki."

Chapter Twenty-two

The bad feeling wasn't just right on the mark, it was an understatement. This wasn't just bad, it was really awful.

Kylie's gaze shot away from Perry's shocked expression to Miranda. The little witch stood rock-hard stiff. The only thing that moved on her was her eyes as she scanned the crowd, obviously looking for Nikki.

And when Miranda's eyes stop moving—meaning she'd found the culprit—her gaze filled with jealousy. And just like that, there was another body part on the witch moving: her pinky.

"No," Kylie blurted out, but it was too late. Nikki the cute blonde disappeared, and standing in her exact spot was a very shocked, very angry-looking kangaroo.

Oh, but Miranda wasn't finished yet. Her pinky continued to wiggle.

Kylie gasped as pimples started popping out of the poor five-foot marsupial. Kylie could hear Miranda's favorite threat ring in her mind. *I'll give you the worst case of pimples you've ever seen.*

Miranda was right. Kylie had never seen pimples so bad. Of course, she'd never seen a kangaroo with pimples, period.

Everyone in the crowd started howling with laughter. Even though Nikki had brought this on herself, Kylie felt sorry for her. And frankly, if Miranda wasn't green with jealousy, she wouldn't think it was so funny either.

Kylie grabbed Miranda by the arm, leaned in, and whispered, "She was wrong to do this, but ... change her back. Change her back right now before you forget how to break the curse!"

Miranda frowned, but Kylie saw the logic whittle its way into the girl's

brain. She bit her lip, pointed her pinky, muttered a few things, and poof, Nikki magically appeared—no longer a kangaroo, but now a very embarrassed and angry shape-shifter.

The laughter from the crowd must have upped the embarrassment quotient. Instead of turning into something fierce and ripping the little witch apart, tears filled Nikki's eyes and she took off running.

Perry shot around and faced Miranda. "Why did you do that?"

Crap! Kylie thought, knowing Perry had said the wrong thing.

Miranda, already wearing an expression of remorse, frowned up at him. "You're taking her side? She's trying to steal you away from me and now you're taking her side!"

"No, I'm not ... But that was stupid," he said.

Oh, shit! Kylie thought. Miranda didn't like the word *stupid*.

Miranda's face turned red and tears filled her eyes. "Stupid?" Miranda snapped. "Fine, if I'm so stupid, why don't you run after Nikki and console her. Because she can have you if that's how you feel!"

"What's going on?" Holiday came running out of the dining hall. While several people started to fill Holiday in, Miranda ran off.

Kylie turned to Perry, who stood there staring at a departing and very hurt Miranda.

"Hey," Kylie said. When he didn't respond, she gave his T-shirt sleeve a good yank. "Don't just stand there. Go after her and tell her you're sorry."

"What did I do?" he asked.

"First you called her stupid. Being dyslexic, she really hates that word. Second, like it or not, it sounded like you were taking Nikki's side."

"No, I said what she did was stupid. And it was." Perry looked over at Holiday. "She's gonna get hell from Holiday. Why the heck did Miranda have to do something like that?"

"Probably for the same reason a certain shape-shifter turned into a big bear and then a giant lion and tried to rip apart another shape-shifter for kissing someone. Because she's jealous. Don't you remember how it felt?"

Perry frowned. "Yeah, I do remember." Guilt shadowed his eyes. "Shit. I did screw up, didn't I?" He raked a hand through his blond hair. "But I

wasn't taking up for Nikki. I just didn't want Miranda to get in trouble."

"Then go tell Miranda that. Explain what you meant. And then do yourself and Nikki a favor and go tell her to give it up."

"I ... haven't encouraged her one bit."

"But have you come out and told her that you're with Miranda and it's just not happening between you two? Because obviously she still thinks you two have a shot. And it's not fair that Miranda has to put up with that crap, and it's not fair for Nikki to keep hoping when she shouldn't. Now go and fix this mess you're in before it's too late."

Right then Kylie's advice to Perry turned around and bit her in the ass. Because it was advice she needed to hear as well. Perry wasn't the only one who had some straightening out to do. She had to talk to Derek. She had to set him straight.

"I can't go," Perry said.

"Yes, you can, or you'll regret this."

"No, I can't. I'm shadowing you. Burnett will give me hell if I run out on you."

Kylie groaned. She turned around and Derek had made his way up to them. She grabbed him by the arm and yanked him in front of Perry. "You're not shadowing me anymore. Derek is."

"Great." Derek smiled and she knew he was reading something into this that wasn't there.

Perry shook his head. "But Burnett—"

"Burnett's not going to get mad. I'll explain it to him. Now go before it's too late and Miranda decides not to forgive you. Go!" She gave the little twerp a shove.

Perry transformed himself into his bird form and took off flying. Kylie knocked a few of the electric sparkles off her arm, and then confronted Derek.

"Come on," she said.

"Where?" The look he shot her came complete with a sexy smile.

"To talk," she said. "We have to talk."

"What about Campmate hour?" he asked.

She let go of a deep sigh. "Forget Campmate hour. You're coming with me!" She grabbed him by the arm and started dragging him.

And, of course, that was when Lucas walked up.

His blue eyes met hers. She saw the way he looked at her. She had the oddest desire to stop and explain, but when she tried to think of exactly what she'd say, or why she felt he deserved an explanation, it just seemed too hard.

So she just met his eyes with a look of apology and went back to dragging Derek behind her. Later, she would deal with Lucas. How she would deal with him, she didn't have a clue.

* * *

"Do you want to go to the rock?" Derek asked, now walking beside her.

"No." The hurt look in Lucas's eyes kept echoing in her heart. He'd hurt her, but hurting him, even unintentionally, sent regret tightening her chest.

"Why not?" Derek asked.

"Because we have to talk, and I think you know what it's about, too."

For a second she wished it wasn't so. It would be so easy if she could just pick Derek. He didn't have a pack trying to keep them apart. He hadn't given up his quest and wouldn't someday blame her. But you couldn't make your heart take the easy way out, it felt what it felt, it wanted what it wanted.

Her heart obviously wanted Lucas. Whether or not she'd give it what it wanted was another matter. But she couldn't give Derek what he wanted either. It just wasn't right.

He exhaled a frustrated gulp of air. "Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to end well?"

She glanced at him. "It may not end the way you want it, but it's the right thing."

"I'm not so sure," he said.

She led him to her cabin and then remembering Miranda and Perry could be inside working out their own issues, she flopped down on the porch step and motioned him to do the same.

Giving the door a quick look, she hoped Perry had been able to calm Miranda down. Heck, maybe they were in there having a make-up make-out

session.

Taking a deep breath, she faced Derek. “You know how I feel. Why are you trying to convince yourself that it’s not true?”

“What’s not true? Come on, Kylie. You love me, too,” he said.

She pulled one leg up to her chest and hugged it. “Yes. I won’t lie, but it’s not the kind that I’m feeling for Lucas. And I know you know that, because you feel what I feel.”

“But if you and I got back together, we could fix this.”

She shook her head. “You don’t deserve that.”

“Don’t deserve what?” he asked. “I want you back. You think I wouldn’t be happy?”

“Not really,” she said. “You shouldn’t be. You deserve someone who’s as crazy about you as you are about them. You don’t deserve someone who ... cares about someone else.”

She bit her lip and realized another reason she felt so strongly about this. “This is what happened to my dad and my mom. She loved my real dad. She cared about my stepdad, but he always knew she loved my dad more. Even my mom says it’s probably part of the reason he ended up cheating on her. She can’t forgive him, but she knows it’s partly her own fault.”

He sat there frowning. “So you’re going to take Lucas back. You are going to forgive him for running off and getting engaged to someone else.”

She tightened her hold on her leg. “He didn’t really get engaged. He stopped it before he got to that point.”

Derek’s frown increased. “Only because you showed up—because you discovered his dirty little secret.”

“I know that. And I don’t know what I’m going to do. I haven’t forgiven him yet, but I haven’t stopped loving him either.”

“But if you gave us a chance, maybe you’d really fall back in love with me. I think you were really in love with me at one time. We could get back there where we feel that way again.”

“We?” She sighed, realizing what he said. “See, you don’t even feel the same way anymore, either.”

“I didn’t mean...” He shook his head.

“Yes, you did,” she said. “Derek, I think we *were* in love with each other,” she admitted. “And I don’t want to hurt you, Derek. I really do care about you and I still love you, just not ... that way. And I think it’s the same with you.”

He stared off at a line of trees and she knew he needed a few seconds to get his feelings in order. She saw him swallow and she felt his pain.

He inhaled. “But what we had was so great.”

“I know and I’m so sorry.” She felt her voice shake with emotion. Hurting him was so hard.

He looked back at her and she saw the honesty, the genuine concern in his gaze. And wasn’t that just like Derek. He was such a great guy. And for that reason alone, he deserved someone who adored him, who loved him more than anyone else.

“You didn’t do anything to apologize for,” he said. “You really didn’t. If anyone can be blamed for this it was me when I got scared and did what I did. Or maybe this is just fate. The way it was supposed to have turned out.”

She nodded.

“I want one thing from you,” he said. “One promise.”

“What?” she asked, knowing she’d give it to him if at all possible.

“Don’t stop being my friend. Don’t avoid me because you think it’s awkward. When you need something, don’t hesitate to come to me. I can accept that we can’t be boyfriend and girlfriend, but I don’t want to lose you as a friend and I’m not saying that just to say it. I mean it.”

She nodded. “I promise.” Tears filled her eyes.

“And when you do go back to Lucas, make him understand that I’d like to still be a part of your life.”

“I told you, I don’t know if we will—”

He reached out and brushed an escaping tear from her cheek. “Yes, you will. Because when you love someone, you forgive them.”

Her breath shook. “Like you are forgiving me right now?” And another tear escaped.

“I told you, you didn’t do anything to be forgiven for. But if you did do something, yeah, I would have forgiven you.”

She inhaled and stared down at her shoe. "Even if it was because of me that you couldn't complete the one thing you always wanted to do."

"I'm lost," Derek said.

"I'm sorry. I'm just thinking out loud."

"About Lucas?" Derek asked.

Kylie nodded and realized how insensitive she was being. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

"Don't be." He exhaled. "This is what I'm talking about you *not* doing. I want you to talk to me." He gripped his hands together. "Look, I don't like saying this, but Lucas does love you. I can feel it. And he's hurting like the devil right now. Whatever it is you think he can't forgive you for, well, you're wrong."

She ran her hand up and down her leg before talking. "Because of me he won't get on the were Council. He won't be able to change all the things he wanted to change with his own people. His own pack will probably disown him. Sooner or later..."

"But he chose you, Kylie. He made that choice. You didn't force him to."

Kylie nodded, but looked him in the eyes. "Maybe it was the wrong choice."

He leaned in, and his shoulder brushed hers with warmth. "I'll bet he wouldn't think so."

She shook her head. "Being a were means everything to him."

Kylie's phone in her pocket chimed with an incoming text; a second later Derek's did the same. She pulled it out and saw Burnett's name on the screen as the sender. She glanced at Derek, who looked at her at the same time.

"A text from Burnett," Derek said.

"Oh, crap," Kylie said, hitting the button to read her text.

Get to the office now! his text read.

Holy hell, Kylie thought. What could be happening now?

* * *

Burnett's message to Derek had read almost the same: *Get Kylie to the office now!* So Kylie and Derek ran to the office. She could have moved quicker if

she'd left Derek in the dust, but she held back. What was a couple of seconds?

Nevertheless, by the time she got in front of the office, her heart was thumping in her chest. From exertion or fear of what awaited her, Kylie wasn't sure.

She hadn't made it up the office steps when she heard the voices. Shit, Kylie thought, what was her stepfather doing here?

"It's my stepdad," Kylie said to Derek. "I'd better handle this alone."

She hurried inside and found Burnett, Holiday, her stepfather, and Jonathon in the office. What the heck was Jonathon doing in here? Tom Galen stood in the middle of the room, facing Holiday's desk. Holiday sat relaxed like the essence of calm, but her stepfather's posture wasn't picking up on Holiday's mood. His shoulders were tight, his hands clenched.

And like her stepfather, Burnett appeared a little tight, but she could tell he was trying to contain himself. But Jonathon ... the vampire just looked guilty. And Kylie got a bad feeling.

Holiday's gaze shifted briefly to Kylie, as did Burnett's, but her stepdad didn't realize she was standing there.

"What kind of school are you running?" Tom Galen bit out.

"The same kind of school that the state is running," Holiday answered, her voice tranquil. "We have a security gate for a reason. You went through it and set off alarms. You were mistaken to be a threat."

"I'm not a goddamn threat. I'm a student's father."

"Fathers don't usually try to break into a school," Burnett insisted.

"What happened?" Kylie asked.

Her father swung around and at least some of his tension subsided at seeing her. "I jumped the gate instead of pushing the button and you would think I'd just broken into Fort Knox. I was tackled by this wisecrack of a kid."

Holiday glanced up and Kylie could see from her expression she was trying to play nice. "Jonathon saw your father and made a bad judgment call. Instead of asking questions as he possibly should have, he detained—"

"Detained? He knocked my ass on the ground." Her stepdad rubbed his

side. "And let me tell you, for a skinny kid, he has one hell of a tackle."

"We're sorry," Holiday said. "Aren't we, Jonathon?"

"Very much so, sir," Jonathon spoke up.

"Dad," Kylie said. "Jonathon's girlfriend was mugged last week. You could understand how he might now be a tad overprotective."

Jonathon nodded. Holiday glanced at Kylie as if to say, *good move*. Burnett seemed to agree.

Her father sighed. "I'm sorry to hear about your girlfriend. Is she going to be okay?" he asked Jonathon.

"Yeah," Jonathon said, then flinched as if remembering his manners. "Oh, I mean, yes, sir, and thank you."

With most of the tension lessening, Kylie looked at her dad. "What are you doing here, Dad?"

He frowned. "I came to see you. I e-mailed you late last night and called this morning. You would have known I was coming if you had taken my call or read my e-mail."

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's been a crazy morning."

"She is attending school," Burnett added.

Her stepfather looked apologetic. "My company sent me down here for a meeting with a sister company that's not happening until two this afternoon, and I thought maybe I could steal you away and we could grab brunch together."

Behind Tom Galen, Kylie spotted Burnett scowl. The vampire had made it clear she wasn't leaving the school without him until they knew Mario wasn't in the vicinity. Burnett looked directly at Kylie and shook his head with determination. He wasn't just saying no, he was saying *hell no*!

"Uh, I already had breakfast," Kylie said.

"Well, we'd just grab something to drink," her stepdad said.

Kylie shot Burnett another quick glance. The man was still shaking his head a firm hell no.

"I ... I have classes," Kylie said.

Disappointment filled her stepdad's eyes. She hated hurting him. Today she'd already hurt Lucas, then Derek, now her stepdad. This wasn't a good

day.

“Now, Kylie,” he said. “I’m positive you can spare a few minutes of your time to visit with me.”

She felt the tension building inside her and inside the room. Her stepdad wasn’t going to back down, and from the looks of things, neither was Burnett.

This was not going to end well.

Chapter Twenty-three

Kylie concentrated on looking at her dad and tried not to focus on the scene happening behind him—the scene being a nonverbal argument between Holiday and Burnett. An argument that rivaled the old silent movies that included some very angry hand motions and some very unhappy and telling facial expressions.

“Uh,” Kylie said, a complete stalling tactic because face it, she didn’t have a clue what to say.

“Of course you should go spend some time with your dad,” Holiday finally blurted out.

Burnett’s jaw clamped down so tight, Kylie would bet his teeth had just shortened a quarter of an inch.

Holiday stood up. “However, Kylie has a test in her next class. How about you coming back in about an hour or an hour and a half and you two can go to lunch somewhere. I think Kylie was telling me the other day that there was a hamburger joint in downtown Fallen that she wanted to try. What was it, Burgers R Us?”

Kylie nodded, clueless about the restaurant Holiday had mentioned.

Burnett’s expression lightened; either he was seeing reason, or he was on to Holiday’s plan. Kylie just wished she was on to it, too, because she was clueless as to what was going on.

Her father turned to Kylie. “I guess I could go take a drive and come back around eleven. It is pretty country out here.”

“That would be good,” Kylie said.

“Okay,” her stepdad said, and reached out and drew her in for one of his

super heart-melting hugs. The warmth from his embrace seeped into her chest and it should have made her panic subside. And it probably would have if over her stepdad's shoulder she didn't see the sword falling point down from somewhere above. It hit with force and caused a sharp clank as it lodged itself, standing straight up in the middle of Holiday's desk.

Kylie's heart lurched and she felt her father flinch at the noise. One thought ran amok in her head. How was she going to explain this to her stepdad?

Burnett flew into action at vampire speed. He snatched the sword, knocked over Holiday's glass of tea, and then hid the weapon behind his back in one swift move.

Only a fraction of a second later, her father pulled loose and swung around to check out the clatter.

"What the fu ... frack?" Jonathon muttered, and then blushed when he realized what he'd almost said.

Burnett scowled at Jonathon. Holiday smiled and should have won an Oscar for her acting. "Dang it, I swear this is the second glass of tea I've knocked over today."

Her dad just looked back at Kylie, who hadn't breathed since the sword's miraculous appearance.

"I guess I'll see you in an hour and a half."

She nodded and inhaled.

"You're up for this?" he asked.

She got another gulp of oxygen into her lungs and hopefully to her brain.

"Are you going to walk me out?" he asked.

Feeling a bit like a bobble head doll, she nodded again, then added a smile to it, hoping to appear more convincing.

Her stepdad took one step and stopped and looked at her. "Are you okay? You look like you saw a ghost."

A ghost she could have handled, she thought.

"I'm fine." The two words came out squeaky. Unfortunately, she simply wasn't an awarding-winning actress like Holiday.

* * *

“I think it’s doable,” Kylie told her dad, and glanced up from the brochure of a guided hiking tour through the Grand Canyon—a trip he wanted to plan for them this summer. “It looks great.” It wasn’t really a lie, but she’d bet Chris, the vampire sitting a table away from her and her dad at the restaurant, might have heard her heart say differently.

She felt Lucas, sitting across from Chris, glance at her and her heart gave a little tug. Burnett had picked two people—two he thought her father was less likely to recognize—to play secret bodyguards during her lunch. When he’d told her he would have two people stationed at the restaurant, she hadn’t considered he would pick Lucas. Little did Burnett know, Kylie half feared her stepdad would recognize Lucas as the kid who’d lived next door to them. The kid Kylie had accused of killing her cat.

Thankfully, her stepdad hadn’t given Lucas a second glance so far. Neither had he noticed the hawk following the car all the way into town. She’d bet her best bra that the hawk answered to the name of Perry.

Kylie had taken the time before her dad’s return to find Miranda and make sure she was okay. The little witch was still shook up. She’d made up with Perry, but had an appointment to have a sit-down serious talk with Holiday. No doubt there would be some consequences for her actions. While Miranda didn’t look forward to the consequences, she accepted her wrongdoing.

“I thought you would like it,” her father said, drawing her attention back to the present. “It’s sort of like the one we did in Taos, New Mexico. There’ll be some kayaking, but nothing too dangerous.”

Her dad’s eyes lit up with excitement. Kylie felt bad not sharing his thrill. She’d pretty much spent the last forty-five minutes here, praying that sword wouldn’t come and stab any of the restaurant’s patrons. But now seeing her stepdad’s eyes become worried, she tried harder to put on a good front.

“Remember the baby deer we saw on that trip,” Kylie offered. “And that camp leader that got skunked.”

“Oh, yeah.” His grin widened. “We have had some great trips.”

“I know.” She put her hand on top of his and he turned his over and gave hers a squeeze. She felt his love seep into her palm.

“Do you know how much I miss you? I really wish you’d consider coming back and living with me.”

She bit down on her lip, remembering how when he’d first left her mom, she’d thought that was all she wanted. Her life these three months had changed so much.

Giving her dad’s hand another squeeze, she said, “I really like Shadow Falls. But we’ll have this trip in the summer.” God, she hoped Mario was dealt with by then and she wasn’t lying.

He nodded. “I get it. My baby girl is growing up.” Emotion filled his eyes and he looked around. And Kylie’s heart clutched with fear he’d recognize Lucas.

“Did you like your hamburger?” she blurted out, drawing his attention to her.

“Loved it. You were right to suggest we come here. But you barely touched your food.” He waved at Kylie’s plate with her hamburger and fries growing cold.

“I had a big breakfast,” Kylie lied. “But it was good.” Kylie glanced at her watch. It was almost one. Burnett had had her stall her father so they wouldn’t be in as big of a lunch crowd. Her chest clutched a little when she realized that in less than an hour, she would face the Brightens, her real dad’s adoptive parents. Oh, hell, she still didn’t have an approach plan.

She looked back at her stepdad. “You know, it’s getting late.”

“I know, you’re gonna turn into a pumpkin if I don’t get you back.” He signed the credit card bill that Kylie had already asked the waitress to bring.

Suddenly the three Cokes she’d drank out of nervousness hit her bladder. “I’m going to run to the girls’ room first before we head out.”

“Go ahead, I need to make a call to work anyway.”

When she started to the girls’ room, Lucas frowned. Oh, please, Kylie thought, what was going to happen in the bathroom?

Okay, a lot could happen. Mario could happen. But she had to pee.

Chris and Lucas whispered across the table and then Chris got up and shot

ahead of her toward the bathrooms. She hoped he knew he wasn't coming into the bathroom with her. With her shy bladder, she'd never get her job done.

She found him waiting beside the men's bathroom door. As if he planned to just stand guard and listen. And just knowing he could hear her pee would probably make peeing impossible.

"Do what you gotta do and get out," Chris said like some serious special agent.

"I will." Kylie pushed the door inside.

The moment the door whooshed shut, someone inside one of the stalls turned on some weird Cajun music. Each to her own, she thought, and went into the stall.

She hadn't been in there a minute, was finally warming up to the crazy rhythm of the tune, when she heard a noise above. She looked up and saw a pair of hands gripping the top of her stall. Then a foot appeared as someone came climbing over.

Crap.

There couldn't be anything worse than getting caught midstream and in an above-the-toilet-seat squat when confronted by an intruder.

She shot upright, prepared to face whatever was about to go down. Unfortunately, she hadn't managed to stop the flow completely.

Immediately she realized she'd been wrong. There could be something worse. Being caught midstream, in a squat, with pee running down your leg, when you faced the almost-fiancée of the guy you still loved.

"What are you doing here?" Kylie snapped, knowing that to show fear to a werewolf could be detrimental.

"Isn't it obvious? I was curious?"

"About my potty habits?" Kylie snapped.

She smirked. "About you."

Not thinking the girl was going for her throat—and hey, if she did, Kylie didn't want to die with pee running down her leg—she snagged her few squares and wiped the urine running down her thigh.

Panties up, jeans snapped, she faced Monique and decided to just get rid

of her. “You should know any second now a vampire is gonna run in here. If I was you, I’d scoot.”

Monique arched a brow. “So Lucas didn’t teach you the secret trick of dealing with nosy vamps, huh? Just a little zydeco music and their super hearing goes to shit.”

Kylie frowned. No, she didn’t know that trick, and she was a bit miffed that Lucas hadn’t enlightened her. But why would he? Keeping secrets from her was his specialty.

“What is it you really want, Monique?” Kylie asked.

Monique shrugged. “I told you. I’m curious. Do you know how many suitors have approached my father to marry me? And then ... the lucky guy my father finally chooses to saddle me with for life doesn’t even want me.”

Kylie heard the resentment in Monique’s voice. But oddly it sounded more about being forced into an arranged marriage than Lucas’s unwillingness to go through with the engagement. Nor had Kylie missed the part about Lucas not wanting Monique. He’d told Kylie this, Fredericka had told her this, but something about hearing it from the other girl herself felt good. “So now you want to take it out on me, huh?”

“No.” She tightened her brow and started checking out Kylie’s pattern.

Kylie turned her head and tried to change her pattern, but obviously she wasn’t quick enough.

“Wow, that is weird. What exactly are you?”

“Just a mystery,” Kylie said, and grew leery of standing in a stall with Monique—leery because this was what all chameleons feared, being noticed, bringing attention to their race. “Do you mind backing out?” Kylie asked.

Monique shuffled back a few steps and unlatched the stall door by reaching back, never taking her eyes off Kylie. “Are you sure you don’t have a brain tumor?”

“That’s probably it.” Kylie motioned for her to move back again.

The girl took one step and then stopped. “But they say you’re a protector, too. And at the ceremony, I’m told you had a were pattern. How could you...”

Kylie squeezed past her to leave the stall and went to wash her hands.

And as much as she didn't want to think about it, her mind re-created the kiss she'd seen Lucas give Monique.

"Are you still mad at him?" Monique asked. "I'll bet you're furious."

Kylie gave the soap container an extra-hard pump. When she glanced up in the mirror at the were's reflection, Kylie was hit again by how pretty Monique was. Her eyes were dark brown with long dark lashes that matched her black hair. Her lips were pouty and plump like some famous actresses. Yup, she had a pretty face, matched by her picture-perfect curvy body.

Scrubbing her hands together, Kylie said, "If you don't mind, I don't think this is something I want to discuss with you."

"If I were you, I'd be drilling me with questions." She tilted her head to the side and studied Kylie's reflection as if trying to figure her out. "Since you're not curious, that means you believe him when he told you that we didn't fool around. Or at least you want to believe him," Monique said. "Don't you want to ask me?"

A sharp, painful ache struck Kylie's heart. "You already said he didn't want you."

"Maybe I meant he didn't want to get married, but you know guys, they always want other stuff."

Kylie ran her hands under the faucet and rinsed. Then she looked up at Monique's reflection again.

"You were right the first time. I believe him." And the words slipped out of her mouth and didn't trip her heartbeat up a bit. Even she was a little surprised.

"Then why are you still mad at him? Clara says you hardly acknowledge him. That he's one sad puppy."

Kylie snatched some paper towels from the dispenser. "Let me repeat myself: I really don't care to discuss this with you."

Monique shook her head as if she was confused by Kylie's behavior. "It took guts to do what he did. To call off the engagement. To risk it all." She tilted her head to the side and studied Kylie. "You do know what all he risked, don't you?"

Kylie didn't answer. She closed her eyes for a second and wished she

didn't have to hear this.

"His own pack is considering banishing him," Monique continued. "If he can't get on that Council, he has lost everything. His father has practically denounced him. I've heard the forefathers have called a meeting to discuss his actions. My father is still debating putting a hit on him."

Kylie twisted and stared at Monique. "And you are going to let him?"

"Let him? I've told him that I'm thrilled to be out of the union, but what I say holds no importance to my father. Like Lucas, I'm expected to follow the rules. Funny, it took him calling off our engagement before I kind of liked the guy."

Monique moved in a little closer. "Call me a romantic, but I think it's kind of sad that after he did that, you don't take him back. Not that you would have him for very long. A lone wolf's life expectancy is very short. You either belong to a pack, or you are considered free game for any hungry were on a hunt."

The bathroom door banged open. The lone wolf stormed into the bathroom looking prepared to kill. When his eyes lit on Monique, his killer instincts lessened, but his scowl tightened. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Monique shrugged. "When a girl's gotta pee, she's gotta pee!" She moved past him without a bit of shame and walked out the door. "Have a good life, Lucas."

Lucas didn't even watch her leave. He stared at Kylie, his gaze almost a caress. "I'm sorry. She had no right to—"

"She didn't do anything." Kylie twisted the paper towels extra tight, ripped them in two, ripped them one more time, and then tossed them in the garbage. She swallowed the knot of pain down her throat. "You should go to her. Agree to go through with the engagement."

"What?" He stared at Kylie if she'd lost her mind.

"You heard me!" she insisted.

He shook his head. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do!" she said. And she did with all her heart. How could she stand by and watch him lose everything? Watch his own pack push him out,

knowing it was because of her?

“You’re just angry with me.”

“Yes! You’re damn right I’m still angry at you.” Tears filled her eyes as honesty echoed in her voice. “You betrayed me. It hurts like hell knowing you left me all those times and went to see her. But do you want to know who I’m angrier at? Myself. I knew for the longest time how this would end. I knew that me not being a were would end up destroying any chance we had.”

“I don’t care what you are!” he growled.

“You should. Because the price you’ll have to pay is too much.” She saw the hurt flash in his eyes. “Even if you hadn’t betrayed me, I wouldn’t let you pay it. It’s over, Lucas, accept that and don’t screw up your life because of me.”

Head held high, she walked out. Unfortunately, her heart felt like the towels she’d just trashed—mangled and twisted.

* * *

Kylie watched Perry—still a hawk—follow her dad’s car as they returned to Shadow Falls. While her stepdad drove, he talked about the possible hiking trip. When he slowed down to turn into the Shadow Falls parking lot, Kylie noticed the silver Cadillac in front of them with its blinker on, also pulling into the parking lot. The car’s tinted windows prevented her from seeing who drove, but she couldn’t help wonder if it might be the Brightens—her real dad’s adoptive parents.

Kylie’s stomach started to flutter. She still didn’t know what to say, what not to say. Her heart kept echoing the pain she’d felt when talking to Lucas, but she needed to shift mental gears now. Unfortunately, she had too many issues to give herself over to just one.

She glanced at her watch. It was twenty till two. It could actually be them if they were the type to be early.

Glancing at her dad now talking about the camping gear they would need, she realized how awkward this would be if he had to meet the Brightens. It would probably lead to having to explain a whole hell of a lot of things that Kylie didn’t know how to explain. And it would probably end up hurting her

stepdad, something she didn't want to do.

The silver car pulled in and parked in a visiting parking spot. Her dad pulled in and parked two spots down. Releasing her seat belt, before her dad even had a chance to turn the car off, she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks for lunch. I'll see myself in.”

“Not so fast, I have time to walk you in. I need to take advantage of every second with you.”

Chapter Twenty-four

“Okay,” Kylie said, in a bit of a panic. “Well, it’s gonna be a quick walk because I ... I have to go pee.”

“You went to the bathroom at the restaurant,” her dad said as if her peeing habits concerned him.

“Tiny bladder.” She popped out of the car. She cut her eyes briefly at the other car and saw the passenger side door opening and then she saw ...

“Oh, crap!” It was *not* the Brightens. And right now she really, really wished it were.

Her mom and ... She watched in sheer horror as John’s head appeared on the other side of the car.

“Kylie?” her mom called out in a stern voice.

She turned to her dad. “You should leave before ... before things go crazy.”

“It’s okay.” Her dad looked embarrassed. “Just because of what happened last time doesn’t mean we can’t be civil to each other.”

Her mom’s posture and expression as she came stomping over to the car didn’t seem to agree with her dad’s “civil” declaration. Oh, lord, Kylie was so not in the mood to deal with her parents’ drama right now.

But as she got closer, Kylie noticed her mom, her hair mussed, her clothes wrinkled, and her eyes bloodshot, didn’t have her frown zeroed in on her dad, but on Kylie.

Okay ... whose drama was this? Her parents’? Or ...

“Is it true?” her mom snapped.

Kylie instantly remembered her mom had just flown back from England,

which explained her appearance, but it didn't explain what was wrong.

Kylie looked to her dad to see if his expression would tell her if he had a clue to what her mom was talking about. But he looked equally puzzled.

"Is what true?" Kylie asked, and noticed John walking up to stop beside her mom. He didn't appear wrinkled or jet-lagged. But just seeing the man sent a bad feeling wiggling its way inside her.

"You called your dad about this, but not me?" her mom asked.

Kylie saw Holiday and Burnett high stepping it out of the office, probably thinking another free-for-all fistfight was about to occur.

Glancing back to her mom, Kylie sent up a prayer that this—whatever this was—wouldn't escalate into chaos.

"I didn't call him about anything. What are you talking about?"

"Did you use the credit card I gave you?"

Kylie nodded, her mind running circles and then landing on a possible answer to what this was all about. But Kylie really *really* hoped she was wrong.

"Are you pregnant?" her mom blurted out.

Okay, so Kylie wasn't wrong. Her mouth opened but nothing came out.

"She's pregnant?" Her dad looked at Kylie with a stern parental glare. "We won't be able to go on that hiking trip now!"

"Unfreakingbelievable," her mom seethed. "You hear your daughter's pregnant and you're worried about a hiking trip."

"No, I was ... I'm just in shock."

He wasn't the only one shocked. "Stop!" Kylie said.

"Just answer me, young lady," her mom demanded.

"No, I'm not ... pregnant." Kylie shook her head back and forth, imitating Burnett's hell-no head shake. "I haven't even ... I'm..." *I'm still a virgin!* The words sat on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't spit them out.

"Then why would you buy three pregnancy tests?"

"You bought three pregnancy tests?" her father echoed.

Kylie suddenly noticed another car parked beside John's Cadillac. It didn't have tinted windows, but it didn't matter if it did, because the windows were rolled down and the elderly couple in the front seat both had their faces

turned, listening to the fiasco that was going on.

It suddenly hit Kylie who these people were.

The Brightens.

It had to be, didn't it? With Kylie's luck, yup, it had to be them.

Lovely.

Just lovely.

Kylie's knees started to tingle, signaling her desire to vanish.

Not now. Not now!

Take a deep breath and just relax. The voice came with a certain familiar chill.

Kylie looked around and didn't see him, but could hear him. *Daddy?*

I'm here. It's gonna be okay. I promise.

Your parents are going to think I'm a slut.

Nah. They are going to love you. You'll see. You will impress them. And soon, soon we will be together.

Kylie gasped. *Am I going to die?*

Daddy? Daniel? He, and his familiar cold, were gone.

Kylie took a big gulp of air. Now on top of worrying about her possible upcoming death and convincing everyone that she wasn't pregnant, she had to worry about the Brightens liking her. Because if they didn't, it would no doubt hurt her dad.

Oh, hell! Maybe she *should* just vanish.

* * *

Daniel, her dad, was right, at least about everything being okay. Well, she still had to face the Brightens. But within two minutes, Holiday had the Brightens by the arms and was escorting them into the office. Much to Kylie's relief, her parents were clueless as to who they even were.

And within five minutes, she had her stepdad on his way to his meeting, and her mom had calmed down. Not completely chilled, but calmer.

Holiday had explained the whole confusion with the pregnancy tests in a much more rational way than it actually went down. Claiming the test had been for her and that she'd forgotten her purse and Kylie had been so kind to

offer the credit card, and she'd already mailed a check to her mom. And so on and so on. Yeah, Holiday pretty much lied, but it sounded really good.

Her mom explained that after the flight she'd found the credit card company had called and thought the charges might be fraud because the card had never been used and charges were made in Fallen, not in Houston. Her mom wanted to make sure the card hadn't been stolen so she called the drugstore to check on the purchase. That's when she was informed it was for three pregnancy tests and the buyer had been a Kylie Galen.

Now that her mom had calmed down, Holiday walked back to the office. Kylie spent about five minutes visiting with her mom, pretending to be interested in her off-the-wall ramblings about England. Finally, her mom confessed she was too tired to think, much less talk. She kissed Kylie's forehead, told her she was so proud she wasn't pregnant, and asked John to take her home.

John had barely said two words the whole time he was here, but Kylie had caught him watching her in a way that made her antsy. However, when the man put his arm around her mom and gently kissed her brow and told her she could sleep while he drove, Kylie felt a flicker of guilt for not liking him.

Maybe Kylie needed an attitude adjustment where John was concerned. Because face it, if he made her mom happy, that made Kylie happy.

Liar, her heart seemed to say as it skipped some beats. She wasn't happy with John. But maybe Kylie should work on that. Work on trying to like the man. It felt impossible. Yet so much in her life lately had felt impossible—like the possibility of her impending death, like letting go of Lucas—that maybe she just needed to try harder.

Waving good-bye to her mom, Kylie headed back to the office to face the Brightens. And she had another case of stomach flutters. And for good reason, too. One's very first conversation with your recently discovered grandparents shouldn't be about pregnancy. Even when the conversation was about *not* being pregnant.

Stopping at the office door, mentally exhausted, she thought about how her day started on a downward spiral ever since Miranda had turned Nikki into a kangaroo with pimples.

This was definitely going down as one of her most bizarre days.

Squaring her shoulders, determined to get through this meeting with Daniel's adoptive parents, hopefully without having the sword appear again, Kylie decided that after this visit, she was going to go to her cabin and either cry or eat a lot of chocolate.

Maybe both.

She recalled her dad's promise that the Brightens would love her, and while she trusted her dad with all her heart, she couldn't help but worry. Then again, maybe they were going to be so thrilled to have a granddaughter that they wouldn't even care if they thought she was sleeping around and possibly pregnant.

Right before she reached for the knob, Kylie experienced a bit of déjà vu. She'd been right here before—walking into the office thinking she was to meet the Brightens. Of course, that turned out to be her real grandfather and aunt. But the point was, she recalled with clarity the fear and anxiety she'd felt then.

A crazy sense of accomplishment tugged at her heart. While she'd just admitted to being worried and either wanting chocolate or a good cry, what she felt now was so much more manageable.

No matter what happened in there, Kylie would be able to deal with it. She could almost hear Nana, her mother's mother, whispering from the outskirts of heaven, *My little Kylie is growing up.*

Suddenly feeling a bit more confident, and deciding that maybe all she'd need this afternoon was some good chocolate, Kylie walked into the office.

Holiday came rushing up to her. "Burnett has the Brightens in the conference room sipping tea. He took the sword to my house and locked it in a closet so ... maybe that won't happen again. I explained the whole pregnancy situation to the Brightens, too." Holiday bit down her lip in concern. "Oh, Kylie, I'm so sorry. All this is my fault. I got you into this jam."

"It's fine," Kylie said.

Holiday gave her a quick soothing hug. "Are you really okay?"

Kylie inhaled. "A little nervous, but yeah, I'm okay."

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

Kylie considered it, and then said, “No, I ... I think I can handle it.”

Holiday sighed. “You are growing up.”

Kylie stared at the fae. “I could swear I just heard my grandmother say that.”

“She did,” Holiday said. “She was just here.”

Kylie grinned. “Really?”

Holiday nodded. “She pops in at the oddest times.”

Kylie felt her Nana’s love stir inside her. “Tell her I love her,” Kylie said, and went to meet the people who had raised her father and probably contributed to the great man, and ghost, that he turned out to be.

* * *

When Kylie walked in, Burnett was already standing up, ready to excuse himself. “I’ll let you three visit.”

As he walked past, he rested his hand on her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. It was a cold touch, but came with warmth and a feeling of *go get ’em, girl*. She was hit again with how lucky she was to have the people at Shadow Falls in her life.

The moment Burnett left, and she felt both Mr. and Mrs. Brighten’s gazes on her, the flutters in her stomach returned full force.

She gave herself a second just to study them. Mr. Brighten was balding, with brownish gray eyes, and he had a kind face. Mrs. Brighten had a head of thick gray hair and what looked like hazel eyes. She had a gentle, kind look about her. A little plump and with a likable face. Like someone you would pick out of a crowd to play the part of loving grandmother.

“Hi.” Kylie forced a smile, but she didn’t force it too hard. She took one step into the room and decided to clear the air first. “I just want to reconfirm that you know that I’m not pregnant.”

Chapter Twenty-five

“Your principal explained that.” Mrs. Brighten continued to stare.

“I also want to say that ... that I know you might think my mom and stepdad are nuts after witnessing the whole parking lot scene, but...” She remembered to breathe. “But ... well, sometimes they are a little nuts, but for the most part, they’re really good people.” Emotion tightened her throat and she swallowed. “They both love me.”

Mr. and Mrs. Brighten nodded again. A strange kind of awkwardness filled the room. One Kylie hoped to send packing. She really wanted this to go well. And not just for her dad, she realized, but for her.

“I’m sorry we’re staring,” Mr. Brighten finally said. “It’s just ... you look so much like your father. It’s amazing.”

Kylie smiled again, this one completely genuine. She moved in and sat down across from them at the table. “I know.”

“You’ve seen pictures?” Mrs. Brighten asked.

Yeah, his real father and aunt brought them to me when they were pretending to be you. Yeah, she had to lie. “My mom had a few photos of him.” Then Kylie remembered her mom had kept the obituary clipping that had Daniel’s image.

Almost a frown appeared on Mrs. Brighten’s expression. “I do not understand why she wouldn’t have contacted us about you. We could have ... we would have loved to have seen you grow up.” She paused. “It would have helped ... helped with our own loss of your father.”

Kylie remembered her mom saying that the Brightens would hate her for this. “She knows it was a mistake,” Kylie said, recalling her mom saying

almost as much. “But in her defense, she was young, pregnant, and scared. My stepdad, he was someone who knew her and loved her. He agreed to marry her, but he wanted ... he wanted to raise me as his own.” She paused. “He was wrong, too, but they were both just trying to do the best they could.”

Mrs. Brighten nodded. “I imagine that was a hard place to be.”

Kylie’s knot of worry lessened. “I hope you’ll forgive her. Because ... she’s been a pretty amazing mom.”

“I’d like to chat with her.”

Kylie tensed. “I’m sure that’s possible. If you don’t mind, I’ll check with her ... and get back to you on that.” Kylie sent up a prayer that her mom would be agreeable. But oh, lordy, that was going to be a hard conversation.

Tears filled Mrs. Brighten’s eyes. “I brought some more photos with me, if you’d like to see them.”

“I would love to,” Kylie said. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Brighten pulled a small photo album from a large beige purse. As Kylie flipped through the pages, she recognized some of the same images she had. Her real grandfather had snuck into the Brightens’ house and had copies made to bring to her so they would appear like the real Brightens. But there were many images that Kylie hadn’t seen. And seeing images of her father, she felt emotion swell inside her.

“If you would like you can keep it,” Mrs. Brighten said. “I made it up for you.”

Kylie smiled. “Thank you so much! I will cherish this, I promise.”

Mr. Brighten sat up. “You even act like your father. He was so ... polite.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Brighten said. “He was such a good boy. Always kindhearted. A gentle spirit. A little shy sometimes, but—”

“I can be shy, too,” Kylie said. “I hate it when I’m called on to stand up and talk or give a report in school.” *Or everyone is looking at my weird pattern. Or thinking I’m pregnant.*

Mrs. Brighten smiled. “He really didn’t like school very well. He always said he felt as if he didn’t fit in anywhere.”

“Oh boy, do I know how that feels,” Kylie said.

“Not that he got into trouble. Well, there was that one time in his last year

of high school. There was a kid at school, Timmy. He was slow, and while walking home from school, Daniel came upon a group of older boys picking on him—really mistreating him. There were maybe six of them, and Daniel lost it. We still don't know how he did it, but he gave all of them bloody noses and black eyes. And there wasn't a scratch on our boy."

Kylie listened to the story with a hungry heart—a daughter eager to know about a father she knew so little about.

"The school suspended him," Mrs. Brighten continued, "but when Timmy's parents found out, they went to the local news channel and they interviewed Timmy about what happened, and the news channel honored Daniel as a hero. And the boys got in trouble. The school was forced to drop Daniel's suspension. Of course, Daniel was embarrassed about the attention. The news channel gave him a trophy, and the next day, he went over to Timmy's house and gave him the trophy. He said that Timmy was the real hero having to deal with those bullies all his life."

Pride for her dad swelled in Kylie's chest. He'd been a protector just like her, and like her, he didn't want the credit. She wished again that she hadn't lost the man whom she'd taken after. Sure, she still had a part of him in spirit form, but she could have used so much more.

"But you know after he graduated from high school, he just sort of found himself. As a matter of fact, one day he came home from a trip and he told me he was finally figuring out who he was."

Kylie remembered her dad telling her about meeting an old man who'd told him he wasn't human. She wondered if that was the same trip.

"I told him," Mrs. Brighten continued, "that I already knew who he was. He was a kind and gentle soul." She stared at Kylie. "I see the same in you. As if ... as if you had some magic spirit that very few people have." She reached across the table and rested her hand on Kylie's.

The aged hand reminded Kylie of how her great-aunt had touched her when playing the part of Mrs. Brighten. There was no extra warmth from the real Mrs. Brighten's touch as had come from her great-aunt's. Yet it didn't make the real Mrs. Brighten's touch any less special. And just like that, Kylie knew how easy it was going to be to love these people, and how lucky her

father had been to be raised by them.

* * *

It was almost five that afternoon before Burnett and Holiday, holding hands like two lovebirds, walked Kylie to her cabin. Della waited inside to take over shadowing duties.

“You sure you’ll be all right?” Holiday asked.

“Yeah.” And amazingly, Kylie sort of believed it. Yes, she was still craving some chocolate to counteract the freaking crazy day, and yes, her heart would forever be broken over Lucas, but she was going to be okay.

Thinking of her other roommate, Kylie asked, “Did you talk with Miranda about the Nikki episode?”

“Yes,” Holiday said, her eyes frowning. “Although I haven’t come up with her other punishment yet.”

Kylie couldn’t help but put in her two cents. “I’m not saying Miranda didn’t do wrong, but Nikki was being overly obvious about her crush with Perry. I even warned her about it. But she didn’t listen.”

“I know,” Holiday said. “Nikki was wrong, but Miranda can’t go around turning people into kangaroos.”

“Really? You seemed to enjoy hearing about it when she did that to me,” Burnett said sarcastically.

Holiday hiccuped. “That was funny.” She sent him a devilish grin.

Kylie watched them leave before stepping inside. She found Della sitting at the kitchen table, sipping on a glass of blood, with schoolbooks in front of her. The little vamp took her homework seriously.

Della looked up. “I agree with Holiday. It was funny when Miranda turned Burnett into a kangaroo.”

Kylie slumped down into a chair. “Where’s Miranda?”

Della rolled her eyes. “She and Perry went off to have make-up ‘almost sex’—her words, not mine. Personally I didn’t need to know that. Although I have to admit I wonder exactly what ‘almost sex’ is.” She frowned. “Then again, it probably involves Perry sucking her earlobes and I’m really not willing to hear about that. Again.”

Kylie chuckled. “When you think about it, all things sexual are sort of ... I mean, even French kissing ... having someone’s tongue in your mouth. It’s gross.”

“Unless you’re doing it.” Della’s words came out dreamlike. Kylie felt certain her friend was thinking about Steve. “And then it’s not gross. It’s almost magic.”

Kylie remembered French-kissing Lucas and even doing more the night they’d been coming back from the graveyard. It *had* been magical. But all that magic was over now. No more Lucas. “Yeah, it’s not so gross then, is it.” Popping up, she went and looked inside the tiny pantry. “Do we have anything chocolate in this kitchen? Anything?”

“I think there’s some chocolate syrup in the fridge. But we don’t have any milk. Not that it was me who drank it. That would be the witch.” Della glanced back at Kylie.

Kylie reached into the refrigerator and found the chocolate syrup. Oh, hell, beggars couldn’t be choosy. She squeezed a line of chocolate all the way up her index finger and popped the digit into her mouth.

“So the meeting with the Brightens didn’t go well?” Della asked.

“No, it went fine,” Kylie mumbled around her chocolate-covered finger. When the sweetness disappeared, she pulled her finger out and aimed the top of the bottle down and gave the digit another squirt of sweetness.

“Then why are you sucking chocolate syrup off your finger like it’s whiskey? Wait! I know why, I heard about the fiasco with your dad and mom—the whole pregnancy thing. Hilarious.” Della dropped her elbows on the table and laughed.

“Not hilarious.” Kylie frowned. “How did you hear about it?”

Della shrugged, looking a little guilty for bringing it up. “Someone heard it go down. Everybody was talking about it. Sorry.” She made an apology face.

Kylie moaned. “Will I ever stop being the source of gossip around here?” She held her head back and squeezed a good squirt of chocolate straight into her mouth.

“Now that’s gross!” Della chuckled.

Kylie brought the bottle down and licked her lips. "I didn't touch my lips to the bottle. I just poured it into my mouth."

"And on your chin."

Frowning, Kylie wiped her chin with the back of her hand. "Sorry, I'm feeling desperate." She snagged a bowl and spoon and went back to the table and emptied a half a cup of the sweet feel-good stuff into her bowl.

"Damn," Della said. "You are feeling desperate."

Kylie scooped a spoonful of chocolate into her mouth, licked the spoon clean and said, "Monique crawled into the stall with me."

"Who? What stall?"

"Monique. Lucas's Monique. She climbed into the bathroom stall with me in the restaurant bathroom."

"Oh, shit! Did you two like duke it out or something?"

"No." Kylie licked the spoon. "I just peed all over myself." She took another spoonful of chocolate into her mouth.

Della sighed. "Are you okay?"

"I will be after I finish off this bottle," Kylie said.

Della half grinned. "If I was a real friend, I'd stop you from drinking it."

Kylie shook her head. "If you were a real friend, you'd help me finish it."

"Shit. Why not?" She pushed over her glass of blood. "Give me a couple of shots."

Kylie arched an eyebrow. "For real?"

"Yeah." Della pushed her schoolbooks to the side. "Screw homework, let's get drunk off chocolate. I could use a pick-me-up, too."

Kylie saw pain reflect in her friend's gaze. She gave an extra-hard squeeze of chocolate into the vamp's glass. "What really happened while you were away, Della?"

Chapter Twenty-six

The vamp stared down at her glass of blood laced with chocolate. She swirled the glass and seemed to watch the two ingredients blend together. “I skipped out on Steve the first night and went to see Lee.”

That didn’t surprised Kylie, she knew Della was still hung up on Lee, but it didn’t explain how she ended up getting hickeys from Steve. Unless it wasn’t Steve who gave her the hickey, but Kylie didn’t think she’d lie about that. And something told Kylie this wasn’t all about Lee. It was about a shape-shifter with a cute butt.

“And?” Kylie asked, dipping her spoon back into her own chocolate.

“And he went out on a date with his new fiancée.” She brought the glass to her lips and sipped. “Hey, this shit is really good.”

“Yeah.” Kylie waited for Della to continue. She didn’t have to wait too long.

“He took her to a Chinese restaurant. I followed them.” Tears filled Della’s eyes.

Feeling her friend’s pain, Kylie set her hand on Della’s. Della pulled it away.

“Then they spotted me and I realized I looked like an idiot. I was all kinds of embarrassed.” She took another sip of her chocolate blood and looked up. “Then like some damn knight in shining armor Steve showed up. He’d followed me. He saved my ass from looking like a total fool. Pretended we were on a date. He kissed me in front of them. Like we were this hot couple.”

Kylie took another spoonful of chocolate into her mouth. “And the kiss was pretty good so you guys made out later?”

“No. I mean yes.”

Kylie pointed her spoon at Della. “Which is it?”

“Yes it was good, but it didn’t happen until the next day.” Della leaned in and frowned.

“The mission went bad. I was stabbed,” Della confessed.

Kylie’s mouth dropped open. “But Burnett said—”

“I made Steve promise not to tell him. It wasn’t life threatening.” She moaned. “The bad thing is that Steve saved my ass. Not just at the restaurant in front of Lee, but again with the rogues and then when we ran into some nasty weres. I was in pretty bad shape, couldn’t fight. I hated it.” She paused. “He checked us into a hotel and was taking care of me. I don’t know how it happened, one minute he was doctoring me and the next we were playing doctor.”

“Oh my!” Kylie said. “So you actually—”

“No, we didn’t. Came close. Thankfully blue balls don’t really kill a guy.”

“Blue balls?” Kylie asked.

Della rolled her eyes. “You don’t know what blue balls are?”

“No. Should I?”

Della grinned. “At least you should know if a guy ever tells you he can die from it, he’s lying. And believe me, some guys will actually say that to guilt a girl into doing the bumping dance. I had one try it on me once, before Lee. I told him I’d go to his funeral, and never dated him again.”

“But what is it, really?” Kylie made a face. “Or is it too gross? It must be gross because they never mentioned it in any of the pamphlets my mom gave me.”

Della chuckled again. “It’s when a guy gets really turned on and is ready to do the deed and then the deed gets canceled.”

Kylie leaned in. “Do their balls really turn blue?”

Della burst out laughing. “I don’t know, I’ve never gotten down there and checked.”

Kylie blushed, but then she didn’t really care in front of Della, so she just laughed. “So you think Steve had blue balls?”

Della rolled her eyes. “He looked pretty uncomfortable. I shouldn’t have

let it get that far. I was just ... mixed up in the head.”

“Or maybe you really like Steve.” Kylie pointed her spoon at Della. “I’m not saying you should have had sex, but the guy’s crazy about you and you obviously like him, too. So why are you treating him like a disease now?”

Della took a big swig of her chocolate blood. “Because ... when I realized what was happening, all I could think about was that in a year or so I’ll be standing in another restaurant watching Steve with his fiancée. I can’t do that again.” Tears filled her eyes.

“But you don’t know that will happen.”

“I don’t know it won’t happen, either.” Della reached for the bottle of syrup and added another squirt to her glass. “So now I’ve spilled my guts. How do things stand with Lucas?”

Kylie stirred her chocolate in her bowl. “It’s over.”

Della’s eyes widened. “Why? Did Monique say they’d fooled around? We should get Miranda to give him a case of mange on his balls!”

“No, Monique sort of said they didn’t.”

Della picked up her glass. “Then why’s it over?”

Kylie clanked her spoon against her bowl. *Because if it isn’t he’ll lose everything.*

Della studied her. “But it he didn’t cheat—”

Anger stirred in Kylie’s chest. “Even if he didn’t do anything, it still feels like he did. I mean, he was getting engaged, behind my back.” She shook her head. “First Trey. Then my stepdad cheats on my mom. Then Derek and now Lucas. Why do guys do this?”

Della kind of shrugged. “At least Lucas didn’t have sex.”

It still feels like a betrayal. A big one. “What’s downright infuriating is that I still love him.” Love him so much that she couldn’t stand by and watch him lose everything because of her. “But I’m still so mad at him I could...”

“Give him a set of blue balls?” Della chuckled.

“No, punch him!”

“Then maybe you should.” Della looked down at her glass.

“Should what?” Kylie asked.

“Punch him. Then maybe you wouldn’t be so mad and you could move

on.”

Kylie shook her head. “I wish it was that simple.”

“Maybe it is. You won’t know until you try. Just go up to him all casual like and then go all crazy on his ass. Seriously, then maybe you could put it behind you and forget it.”

“Like you’re trying to do with Steve?” Kylie pointed the spoon at her again.

“Hey, I’m like a good parent. I don’t want you to do as I do, but do as I say!” She chuckled.

Kylie shook her head.

“And besides, now it’s...” She shut her mouth, unsure if she wanted to talk about this.

“It’s what?” Della asked.

She might as well spill it. “It’s not just about what he did.” If it was, Kylie suspected she’d be halfway to forgiveness. “He gave up everything when he refused to sign that engagement paper. He’s not going to get on the Council, his own pack is pissed at him. Monique’s dad is threatening to have him killed. Sooner or later he’s going to hate me for this.”

“I think you’re overthinking it.”

Kylie ran her spoon around the bowl for the last bit of chocolate. “And I think we gotta change the subject,” she said.

Della relented and picked up her glass. They didn’t speak for a few minutes, then finally she spoke up. “Before I went to Lee’s place that night, I went and played peeping tom at my house.”

“How were things?” Kylie asked, sensing it didn’t go well.

“Good. So good it made me mad. They were playing board games like this happy little family. Dad told jokes and they were all laughing. I don’t think they even miss me.” She stared at the table for a few minutes.

“They miss you, Della. They’re just trying to get by.”

Della nodded. “Have you ever considered just telling your mom and stepdad? I came so close to just walking in there and laying it out on the table. Look, Dad, I’m not being difficult or lazy. I’m not on drugs. I’m just a vampire.” She shook her head.

Kylie bit down on her lip, unsure what to say, so she didn't say anything.

"I guess I'm scared they'll think the truth is worse than what they already believe."

Kylie wished she could tell Della it wasn't so, but she wasn't sure. "I thought about telling my mom, too. I just don't know if she would handle it."

Della nodded. "So we just hide from the people we love. Sad, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Kylie ran her spoon around her bowl. "At least you don't hide from the supernatural world."

"You don't hide either," Della said.

"Yeah, I do. I'm basically hiding from the FRU. I mean everyone here has seen my pattern, so it's a little late to worry about that, but I know the majority of people here think any day now my brain tumor is going to become apparent."

Della offered her a sad look. "They are actually betting on it."

"Just great." Kylie paused. "When Monique came in the bathroom, I tried to change my pattern. I just wasn't fast enough. She even said something about me having a brain tumor. And I'm like, 'I'm sure that's what it is.'" Kylie dropped her spoon in her bowl and listened to it clatter. "Most of the supernatural world doesn't even know my kind exists." Even Hayden hides what he is, Kylie thought.

"Then maybe it's time you change that." Della sat back in her chair.

"Change what?" Kylie asked.

"Come out of the closet. You know, like ... 'I'm gay and here to stay.' You'd need a different slogan, but maybe, 'I'm a lizard and if you don't like it, I'll eat out your gizzard.'" Della chuckled. "Okay, it needs some work, but you get what I mean."

"I'm serious," Kylie said.

"I know, and so am I. Besides the silly slogan, I mean. You can't do it with the humans, but you should be able to do it with supernaturals."

Kylie ran her finger around the rim of the bowl to collect the last remnants of chocolate and considered what Della said.

She's right, the voice in her head said. The same voice from earlier. The one that popped up inside her head at the oddest times.

“Who the hell are you?” Kylie muttered.

Della scooted back in her chair. “Okay, I’m rethinking the brain tumor now.”

“Not you.”

“Oh, shit.” Della’s eyes grew big. “Do we have a ghost here?”

“No, not a ghost,” Kylie muttered. “Just a voice.”

Della tilted her head to the side. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“In here.” Kylie pointed to her head.

“Have you ever heard of schizophrenia?” Della asked in a sarcastic voice—which meant she was teasing, but Kylie didn’t think it was too funny.

“I’m not crazy,” Kylie said.

Della grinned. “If you were, I’d still like you. If for no other reason than for teaching me how good blood and chocolate are together.” She drained her cup.

Kylie stared at her empty bowl while her brain raced on how she could come out of the closet. She had made it her quest to save other chameleon teens from living a life of seclusion, but maybe before she could do that, she needed to make sure it was safe for them to come out. Maybe Della and that annoying voice were right. If she could force the supernatural world to accept her—for what she really was—then other chameleons might follow her out in the open.

Sort of like Rosa Parks on the bus in the fifties. Someone, some chameleon, needed to stand up so they could be counted as part of the supernatural world. They should be proud of who they were, and not have to hide their true selves.

Instantly, her chest swelled with emotion that was both warm and affirming. This was her quest. Her new quest or maybe just part of her old one. And it felt like the right thing.

Yup, all she had to do was figure out how to come out of the closet.

* * *

That night, head buried in her pillow, the tingly feeling of another presence stirred her awake. It wasn’t a cold presence, which meant whoever was here

wasn't dead. Opening her eyes, the sweet floral scent tickled her senses. She spotted the red rose on her bedside table.

Only one person left her roses.

Lucas? Her heart whispered his name and went straight to hurting. Last night, she'd lain in bed and accepted what had to be. Letting him go. As much as it hurt, she couldn't let him destroy his life because of her.

She inhaled and listened. Was he still here? Or had he come and gone? She noticed her white curtain fluttering as a soft night breeze floated inside. If he'd left, he'd have shut the window.

She closed her eyes again, wondering if she pretended not to wake up he would just leave.

"I know you're awake," his deep voice spoke into the still darkness.

"And I know you shouldn't be here." She swallowed and fought the swell of emotion climbing up her throat. She rolled over and pulled her pajama-covered knees to her chest. It took another couple of seconds to gather her courage for her to look for him—knowing that seeing him would hurt.

She was right. His hair looked windblown as if he'd gone for a run. His eyes looked hurt. Raw pain rained down on her. Her chest ached with loneliness.

"I couldn't sleep," he said. Silence filled the room. He moved closer. His knees touched the bed. He sat down. The mattress dipped with his weight. Her heart raced, remembering the times she had curled up with him here on this bed. She'd even slept beside him here and he'd held her, made her feel safe, protected. Loved.

"It can't be over, Kylie. You are the only thing that matters to me."

She shook her head. "Not true." Just like her, he had others in his life. He had things that were important to him. He had quests. "Your pack is important. It has been all along. Your grandmother. And you can say you don't like your dad, but you put up with him, so he has to matter to you. And then there's your sister." *And you'll lose them all if you choose me.*

"Fine, I care about them—everyone but my father. Right now I don't care if he rots in hell. I'm tired of him manipulating my life—but the others, yes, I'll admit it, I care. But they aren't you," he said, and growled.

“Monique’s father is considering putting a hit out on you!” she blurted out.

“That rich pompous ass is always running off his mouth. He’s nothing but hot air. He knows what my dad would do to him if he hurt me.” Lucas stopped talking and just looked at her. “But this proves it. You care about me. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t care if he planned to kill me. You may still be angry, and I deserve that, but you love me and that’s why it can’t be over.”

She shook her head. “Love isn’t enough!” Tears clouded her vision. That was what she’d finally realized last night. “Can’t you see, Lucas? We’re Romeo and Juliet; we’re the Hatfields and McCoys. We are every bad love story that ever existed. We are people who only hurt ourselves and others by selfishly letting our emotions guide us instead of logic.”

“That’s stupid,” he growled, and tried to reach for her.

“No!” She scooted away from his touch. “Do you want to know what’s stupid? I keep seeing you kissing Monique in my head. I keep hearing you vowing your soul to her, and I get so hurt and so angry that I want to scream. But at the same time, I completely understand why you did it. And if I were in your shoes, I might have done the same things. I have my own quests, the ghosts, figuring out how to help other chameleons, and I’m going to complete those quests no matter what.”

She swallowed and offered the last piece of truth, the last piece of reasoning that they couldn’t be together. “I’m going to do it even if it hurts you. That’s how I know, Lucas. That’s how I know that this isn’t right. When doing the right thing for yourself can hurt someone you love this much, it can’t be right! We *aren’t* right. So please, let’s not hurt each other any more than we already have. Just leave.”

She had never seen anyone look so hurt. It took everything she had not to call him back as he climbed out her window.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The next day during science class, Kylie sat at her desk barely listening to Hayden Yates talk about Newton's laws of motion and $E=MC^2$. Not that she didn't respect science, but how could any of that explain a sword that could move on its own? And didn't Hayden say that both Einstein and Newton were supernaturals? Did that mean they didn't have magical swords following them around?

Not that she was completely consumed with worry over the sword right now. Her morning had been bat-shit crazy. Starting with a ten-minute conversation with her mom that entailed both of them apologizing. Mom for overreacting to the news of the pregnancy tests and making a scene, and Kylie for not informing her she'd used the card for the items. It hadn't been a bad call, but it hadn't been a good one, especially when her mom launched into a conversation about how John was possibly her soul mate.

Somehow she'd managed to tuck her mom worries away. Her Lucas issues weren't so easy to tuck away. Between hurting for him, she'd also fretted over finding a method of coming out of the closet.

She'd even skipped Campmate hour and breakfast to try to formulate a plan. And she came up ... empty.

Of course, she wasn't at her all-time best. After Lucas had left, the spirit, as if jealous that Kylie wasn't fixating on her, had decided to pop in every hour last night. She hadn't brought her severed head and sword, for which Kylie was forever grateful. But on her last visit the spirit brought something even more upsetting. Grief. She sobbed in her hands and muttered something about her son being killed.

Having lost too many in her own life, Kylie hurt for the spirit and told her so, but the spirit was too upset to even respond.

Kylie wondered if the ghost meant her son was killed in the present time, or if she was revisiting something in her past. Time just didn't compute with spirits, which could be confusing as hell to the living who were trying to help them.

Then again, nothing seemed to compute much with this spirit. She wouldn't answer any of Kylie's direct questions. As in: *Who is it exactly that you want me to kill?* Or, *Why me? Why did you choose me to do your killing?*

When Holiday had stopped by the cabin last night, she'd reminded Kylie that a spirit usually had a connection with the person they were visiting.

"Find that connection and you might start to understand what she really wants," Holiday had advised.

Easier said than done.

So far, the spirit hadn't said one thing that led Kylie to believe she had known her, or that they knew anyone in common.

She'd first run into the spirit on her way to see Lucas's engagement ceremony. Kylie considered that maybe she had been killed in those woods and Kylie had just stumbled by. She even found herself hoping that was the case. Call her a prude, but she didn't want to be connected with someone who chopped heads off people and carried them around like trophies. And if Kylie had known someone like that, wouldn't this person stand out in Kylie's memory bank?

Sure, Kylie was almost certain the ghost had brought the head around just to get attention, but something a little less dramatic would have worked just fine. Holiday also said to consider everything the spirit did or brought with her to be a clue. Like the sword that kind of looked like the one that appeared at the falls.

Was the head a hint or a sign? Then again, weren't clues supposed to be subtle? There was absolutely nothing subtle about a severed head. That last thought led Kylie back to believing it was just a ploy to get attention—mostly because the ploy was working. Here Kylie was worried about the ghost and not her quest.

Not that she didn't need to figure out both; she did. But her quest seemed to take priority right now. Or it would if the ghost would stop pulling her thoughts away.

Hayden stood by the board and pointed to the homework assignment. She started to jot it down when something landed in her lap with a thump. A pretty heavy thump.

Startled, her butt came off the desk chair a good half inch. Only her dislike of being singled out in the class had her swallowing the yelp that rose in throat and planting her butt back down.

Considering there was a desktop covering her lap, the whole "thing falling in her lap" didn't make sense.

Then again it didn't have to make sense, because nothing else in her freaking life did!

Kylie hesitantly reached under her desk to feel the cold metal object. Just as she suspected, it had a long vertical shape with a handle. The sword was back.

Kylie heard a clearing of a throat a couple of seats away. She glanced over at Derek, who was on shadowing duty, and he mouthed the words: *You okay?*

Obviously Derek had sensed her emotional dilemma, but hadn't seen the sword, or he would have at least glanced down at the dang thing. She nodded.

After only a minute, Hayden dismissed class. Kylie pretended to be reading her notes and didn't move. Burnett didn't want anyone to know about the sword, and suddenly brandishing a weapon in the middle of science class that looked like something straight out of a video game would likely draw some attention.

"Kylie, you coming?" Derek asked from the door.

"Uh, no, I need to discuss something with Mr. Yates. I'll be out shortly." She glanced at Hayden, who studied her with concern.

"Just wait outside," a worried-looking Hayden told Derek.

When Kylie glanced up at Derek, she saw Lucas standing right outside the door. His blue gaze met hers, but dang it, she had too much on her plate, not to mention a sword in her lap, to start fixating on losing him, on how

much it hurt. Yet, when she saw the concern in his eyes, the complete affection with which he looked at her, her heart did another nosedive anyway. Begrudgingly, she couldn't deny that there was a part of her that wanted to hang on to him, to grasp on to what they felt. But that would be foolish, wouldn't it?

"Shut the door," Hayden told them, and walked over to her desk.

Shut the door. Hayden's words echoed in her head. She had to shut the door to her feelings about Lucas. But how?

"Is something wrong?" Hayden asked.

My whole freaking life. Kylie met the teacher's eyes, pushing away her ache over Lucas. "Yeah, there's a sword in my lap."

"*The sword?*" he asked.

She made a face. "Well, I haven't looked at it, but I'm assuming I've only got one sword that just magically appears and breaks all the rules and theories you just covered in class."

Hayden grinned and tilted his head down to see the sword. When he rose up, he said, "Yeah, those theories aren't worth a crap sometimes when magic is involved."

"Same sword, I assume?" Kylie asked.

He nodded.

"Great." Then she realized something he'd just said. "You think it's magic doing this, like Wiccan magic?"

"Or something equally baffling," he said.

"So you really don't think it's some chameleon powers?"

He twisted his mouth. "Chameleon powers are in part Wiccan powers."

"Yeah," Kylie said, and her mind went back to her latest quest. "Which completely confuses me as to why it's bad to be us."

He looked puzzled. "It's not bad to be us," he said, and then, "Let me get my hoodie and I'll wrap it up and we'll take it to the office."

He went and snatched his sweatshirt from the cabinet behind his desk, then came back with it stretched open. "Do you want to bring it up?"

No. She didn't like touching the thing, didn't like it sitting on her lap, but she did it anyway.

She reached down and carefully grasped the handle and brought it up and out. Before she had it all the way up, it started glowing again. She dropped the weapon in the hoodie then looked up. "If it's not bad to be us, then why do you hide your pattern? You even wear a hoodie so no one will see it. And why do the elders think they have to hide all the kids?"

"I hide the pattern because people wouldn't understand, because in the past that led to us being persecuted, but not because it's bad to be a chameleon."

"But wouldn't it be better if you didn't have to hide it? If we could just wear it proudly like the others do?"

He stared at the sword as if half listening to what she said. "Someday that will happen."

"No it won't," Kylie insisted. "Not if everyone keeps hiding."

He gazed up at her. "You don't understand how bad things were for our parents."

"You're right, I don't understand. And maybe that's why I see things clearer. Change needs to happen. But somebody has to make it happen. It's not going to happen on its own, or by accident."

"Okay, it sounds as if you've actually given this a lot of thought. How would we change it?" he asked.

"I haven't figured it out yet, but I will." She stood up.

He sighed as if he didn't like what she said. "When you do figure out something, you run it by me first. I know you wouldn't want to put anyone in jeopardy."

"I just want to help. And I'll run it by you if I can." She cut her gaze to the sword.

"What's that mean ... 'if I can'? Why couldn't you run it by me?" he asked.

She looked at him. "I'm just being careful not to make promises that I don't know if I can keep."

He frowned. "Don't do anything stupid, Kylie."

"Now that I can promise," she said. "I'll avoid stupid at all costs."

He didn't appear content with her answer, but he looked back at the

sword. “Your grandfather called me at lunch and wanted to know for sure if the sword had any markings.” Hayden rolled the weapon over. “I don’t see a thing on it.”

“Me either,” Kylie said.

“Does it hurt you to hold it?” he asked, and looked up at her.

“Hurt? No. Freak me out? Yes. Why?”

“Would you hold it for me again? For a few seconds, and let’s see if anything appears. We know it starts to glow; maybe something else will appear on it.”

Kylie frowned. “Fine, but if it or I go bananas and kill you or something, it’s not my fault. I mean the last time Holiday had me try something, Burnett nearly ended up sterile.”

Hayden frowned. “Maybe we should wait and try it when we get to the office and Burnett and Holiday are around.”

“Good idea,” Kylie said.

* * *

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Kylie asked. “What if it’s like the paperweight incident?” She glanced from Hayden to Burnett, who’d gotten ball-busted by the paperweight.

Not surprising, the vamp was the one who looked the most concerned, but he was also the one to speak up. “You’ve held it before and the only thing it did was glow.”

“But I never held it for more than a few seconds.”

“If you really don’t want to do it, then don’t,” Holiday said, and Derek, standing beside her, nodded. Burnett, remembering Derek’s computer skills, had asked him to be here so he might research any information on the sword.

Kylie looked at Holiday. “I just don’t want it to go crazy and start killing people.”

“Why do you think it would do that?” Holiday asked.

“I ... I don’t know, maybe because of the ghost’s sword,” Kylie said. “And the fact that she carries around a head with the sword.”

“Do you really think the ghost and this sword are connected?” Holiday

asked. “Because I still can’t see how a ghost could have sent the sword here.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Kylie said. “But I think the two swords look alike.”

“But it’s a very common-looking sword—for what it is,” Burnett said.

“And I don’t think you’d hurt anyone,” Derek said. “You’re a protector; if the sword is reacting to you, then I think it’s connecting to that part of you. I don’t think it’s evil.”

“I agree,” said Hayden.

“Okay, it’s your lives on the line.” Kylie reached for the weapon.

“But just in case,” Holiday said, stopping Kylie. “Let’s all be prepared to duck and run if need be.”

Kylie frowned.

Holiday shrugged. “Just in case.”

Kylie reached for the sword. Burnett pushed Holiday behind him and then everyone took another step back.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The moment her palm wrapped around the grip of the blade it started to glow again. Warmth from the weapon soaked into her hand and started climbing up her arm.

“You okay?” Holiday asked as if sensing Kylie’s unease.

Kylie fought the urge to drop the weapon and took a breath. Instead, she gripped the handle tighter, trying not to let the weight of it make the sword wobble. It wasn’t so heavy, probably only weighed three pounds, yet it felt awkward. She felt awkward holding it.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she said. “It’s just warm.”

“Don’t let it burn you,” Holiday said.

“It’s not hot. Just warm,” Kylie said. The sword continued to grow brighter, not so bright it hurt to look at. It was like filtered light. She took her second breath since holding the weapon and suddenly she wasn’t afraid anymore. It was ... not even the least bit frightening. It felt ... like picking up something familiar. A worry stone, or a picture frame she’d held and stared at for a long time. And yet she’d never touched this sword until a few days ago. How could it feel so comfortable in her hand?

As if her sense of calm spread, Burnett and Hayden took a step closer. Derek followed them and then Holiday.

“I don’t see any new markings on it,” Hayden said.

“Me neither,” Burnett said.

Kylie looked at the sword and realized it didn’t even feel cumbersome anymore. The awkwardness had vanished. Her grip on the sword felt solid, the object in her hand became almost a part of her. She turned her wrist and

saw an inscription on the knob at the top of the handle.

“Here. There’s an inscription.” Kylie nodded, then pointed with her left hand.

All four of them moved closer.

“It’s in Latin,” Holiday said. “It says *holy warrior*.”

“You know, I can check the Internet and see what I can find, but...” Derek looked at her as if with an apology, as if he knew what he was about to say was going to upset her. “But there is someone here who knows a lot about swords.”

Burnett nodded. “I just now remembered that.” The vamp looked at Kylie with the same apologetic look as Derek.

Oh, shit! She knew without them saying who it was.

Burnett pulled out his phone. “I’m calling Lucas.”

Kylie shook her head. “How? What does a werewolf know about swords?”

Burnett arched a brow. “His ancestry goes back to the Scandinavians.”

History wasn’t her forte. “And what does that mean?”

“Fighting with swords had been in his family a thousand years. He was trained when he was a kid.”

A moan slipped out of her mouth. She’d hoped to keep as much distance as she could from Lucas.

“Fine, call him. Show him the sword. But can I go now?” Kylie started to set the sword down.

Burnett frowned. “Actually, I’d like him to see it glowing.”

“Lucas,” Burnett said into his phone. “Can you come to the office? I have something I want you to see.” Burnett looked at Kylie. “Yes.” Pause. “Yes. No, she’s fine.” Pause. “You’ll see when you get here.” Pause. “Great.” Burnett hung up.

“He’s actually just at the dining hall,” Burnett said.

Kylie knew then that he’d probably followed them to the office and was waiting to see if something was wrong. The fact that he cared did another number on her heartstrings. She closed her eyes for just a second and prepared herself for seeing him.

The sound of rushed footsteps on the office's porch filled the silence. The office's front door banged open.

A knock sounded on Holiday's door. "Come in," Burnett and Holiday said at once.

Lucas rushed in, his gaze shooting to her. His eyes, filled with worry, met hers with a touch of panic. She felt that look of concern brush against her nerve endings. Nerve endings that felt raw, exposed. Real physical pain stirred in her chest.

"What's ... wrong?" His gaze shifted to the glowing sword, which she now held by her side, and his breath caught. "Damn!"

"Do you know anything about this type of sword?" Burnett asked.

Lucas moved in. He reached for her wrist, gently, but his touch shot tiny pinpoints of pain inside her. Her focus shifted off the sword and on his touch.

He raised her hand and the sword. She heard him breathing, soft easy breaths that somehow seemed emotional. She sensed his mind wasn't only on the sword either. She bit her lip to keep the sigh from leaving her lips.

"And?" Burnett asked.

Lucas inhaled. "It's from the twelfth century." He turned her hand a bit to get a good look at both sides. "More than likely a crusader sword."

"I pretty much knew that," Burnett said. "Any knowledge of why it would be glowing?"

Lucas looked up at her. "It has to be Kylie."

His thumb brushed over the bottom of her wrist. His touch was sweet and bitter at the same time. She wanted to cry. She swallowed again, praying to keep the tears at bay. But damn it! Even angry at him, even feeling certain their relationship was doomed, she loved him so damn much. The desire to lean against him, to beg him to hold her, was strong, but she forced herself not to give in.

"Yeah, we know that, too," Burnett said. "But why?"

Lucas's gaze continued to caress her. "That I don't know. I mean, I could guess."

"Then guess," Burnett said, lacking patience.

Lucas glanced at Burnett. "She's a holy warrior."

“No, I’m just a protector.” Kylie pushed her Lucas issues aside to focus on the issue of the sword again. “I’m not a warrior. I don’t even like war.”

“But that is exactly what the sword says,” Burnett said. “Holy warrior.”

Lucas looked back at her. “Where?” He glanced down at the sword again. Kylie turned her wrist and showed him the inscription.

“Holy shit. You really are a holy warrior.” He looked awed. Impressed.

There was a time she’d been thrilled to see that look in his eyes for her. But not right now. And oh yeah, she wasn’t so impressed either. She didn’t want to think of herself as Joan of Arc, or any kind of warrior. “You can’t believe everything you read,” she said.

Lucas looked puzzled by her reaction. “It’s almost the same thing as a protector, but to me, it’s even more amazing. There are legends written on it. I don’t remember them all, but my grandmother has a book on them.”

“But you’ve never actually met a holy warrior, right?” Kylie asked.

“You,” he said again with a sense of pride.

“Before me!” she snapped.

“No,” Lucas admitted.

Kylie turned to the others in the room. “Have any of you met a holy warrior?”

They all shook their heads no.

“Then there’s my proof,” she said adamantly. “They are just legends. They really don’t exist.” Face it, she didn’t want to think of herself as a warrior. She was still trying to come to grips with being a protector.

Holiday moved in and rested a hand on Kylie’s arm. “We didn’t know chameleons existed until a few weeks ago.”

“She’s right,” Derek said to Kylie.

Well, hell, there went that argument, Kylie thought, and tried not to panic.

Lucas, who still held her wrist, gave her hand a slight squeeze. “It’s not ... a bad thing. Being a protector is practically the same thing. You have to fight to protect someone.”

She looked down at the glowing sword and realized that Lucas’s touch was warmer than the sword.

“Okay, so we’re guessing she’s a holy warrior, but what does this really

mean?” Burnett asked. “Why has the sword just now appeared? Is it a rite-of-passage thing? Just timing? Or ... is it something else?” The way he said *something else* made it sound bad.

And Kylie could guess what it was, too. And she didn’t like it. Nope, not even a little bit.

Lucas glanced at her with sympathy. “I think she’s being presented a weapon for a purpose. Yes, it could just be that she hasn’t been ready to receive it yet. But I think it’s more that...” A look of protectiveness crossed his face. She knew they were all thinking the same thing.

“More what?” Burnett and Holiday asked at the same time.

“It could be she’s going to need it. The sword appears when it’s time to prepare for battle.”

“This is exactly what the elders said,” Hayden spoke out. “If she’s given a sword, it’s because she’d going to need it.”

“Is there a way we can find out for sure?” Burnett asked.

Lucas shook his head. “I wouldn’t know. But...” He inhaled and met Kylie’s gaze. “Do you know how to use one of these?”

“Why would I know how to use this? I don’t even know how to use a potato peeler. And that’s why this whole thing doesn’t make sense. I am *not* a warrior.”

“I’ve seen you fight,” Derek said. “You’re pretty amazing.”

“He’s right,” Lucas said. “You’ve got a holy warrior’s heart, too.” He looked back at Burnett. “But she needs to learn to use a sword.”

And obviously she wasn’t going to have a say in the matter. She frowned.

“Can you teach her?” Burnett asked.

Lucas’s gaze met hers again.

No, Kylie thought, and she finally pulled her hand away from his. This was not a good idea.

“If she’ll let me,” Lucas said.

“Kylie?” Burnett asked.

Did she have a choice? Could she say hell no and the sword would disappear?

She didn’t think so. She couldn’t run from this.

She knew that. Knew it with certainty—if for no other reason than how the sword felt in her hand—as if it belonged there.

She nodded, knowing it was the right thing to do, but hating it all the same.

“Good,” Burnett said. “First I want you to get me those books of legends from your grandmother and then your job is to teach Kylie how to use that sword.”

Lucas turned and looked at Kylie. “I look forward to it.”

And I don’t, she thought, but kept those words to herself.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Kylie walked back to her cabin with Derek, her official shadow until Della returned from her meeting with her vampire sisters. Lucas was gathering supplies, and lessons would start tomorrow.

“I know you’re not happy about this,” Derek said.

“You’re my shadow, I’m not upset.”

“Not about that. I mean the lessons with Lucas.”

Kylie sighed. “I don’t see where I have a choice.”

“You could have insisted Burnett find you another teacher.”

“I didn’t think about that.” *But why hadn’t I? Am I wanting to be with him?*

Derek glanced at her. “It’s probably best this way, though.”

“Why?” Kylie asked, sensing there was something he wasn’t saying.

He smiled, but it came with a small touch of sadness. “You love him. I felt it so strongly in there. I also felt your anger.”

“I have a right to be angry,” she muttered, even when she knew her anger wasn’t the biggest issue. Not that it was exactly a small issue either.

“Yes, you do,” Derek said, and he stopped walking and just looked at her. “But what you were feeling was bigger than that.”

She thought he meant her knowing that Lucas would eventually resent her, but then Derek continued.

He made a sheepish face. “I felt it. The same anguish you used to feel when we first met. When you were hurt over that ol’ boyfriend of yours.

Then it was the pain you feel toward your stepdad—you know, for cheating on your mom. Then there was the feeling of being betrayed by me.”

She wanted to deny it, but couldn’t. “So I guess this just means all guys are pieces of shit!” Her heart knotted and she swallowed to keep the tears from rising to her eyes.

He sighed and reached out and touched her shoulder as if wanting to console her. “What Lucas did was wrong, Kylie. Hell, what we all did was wrong. And I’m not saying Lucas doesn’t deserve your anger, but he doesn’t deserve to pay for everyone else’s mistakes.”

In spite of her efforts tears blurred her eyes. Damn Derek for being right! Her anger at being betrayed by others was all wrapped up in her anger at Lucas.

Derek’s warm touch soothed her emotions, but it didn’t fix things. Because this wasn’t fixable. “Even if I could get over being mad, our relationship wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I already told you. He’ll lose everything. His family. His pack. And even more importantly, his dreams. I refuse to be the reason he loses all that.” She took off walking again. Fast. Wishing she could run, run away from everything she felt. From everything she’d lost.

He caught up with her, and she slowed down as they cut to the path back to her cabin. The sun seemed to come at a different angle than a few weeks before. There was a fall feel in the air and it seemed to say that life was changing.

Change was hard.

He cleared his throat and spoke into the fragile silence. “Then you just find a way around that.”

She looked at him, unsure exactly what he meant. “Around what?”

“Around him losing everything.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she said.

“Anything is possible. You’re Kylie Galen.” He offered her a sincere smile.

She shook her head. “You know, people give me way more credit than I

deserve.”

He grinned. “You just don’t see yourself like we do.”

She let go of a frustrated puff of air and the earlier issues rose in her chest. “I’m not cut out to be a warrior, Derek.”

“You are going to do fine,” he said. “Besides, remember what you told me about accepting my gifts when we first got here?”

“It was probably bad advice,” she said.

“No it wasn’t. You told me I needed to embrace the gifts. You were right. I can’t imagine not using my powers now. They are a part of me. And this whole sword thing and being a warrior is part of who you are.”

She shook her head. “I have so much on my plate, I don’t need something else.”

“What’s on your plate?” he asked.

“My resident ghost. I need to get her crossed over before she makes me crazy. And my quests,” she said.

“But don’t you think the whole sword thing is part of your quests? I’d think it glowing when you touch it is a sign that it has to do with you.”

“Well, it’s not the part of my quest I would choose to work on right now,” she snapped.

After a second, he asked, “Can I help you in any way?”

She actually considered it. “I don’t think so.”

“Tell me about your ghost,” he said.

She told him about the spirit. About the head and the sword.

“Shit, that would be freaky,” Derek said. “They have to be connected somehow. She’s got a sword and then a sword shows up.” He paused. “I know that Lucas is going to bring those books from his grandmother’s but I’m still going to do some research on the Internet. Maybe I’ll find something.”

“Thanks,” she said, and then glanced at him. “For everything, too.”

“Everything?” he asked.

“I don’t deserve your friendship.”

“Oh yes you do.” They walked a few minutes in silence. The sound of their footfalls on the rocky path joined in the melody of nature. A few bird

calls, insects buzzing.

“You want to know something?” he said.

“What?” she asked.

“You did the right thing ... with us. I needed you to tell me that. As crazy as it sounds, I actually feel better.”

“Are you just trying to make sure I don’t feel guilty?” she asked.

“No. I’m serious. This is right.”

She looked at him and sensed he was being completely honest. “We’ll be okay, won’t we?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think we will. But I’m also serious about being your friend.”

“Me too,” she said.

They walked a little way in silence again.

“What are your other quests?” he asked.

She didn’t want to explain everything about coming out of the closet to Derek, so she explained the other half. “I want to help the other chameleon teens. The elders keep them secluded from everything. It’s no way to grow up.”

“Like that girl Jenny?” he asked. “She seemed ... pretty normal.”

“Yeah, like her, and she’s normal, she’s just ... very secluded from the world.” She told him about them not having cell phones or friends outside the compound.

“That’s sad. Jenny seemed ... nice.”

“Yeah, she is,” Kylie said, and remembered seeing Jenny clinging to Derek’s back as he ran around in circles trying to buck her off. Kylie almost smiled.

“I know what you’re thinking about,” he said.

“It was funny,” she admitted.

“It was not. I could have hurt her.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Kylie said.

“Not on purpose, but she lunged at me from nowhere. I had no idea it was a hot chick latched on to me.”

“So.” Kylie pointed a finger at him. “You thought she was hot. I knew you did. I saw the way you two looked at each other there.”

He shrugged. "I didn't look at her any way."

"Yes, you did. You were checking her out. And she was checking you out."

He arched a brow. "Was she really?"

Kylie laughed. "Yes, she was."

"Then I'll have to look her up, I seem to have a thing for chameleon chicks."

"Good luck with that," Kylie said. "I hear her kind can be difficult."

"That's true," he said, and chuckled. They walked a few feet in silence.

"How bad is it really for them, for the teen chameleons?" Derek asked.

"They basically aren't allowed to go in public until they can change their patterns. And that doesn't happen until like their late teens or twenties."

"You can change yours."

"Yeah, I'm different for some reason." She frowned. "It seems to be the story of my life."

"That does suck for them," Derek said. "Why don't you see about bringing them here? I'll bet Holiday would allow it."

"Believe it or not, I've given it some thought, but it's not going to be that easy." First Kylie had to figure out how to get the chameleons to come out of the closet.

"Well, if I can help, you know I will."

"I'll remember that."

When they got to the cabin Della was already there. So was Miranda. They sat at the kitchen table, sodas in their hands and troubled expressions on their faces.

"Good, you're here," Miranda said as if they'd been waiting for her to hold some important roundtable, Diet Coke discussion. Then both her roommates looked at Derek as if it was a party and he wasn't invited.

Derek looked at Kylie and half chuckled. "The last time I saw that look from girls, there was a handwritten note on my neighbor's tree house that read 'No boys allowed.' I'll see you. And if I get anything from my computer research, I'll let you know."

Kylie watched him leave. Then she turned to Miranda and Della and

tossed out her own roundtable, Diet Coke issue to discuss. “Why couldn’t my heart have picked him? Life would have been so much easier.”

“Because hearts are ornery, sneaky little bastards, designed to cause misery. They want what they want, and they don’t give a damn about what would make life easier or harder for the heart’s owner,” Della snapped. “It sucks big toads!” she screeched, and hit the table so hard, Kylie wouldn’t be surprised if it had cracked. “I say we get drunk on chocolate again. Do you think you could score another bottle of chocolate syrup from Holiday?”

Kylie looked at Miranda with the unspoken question: *What the hell is going on?*

Miranda shrugged and obviously read Kylie’s silent inquiry, because she answered it. “Steve’s been calling her about twice an hour and she won’t even answer the phone.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

The next day after school, Kylie still sported a chocolate hangover. Yes, they did exist. She was living, breathing, nauseous proof. Holiday, claiming they all three deserved to drown their sorrows in cocoa, had not only come through with the chocolate syrup, she'd had Burnett buy them a gallon of chocolate ice cream and a pack of Oreos.

Of course, more than half the Oreos were gone by the time Burnett and Holiday dropped them off, and Holiday still had crumbs on her chin. "I'm eating for two," she said, excusing herself.

Della had stuck with just her Bloody Chocolate Marys, but Kylie and Miranda had gorged on everything. Kylie wouldn't be surprised if she never touched the stuff again. She couldn't deny that the chocolate had managed to temporarily soothe all their issues. Soothe, not solve.

Della had bitched about Steve not accepting it was over. Miranda had whimpered about having to apologize to Nikki. Kylie had almost gone into a serious whine about how all guys were no-good cheats. But no sooner than the words were about to leave her lips did she recall what Derek had said about her dumping all her past anger on Lucas. Again seeing truth to the statement, she bypassed that rant and talked about being pissed she was a holy warrior.

Of course, after bringing up the warrior issue she had to go into the whole thing of what happened with the sword, making them vow not to repeat it. Miranda, of course, thought the whole holy warrior thing was cool, and Della was jealous. Kylie was still pissed and downed another bowl of ice cream to help deal with it all. Ahh, but before the night was over, they were laughing

themselves silly over all things stupid. Among the topics they discussed were sex, boys, and what was more appealing on those boys, briefs or boxers.

Boxers won.

“Okay, so maybe chocolate and blood don’t go so well together,” Della said, looking pretty gloomy this afternoon as well. It was Kylie who should be in the worst mood. She was about to meet Lucas to have her first sword fighting lesson. By the lake, too.

Why had he chosen that spot to practice?

Oh, damn, she knew why—because that was sort of their make-out spot. But what she didn’t know was if he thought there was a chance in hell that they’d be making out today. If he did, he had another think coming. She’d come here to fight, not French-kiss!

She spotted Lucas waiting, leaning casually against a tree. She hadn’t seen him since yesterday in the office, but for some reason it felt like a long time ago. He had missed school. When Ms. Cane asked about his absence, Fredericka popped up and said he’d had to go pick up something from his grandmother. Kylie figured it was the books Burnett had wanted.

Moving closer, her gaze continued to shift toward him. He stood there appearing as natural and rugged as the woods behind him. For some reason, he came off more were than human, and she surmised it was getting close to the full moon. About two weeks before a full moon she started noticing he would appear more masculine. The closer she got to where Lucas stood, the more she realized just how hard this was going to be.

His jet black hair needed a trim and flipped up in places. Those tiny almost-curls stirred in the breeze and made her want to run her fingers through them. He wore jeans that were just tight enough to showcase a lower body of a man, not a boy. The aqua blue T-shirt fit snug across his wide shoulders and defined the shape of his chest beneath the thin cotton. The hem of his short sleeves landed perfectly to draw attention to the muscles in his arms. And the color of his shirt just made his blue eyes look a tad untamable. He looked like he’d just walked off some magazine ad selling some super-masculine product.

He pushed off the tree and started walking toward her and Della, but she

felt him moving right at her as if she and she alone was his destination. Not that he hurried; his gait was slow, but confident. Her stomach fluttered and she could feel her hands start to sweat.

Della leaned her head down and whispered, “You do know a were can smell your pheromones, don’t you?”

Friggin’ great, she thought, but then realized that while she couldn’t control being attracted to him, it didn’t mean she had to act on those feelings.

“If it makes you feel any better, you’re not the only one polluting the air right now.”

Kylie hadn’t purposely dressed to draw his attention. Had she?

The pink scooped-neck tee didn’t give more than a hint of cleavage. Sure it fit snug enough, but most of her clothes did since she’d grown a cup size. The color was feminine, but could she help it that she liked pink? Her shorts were cutoff jeans, nothing too short, her shoes just plain white tennis shoes worn over pink socks that matched her shirt. And the only makeup she wore was mascara and lip gloss.

Lucas stopped in front of her. Crazy, how he smelled like the outdoors; fresh, earthy with a hint of mint.

“I’m here.” She tried to appear unaffected by his presence.

“Good,” he said, and there was a softness to his tone.

Their gazes met and held a second. Her heart picked up speed.

Della waved her hand at Kylie as if to say she was feeling like a third wheel. “Did you want me to stay?”

Kylie’s yes and Lucas’s no chimed out at the same time.

“Sorry,” Lucas said, not sounding so sorry as he looked at Della. “But I need Kylie’s full attention to teach her, and you would just distract her.”

“Right,” Della said in a tone of complete disbelief.

Lucas frowned at the vamp.

“Okay,” Della said. “I’ll just mosey along.” She focused on Kylie. “Call me when you’re ready to go and I’ll come back when you’re finished.”

“I’ll walk her to the cabin,” Lucas said.

“I’ll call you when I’m done,” Kylie said.

Della took off, leaving them alone. Kylie looked at the water for a second

and tried to find the strength to get through the next hour.

* * *

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. She continued to stare at the water and she could feel him staring at her. The butterflies playing bumper cars in her stomach revved their engines and went into high gear. Taking a deep breath, telling herself she was being silly, she faced him. “Where do we start?”

“Let me get the supplies out.” He went back to the tree where a big cloth bag rested beside the trunk. He pulled out a towel from the bag and then shook it out on the ground. Reaching into the bag again, he pulled out a sword. She recognized it immediately as the one stalking her. Something close to a shiver spiraled up her spine. But not fear, something else. Like some crazy form of recognition.

Lucas rested it on the towel. Just the way he carried the weapon spoke of respect, reverence. She hadn’t even realized he knew how to use a sword. Perhaps the topic of fighting and such just didn’t come up in their conversations.

Kylie moved closer and watched as he pulled out a second sword, a little different, but similar. The size and shape seemed almost the same and it had the same look of antiquity.

Did another one just magically appear? “Where did that one come from?” she asked.

He glanced up. “This one’s mine. When I got the books for Burnett I also brought my sword.”

“Where did you get a sword?” Kylie asked.

“It’s a family heirloom. It’s been in my family for a long, long time. My grandfather actually gave it to me before he died.”

She noticed again that the swords sort of looked the same. “Were they crusaders or holy warriors?”

He grinned up at her—one of his sexy bad-boy smiles. And damn if her toes didn’t curl inside her tennis shoes at that smile. She remembered feeling that smile against her lips. Tasting it. Loving it.

“Actually, they were Vikings. I’m told that they were the Robin Hoods of their kind, not the murdering pirates, but I wouldn’t swear on it.”

She brushed her sweaty palms on her back pockets. “Has Burnett had a chance to look at the books yet? Did he learn anything useful?”

He reached back in the bag and pulled out two wooden swords. “I saw him right after lunch and he said he was still making his way through them.”

“Have you read the books?” Kylie asked.

“Yeah. When my grandfather was giving me lessons, I devoured them. I used to pretend to be a holy warrior.” His smile brightened. “Saving damsels in distress.”

She could see him playing that role. She remembered when they were kids and he’d caught the rock that the bullies had thrown at her. At six, she’d considered him a hero.

At sixteen, she considered him a heartbreaker.

“Okay,” he said. “Here’s my plan. First I’m going to teach you how to hold the sword, and then to do some very simple defensive moves. Then we’ll actually spar for a while.”

He picked up her sword and moved behind her. She immediately swung around.

“Turn around, I want to guide you on how to hold it.”

“Why can’t you just show me?”

He frowned. “This is how my grandfather taught me. Please, turn around.”

She frowned right back at him, but she swung around. Then she held her breath and waited for his touch. Waited to feel his body against hers.

Waited for the pain that came with touching him—emotional pain—that was both sweet and bitter.

She felt his chest, warm and solid, come against her shoulder blades. His right hand reached down and pressed two fingers down by her elbow. Then he slowly glided his hand down to her wrist. The feel of his touch was both wanted and unwanted. She swallowed and it sounded almost too loud.

“Take the sword.” His voice, deep and hoarse, whispered in her ear.

She hadn’t realized until then that she’d closed her eyes.

Popping them open, she saw he'd reached around her and held the sword in his left hand. Reaching for the sword, she wrapped her palm around the handle.

"Now, move your wrist just a little to the..." He paused at the same time the sword started to glow.

His intake of air said he was again awed by the sword's action. Kylie was too centered on the feel of him pressed against her to care about the sword.

"This way," he said, and shifted her wrist to the right ever so slightly. His head turned also and she felt his cheek on the back of her head.

She thought she heard him inhale, but she couldn't swear on it.

"Do you feel how the sword is level in your hand?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. His scent surrounded her. The strongest waves of pain stopped, but she still felt a dull ache. She also felt ... the wonder of his touch. She felt his skin wherever he pressed against her.

"You're doing good. This is the way you need to hold it."

They stood like that for several long seconds. His firm form pressed against her, his arm encircling her, the sword in her hand.

For a second she thought she heard his hum, the powerful hypnotizing sound meant to weaken women. "Now what?" she bit out, fighting the feeling of being lured, of being seduced.

He inhaled sharply and stepped back. "Now I get my sword and show you some moves." His voice sounded extra low.

He shifted quickly to reach for his sword. He moved to stand right beside her. His dark blue gaze turned and he looked at her. She saw the heat in his eyes, she saw the desire. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

She looked away quickly and while part of her wanted to call him on it, she simply stood there and waited for him to show her the next move. And hoped it only involved sword fighting and not seduction.

Chapter Thirty

She spent the next thirty minutes following his moves. Over and over. Swiping the sword this way, then that. He barked out commands. Not really in a rude way, but as if this was the way he'd been taught. She couldn't help but imagine a younger Lucas taking stern directions from his grandfather.

"Not like that," he said. "Keep the sword pointing out to where your opponent will be. And don't look down. Now look where you're holding your weight. Put your weight into your moves."

Over and over again, they did it.

It was actually grueling. The sun felt hot on her skin, the air thick. Her leg muscles from all the partial squats and forward thrusts burned. She didn't complain. Not once. She'd take this to him touching her.

"That's good," he said, doing the same moves beside her. "You're doing it."

Oh my. You are a natural.

Out in the open, she actually heard the voice before she felt the spirit's cold. The spirit stood to Kylie's left, holding her own sword, following Lucas's direction to a tee.

"What are you doing?" Lucas asked. "Shift your body weight back and then forward."

Kylie ignored Lucas, but continued to move—her focus now on the spirit's weapon and not following his directions.

Comparing the swords, she realized the spirit's sword wasn't really like the one glowing in Kylie's hands. The ghost's blade was more slender and tapered. And the hilt, as Lucas called the handle, was longer.

What kind of sword do you have? Kylie asked the spirit, thinking maybe if she could get her to open up, she might give Kylie something to help send her away.

A bastard sword. I stole it from a bastard. She laughed, but she didn't miss a step in her moves. Her form looked practiced.

Whoever she was, her skills with the sword matched, if not surpassed, Lucas's.

I'm serious. Kylie missed a step.

"You okay?" Lucas asked and she felt him studying her.

"Yeah," Kylie answered, but continued to focus on the spirit. She needed to get this figured out. The sooner the ghost was gone, the sooner she could work on her other quests.

Who is it you want me to kill? she asked, and kept moving, but obviously not well enough because Lucas had stopped moving and was now just staring at her.

"Do you want to take a break?" he asked.

Who is it? Kylie demanded, and stopped moving.

The spirit stopped her motions and looked at Lucas. *Listen to this guy. He's a good teacher. With a little practice you'll be ready. You'll kill my enemy and then I'll leave you be and take my place in hell.*

Hell? Kylie's breath hitched. She hadn't ever dealt with a spirit heading to hell. She couldn't help but hope the ghost was wrong. But knowing what she knew, all the people the spirit had claimed to have killed, she might be hell bound.

The spirit faded.

Kylie let out a frustrated puff of air and then wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her left hand. Again she got the distinct feeling that this spirit was somehow connected to her receiving the sword. But what could that mean? Was Kylie actually supposed to do the ghost's bidding, and kill someone for her?

The thought of taking a life sent a shiver down Kylie's spine. Just another reason she questioned her ability to be some holy warrior.

"You need some water?" Lucas asked.

She looked at him. His skin, already golden from the sun, glistened with heat. The front of his T-shirt clung to his upper torso, showing off his chest even more. Sweat always did look good on him.

She glanced down at the sword. “Is there such a thing as a bastard sword?” she asked, focusing on the ghost and not wanting to think about how good he looked.

“Yeah, why?” He moved to his bag and pulled out two bottles of water. He handed her one. His hand brushed against hers. She pulled her hand back, and he must have noticed her suddenness because he frowned.

“Nothing,” she said, knowing he wouldn’t want to know. He didn’t like ghosts. *But he went into the cemetery for me, to help me. Even when at the time I was a vampire.*

She put the sword down and watched it lose the golden hue.

“That’s so strange,” he said.

“Yeah.” The bottle he’d handed her chilled the inside of her palm. She unscrewed the top and took a long sip.

They drank without talking, her mind on the ghost one second and on how good Lucas looked the next.

“You ready to spar?” he asked.

She looked at his sword and the one resting on the towel. Real weapons that could kill. A slip of a wrist and someone could be seriously injured. “I don’t think so.”

“Not with these. You’re not ready for that.” He pointed back to the towel and the wooden swords. “With those.”

She wanted to say no, but then realized the sooner she learned to fight, the sooner she wouldn’t have to meet Lucas and be reminded of all she’d lost. Screwing the top on the water, she dropped it beside her sword and then picked up one of the wooden weapons. “Let’s go at it.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, they were finally doing just that. Going at it. Kylie finally started to understand how to do this. Using the moves he’d taught her earlier, she was able to block most of his offenses. Most of them, but not all.

Three times he found his way around her sword and touched her chest with the wooden edge. “Two points for the teacher,” he’d said each time. Then they’d go back swinging, swiping, moving back, forth, and sometimes in circles. The sound of their wooden blades clashing rang in her ears. Sweat poured down her brow again, but she ignored it, determined to earn a few points of her own.

Watching him, studying him, she started noticing his patterns of movement. Using what she learned against him, she waited for her opportunity and then took it. She tapped his chest with her own wooden blade. Breathing heavy, she felt the sweat rolling down between her breasts. “Two points for the student,” she said, reveling in the moment of success. As crazy as it was, she enjoyed this.

He stopped and lowered his sword. His blue gaze froze on her. He drew in a deep breath. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed seeing that smile.”

Sobering, realizing what she’d offered him, she tapped her wooden blade to his. “We came here to fight.”

He held up his sword and then went back to sparring.

“I miss you,” he said, right after he stopped her blade.

She pulled back and swung her sword extra hard to the left. His wooden blade blocked it. She pulled back and then went back for more.

“You are my soul mate,” he said, blocking her at every turn.

Emotion filled her chest. Some from the memory of hearing him say those words to Monique, but mostly from knowing all he had to lose. She swung harder, and her sword hit his with a cracking thud. The impact sent his sword flying out of his hand, and hers broke in half.

“You should do what your father wants. Go to Monique, agree to marry her. Get on the Council like you planned.”

“I’m not agreeing to marry Monique!” he said in a stern voice. “I should have never agreed to it!”

“I think we’re done,” she said, her heart racing and a world of hurt sitting on her chest.

A soulful expression filled his gaze. “With sparring today, we’re done. But not with each other.” He went and picked up his sword and then moved

back to pack their things, while she stood there, trying to get her breathing under control. He found the other half of her sword and picked it up.

She couldn't help but wonder if these weren't the same swords he and his grandfather used. And if so they probably meant something to him. Guilt filled her chest. "I didn't mean to break it."

"I know. It's okay. It happens a lot." He paused and from the look he sent her he was about to say something she didn't want to hear.

Kylie's phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket.

Lucas frowned. "If it's Della tell her I said I'd walk you to your cabin."

"It's my mom," Kylie said as she stepped a few feet away. She pulled the phone to her ear, a bit concerned that her mom was calling during work hours.

"Hey, Mom?" Kylie said, and she could still hear her heart thumping in her ears from the exertion of the sparring match. Or because of what Lucas had said.

"Hey? That's what you're going to say to me!" her mom bit out.

"What should I say to you?" Kylie asked.

"How dare you do this to me, Kylie Galen." Her mom's tone sent her back to the time that she and her mom couldn't see eye to eye on anything—back to the days when Kylie called her the Ice Princess. She took a deep breath and told herself not to panic, but wasn't this just what she worried about? That with John in the picture the fragile relationship they had would be put in jeopardy?

"Mom, what did I do?" Kylie moved a couple more feet away, not wanting Lucas to hear her fight with her mom.

"You know what you did; don't play innocent with me."

"I'm not playing," Kylie said, growing a little more concerned, and when she looked up she saw Lucas studying her with empathy.

"You met with Mr. and Mrs. Brighten, didn't you?" Her mom spoke so loud, it hurt her ears and she was certain Lucas could hear.

Kylie moved a few more feet away. She'd planned to tell her mom as soon she got back to the States, but after the pregnancy fiasco it just hadn't seemed like a good time. And yesterday morning with all the apologies and

John praise, it didn't feel right. Besides, it might just be something they needed to talk about in person.

"Yes, and I was going to tell you."

"Was? *Was* going to tell me? Don't you think this is something you should have told me before you did it!"

"I did tell you. I mean, I told you I wanted to do it. We talked about it months ago, remember?"

"You should have discussed this with me first."

And you should have discussed it with me years ago. Kylie found some emotional reprieve in her own anger, but she knew better than to let it out right now. Her mom was never reasonable when this upset and adding fuel to her mom's emotional fire wasn't smart.

"Did they call you? Were they upset?" Kylie had thought the Brightens had agreed to wait and meet with her mom later. Why had they gone ahead and called? But even annoyed that they had called, she couldn't imagine the Brightens being rude with her mom.

"Yes, they called me! And do you have any idea how awkward that conversation was?"

"I'm sorry. But you were in England," Kylie added.

"How long has this been scheduled, young lady?"

"They've been out of the country and I don't even think they got my message until they got back. They called and wanted to come by immediately."

"You should have run this by me first, Miss Galen."

Oh, hell, whenever her mom referred to her as Miss Galen, Kylie knew her goose was cooked. And like so many times in the past, she didn't think her goose deserved to be cooked.

"I should have been prepared to speak to them. Instead, I get this phone call out of the blue."

"I'm sorry," Kylie said.

"John was with me when the call came in. Do you have any idea how awkward *that* was."

Tears filled Kylie's eyes and she couldn't hold back her anger anymore.

“That’s why you’re upset, because of John?”

“I haven’t told him that Tom wasn’t your father. It was completely embarrassing.”

“You’re embarrassed about me?” Kylie asked, and shook her head.

“Don’t turn this around,” her mom said.

“Turn it around?” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Mom, but you are so wrong here.”

“I was not embarrassed about you. I’m ... I’m embarrassed that I got pregnant by someone I barely knew.”

Kylie swiped at her tears. “You said you loved him.”

Her mom gasped. “Of course I did, but...”

“But what?” Kylie asked. “But you were afraid that your precious John would see your omission of the truth as a lie?”

“Kylie, don’t be—”

“And that wouldn’t be good, would it?” she continued. “Wait, you don’t have to answer that, because I can tell you how it feels. How it feels when someone you thought you knew keeps something from you, something that might have mattered! I can’t believe you’re mad at me for not telling you I contacted the Brightens when you friggin’ didn’t tell me about my own father, or about my grandparents, all these years!”

Her mom’s intake of air said a lot. “I ... I thought I explained that?”

“Yeah, you explained that you were so in love with my father, and now you claim you hardly knew him.”

“I ... I don’t think this is something we should discuss over the phone.”

“Really? That’s sort of how I felt about telling you about the Brightens.” Another few tears rolled down her cheeks.

She hung up so angry she almost wanted to throw the phone down. She didn’t, but she did turn it off just in case her mom tried to call back.

“I’m sorry.” Lucas’s words came behind her.

She wiped her tears away again and turned around. She hadn’t known he was so close and unintentionally ran right into him. Her face landed on his oh-so-perfect chest. His arms, warm and gentle, came around and held there for two or maybe three seconds before she pulled away. Just long enough to

remember how good it was to lean on him—to recall how good it had been to be able to count on him. Just long enough for her to come to her senses and remember she shouldn't be leaning on or counting on him anymore.

* * *

The following Friday, almost midnight, Kylie lay in bed staring at the ceiling, playing mind games with her issues. Round and round they go, which one to fret over, nobody knows.

Her mom, whom Kylie was talking to but was still mad at, and her seemingly impossible quest to save the teen chameleons.

Her completely impossible ghost and the impossible and infuriating Lucas.

And an unbearable longing to talk to her dad again, who she hadn't felt or heard from since right before the Brightens' visit.

And last, but for sure not least, an impossible rogue, whose threat still rang in Kylie's ears. *You will come to me, Kylie Galen, come to me willing to die, to suffer at my hands for my pleasure, because the price will be too great! Your weakness will take you down.*

Right now, Kylie's weakness seemed to be her inability to figure anything out. Everything in her life felt as if it were in limbo.

The only issue Kylie felt productive in this last week was her skill at using the sword. At times she wondered if her good feeling about that wasn't just because of Lucas. Being with him for an hour or two a day.

Oh, she hadn't succumbed to any of his advances. Subtle things, like walking so close that his shoulder brushed up against hers, his tactic of showing her a move by standing behind her and guiding her through a certain stance or motion. And then there were his not-so-subtle advances. They would be sparring with the wood swords and he'd just pop out with something like "I still love you" or "Do you know how beautiful you are?" or "Do you remember the night we were coming back from the graveyard and we almost made love?"

She'd broken three more wooden swords when he said those things, too. One would think he would learn to keep his mouth shut. But nope. Lucas had

even laughed the second time she'd done it. He didn't seem to care that his comments ended up with him having to replace another sword. And she knew that for a fact when the very next day he said something else that ended with her breaking the third sword. Not that she was doing it on purpose; it was just so dang hard not to let her emotion come out in her blows.

Today when they had been leaving, she'd called what they were doing "fencing" and Lucas had corrected her. He told her that she wasn't learning to fence. That entailed a completely different set of skills. She was learning to fight. He didn't say it, but she read his thoughts. She was training to kill.

But who?

And how? Oh, she knew it would happen with a sword, she just didn't know how she would be able to do it. To really take a life.

Letting go of a deep breath, she rolled over, gave her pillow a thump of her fist, and recalled Collin Warren when she'd tossed him across the room. Her intent hadn't been to kill but to protect. She hadn't killed him, but she could have.

And maybe that was how "this," whatever "this" was, would go down. Maybe if her protective mode was in gear, she'd be able to do it and not think. But when she thought about it afterward, would she be able to live with it?

Perhaps if it was to save someone she loved.

Or to kill someone you loathe.

The cold washed over her. Kylie sat up and the ghost sat at the end of her bed holding her sword. Kylie had seen her every day while practicing with Lucas. She would show up and complete the exercises with them, but no matter how hard Kylie had tried, she hadn't spoken once.

"Who do I loathe that much?" she asked.

You know, the ghost said.

"Tell me, damn it! I'm tired of your games!"

Della, looking half asleep, burst into Kylie's room. "Are you okay?"

"Yes!" Kylie told her. "Go away!" When she didn't do it immediately, Kylie said, "It's a ghost issue."

Della shot out. But when Kylie looked around the ghost was gone. "Who

do I loathe that much?” she repeated her question. The ghost didn’t return, but suddenly Kylie knew. She knew with clarity.

Mario.

She was supposed to kill Mario.

Deep down she’d known this was going to happen. Known that they would face each other again. What she didn’t know was how in the hell she was going to win against him. He’d had years to build his powers. How could she match that?

Then another question filled her head. Did this mean that Mario was who the ghost wanted her to kill? How was she connected to Mario?

Chapter Thirty-one

Saturday morning, standing in the dining hall, Kylie waited for her mom to show up to parents' day. She hadn't said anything about John coming, but Kylie didn't know if that meant he wasn't, or if she didn't feel the need to ask Kylie if it would be okay. She really prayed he was a no-show. Already feeling as if her relationship was on shaky ground with her mom, she didn't need John around.

On the other hand, Kylie's stepdad had to leave town on a business trip and wasn't going to make it—which was fine with Kylie. Without him, the combustion level would at least be lessened a degree. She hadn't stopped loving Tom Galen, but right now the father figure Kylie ached to see was her real father. Ever since the Brightens' visit, Kylie had been longing to spend some time with Daniel. Almost every night before bed she'd pull out the photo album the Brightens had left her, and nearly every night, she'd end up crying. Feeling as if life had cheated her.

Cheated him, too.

Kylie watched a few parents stroll through the door. Miranda's parents walked in and found her waiting, prim and proper-like, at a table. Seeing Miranda like that felt wrong, like wearing your shoes on the wrong foot.

Miranda's mom sucked all the confidence and personality out of the witch. That was just so wrong.

Derek's mom moved in with exuberance, as if eager to see her son. That's the way parents should be, Kylie thought. The woman's gaze shifted around the room, obviously looking for Derek. When her gaze found Kylie's she grinned and waved and started moving toward her. Thankfully, Derek called

to her from the other side of the room and spared Kylie the awkward conversation. What did you tell the mother of the boy whose heart you'd just broken?

Helen's parents walked in with worry on their faces, even though they'd just dropped their daughter off a few days earlier.

Jonathon hadn't stopped smiling since Helen had returned. Kylie had sat with them at almost every lunch break, letting Della and Miranda sit with their own kind. Yesterday during lunch, Kylie had studied all the different species tables and wondered if there would ever be a chameleon table at Shadow Falls.

Next, Della's parents and sister walked in. Her father looked as he always did, pissed off and unhappy to be here. Della's dad had even told her once that the only reason he came was because her mother made him. Part of Kylie would have loved to knock some sense into that man. How could he not know how much those words hurt his daughter?

Across the room, Della frowned at her family walking through the door. Kylie's heart went out to Della. If possible, her home life was even worse than Kylie's.

"You okay?" Holiday moved to stand beside her.

"Yeah. Just wondering why families have to be so screwed up. Why can't people just love each other?"

Holiday brushed her shoulder against Kylie's, offering a bit of emotional calm. "They do love each other. Family drama is a trade-off for having family. What you see in this room right now is probably the worst it's going to be."

"What do you mean?" Kylie asked.

"The hardest time in any relationship is change. And nothing brings more change in a family dynamic than when a teen is becoming their own person. That's true for humans as well as supernaturals."

Holiday must have seen Kylie glance from Miranda to Della, because she said, "In a few years, Miranda will no longer care if her mother approves of her choices. And her mom will gradually accept that Miranda is her own person. Della will grow up and do great things, because Della won't accept

any less from herself. Her father will have to admit that while he didn't understand the changes in his daughter's life, she grew up to be a success."

"And you don't think that these hard feelings will hurt the relationship?"

Holiday sighed. "Oh, there'll be scars and some mending to do, and yes, there are some cases that don't end well." She paused. "But for the most part, the problems you see here are things that families can and probably will recover from."

"That's hopeful," Kylie said.

"Did you return the Brightens' call?" Holiday asked.

Kylie had gotten the message yesterday that they'd called. "Yes, I spoke with them. They wanted to come to parents' day and meet my mom."

Holiday tensed. "You didn't tell me they were coming."

"They're not. I didn't think my mom was ready to meet with them. After the argument we had about me seeing them, we've barely spoken about them. She apologized, but now we're both pretending it didn't happen. I'm kind of scared to bring it up."

"It will work out. Your mom doesn't come across as the unreasonable type."

"Obviously you don't know her very well." While Kylie said it half jokingly, the other half had merit.

Kylie looked at Holiday and remembered her visit with the ghost. "I had a visitor last night."

"Did she talk to you this time?" Holiday asked, knowing exactly who Kylie meant.

"A little." She bit her lip. "I think it's all connected. The sword, the ghost, and Mario."

Holiday's brow tightened. "Why do you think that?"

Kylie leaned in. "Something she said, and ... just a gut feeling."

"Miss Brandon?" someone called from across the room.

Holiday pressed a hand to Kylie's arm and frowned. "We'll talk later."

Kylie nodded, and as the camp leader walked away, she saw Lucas walk in. He moved to sit down with a group of weres. One of the weres said something and then they all shot up from the table and left Lucas by himself.

It was starting, she realized. They were pushing him out. Pain for him cut deep.

“Sad, isn’t it?” a voice said behind her. “And it’s your fault.” Kylie recognized Clara’s voice. Kylie turned to face Lucas’s sister, but she shot away. Breath held, she looked back at Lucas. She longed to go to him, to soothe him, but that would only make it worse.

Five minutes later, Lucas’s grandmother came walking painfully slowly into the dining room. Kylie glanced around the crowd. Lucas still sat alone at a table in the back. The elderly woman’s gaze roamed the room and found Kylie.

When she started shuffling toward Kylie, her heart stopped. *Oh, shit!* She had no desire to hear Lucas’s grandmother scold her for ruining her grandson’s goals and quests.

Kylie went to dart out the side door when she heard her mom. Turning she saw ... her mom with John. *Oh, crap, he came.* Nevertheless, she’d take John over Lucas’s grandmother hands down—especially since her mom wasn’t playing feely-touchy with John’s butt.

Kylie took off toward her guests with fake eagerness, praying that would deter the elderly woman from approaching.

After a quick hug with her mom, and ignoring John, Kylie led them to an empty table as far away from Lucas as she could find. Her heart didn’t find a normal rhythm until she saw Lucas’s grandmother head to his table.

“Thank God,” she muttered, and motioned for them to sit.

“Thank God, what?” her mom asked, still standing.

Kylie opened her mouth, praying something intelligent, albeit a lie, would fall out. Lately, Kylie’s prayers had been going unanswered and this was no exception. Her lips opened, but nothing, not a thing, came out. Even worse, her brain had shut down.

“Thank God, what?” her mom asked again.

“That the pain in my stomach went away.” Kylie pressed a hand on top of her belly.

“You’ve got stomach pains?” Alarm laced her mom’s voice.

“It’s nothing.”

“You don’t know it’s nothing,” her mom insisted.

“I do.” Kylie’s voice rang high pitched, fearing her mom would drag her to the emergency room. Heck, she might accuse her of being pregnant again.

“How do you know it’s nothing?” her mom asked.

“Because it’s just ... gas. I had a little gas.”

Her mom, blushing, glanced at John. Kylie could feel her own face heating up like a Betty Crocker oven. Of all the things she could have come up with, why gas?

Her mom leaned in a little. “Do you need to go to the restroom?”

“No. It went away.”

Her mom leaned in. “You sure?”

“Positive.” Kylie dropped in a chair and prayed this wasn’t a premonition of how this meeting would go.

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, Kylie, John, and her mom still sat at the table chatting. Well, Kylie did very little chatting, while her mom and John never stopped. They talked about her mom’s new job that she’d be taking in two weeks and they talked about England.

“Oh, I brought you something.” Her mom pulled a bag from her purse. “I know how you like T-shirts,” she said.

Kylie couldn’t help but think, *My mom went to England and all I got was a T-shirt*, but she smiled and pulled it out of the bag and then chuckled when she read the script across the front: *My mom went to England and all I got was this T-shirt*.

“Perfect,” Kylie said, and loved that it was pink.

“I also got you this.” Her mom pulled out a small white box.

The charm bracelet caught the light and sparkled, almost magically, when Kylie opened the box. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the charms. A sword that looked very much like a crusader sword, a cross that looked too damn close to the one on the sword, and a Joan of Arc emblem.

“I bought it at one of the castles and it didn’t have a wide selection of charms, but ... for some odd reason I felt compelled to pick those out. I hope

you don't think they're stupid."

Define "some" reason, Kylie wanted to ask, but she didn't. "No. I like them. Thank you." A certain familiar chill fell on her like a light rain.

Daniel was there? Had her dad led her mom to buy these charms? She glanced around hoping to see him, but he didn't materialize.

Soon, Kylie. Soon. The words echoed in her head, fear filled her heart.

I miss you, Kylie said in her mind. *I don't know if I'm ready to die, but I do miss you.*

Footsteps echoed in the room, and Kylie noticed the other parents leaving.

Her mom looked around. "These visits fly by. I should run to the girls' room before we leave." Her mom popped up and hurried off.

Kylie was about to stand to follow her mom when John rested his hand on hers. The feel of his palm sent a shiver down her spine. It wasn't cold or hot. Just emotionally wrong. She pulled her hand away.

"I was hoping to get a chance to speak to you," he said.

And I was hoping you wouldn't. She glanced toward the restroom. "I think I'll—"

"Is there a reason you don't like me, Kylie?"

She looked at him. Decisions, decisions. Was she going to be diplomatic, or honest?

Who was it that said honesty was the best policy? She couldn't remember, but she decided they were brilliant.

Chapter Thirty-two

“Let’s see,” Kylie said, not skipping a beat. “Let’s begin with the fact that you started a fight in front of my whole school with my stepdad.”

John squared his shoulders, almost defensively. “He’s the one who hit me.”

“After you insulted me and charged at him. And you also stuck your tongue down my mama’s throat in front of all the students and their parents. Would you like me to continue? I think I could come up with more really quick.”

Anger filled his eyes, but he seemed to rein it in. “You don’t hold back, do you?”

She sent him her swallowed-a-mosquito smile. “That was holding back.”

“You are such a joy to speak with,” he said. “However, the problem is that your mom really likes me and I her. I don’t think I’m going out on a limb to say that it would be helpful if we could get along.”

Kylie leaned in. “I don’t think I’m going out on a limb to say that you haven’t known my mom long enough to be saying this to me.”

Kylie could swear his eyes brightened. A nonhuman kind of bright. She tightened her brows to check his pattern.

What was this man?

His human pattern appeared clearly. Not that he couldn’t still be a chameleon, but ...

Anger filled his gray eyes. “This could end up *hurting* your mom.” His words came out so cold, so ... threatening that Kylie’s protective instinct buzzed.

“What do you mean?” She curled her hands into fists.

He glanced away as if to calm himself. When he looked back his eyes were normal. “Just that problems between us would hurt your mom.”

She stared him right in the eyes. And God help her, but she sensed he was lying, that his words *had* been a threat. She tried to calm the buzzing in her veins down, but it continued. Over John’s shoulder she saw her mom step out of the restroom.

She leaned across the table and whispered to John, “If anyone dares hurt my mom, they will die regretting it.”

Right then, Kylie knew two things: she did have the ability to become a holy warrior. Because if John laid one finger on her mom, she could, and would, kill him with no regrets. And secondly, she simply couldn’t die, not right now. Not if it meant leaving her mom with this asshole.

“Is everything okay?” Her mom stepped up to the table, obviously picking up on the tension.

Kylie waited to see how John decided to play this.

“It’s fine,” John said. “We were just talking.” He stood up. “I guess it’s time to go.” They started walking, but the fear for her mom built higher with each step. Kylie couldn’t let her mom leave with this man—not without a warning.

She reached for her mom’s arm. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

John turned.

“Can you give us a minute?” Kylie sent John a look that dared him to intervene.

He hesitated but then said, “I’ll wait by the car.”

Kylie watched him walk out, wishing he’d keep walking right out of her mother’s life.

Her mom looked around. “Who do you want me to meet?”

“Mom, I know you’re not going to like what I have to say, but John scares me. I’m worried about your safety.”

“Scares you?” her mom asked. “I don’t understand. What has he done?”

“I don’t trust him. He gives me the creeps. And I’m a good judge of character.”

Hurt flashed in her mom's eyes. "So am I, young lady. Sorry you don't like him, but I do."

The hurt in her mom's eyes vibrated in Kylie's chest. "I just want you to be careful and not let this thing move too fast."

Her mom scowled. "This is because you want me and your dad to get back together."

"First," Kylie said, now feeling annoyed, "Tom's my stepdad. Second, yes, I did want you to get back together, but this isn't about that."

"It has to be, young lady, because John is the sweetest man I know." She leaned in and kissed Kylie's cheek. "Now, please accept the fact that your stepdad and I are not getting back together." She left. Kylie stayed, fearing what she might say to John if she had to face him again at the car.

"Are you okay?" The masculine voice came near her ear.

Kylie's first thought was that it was Derek. He always knew when she was in emotional trauma. But she quickly recognized the deep, sexy voice. The voice of the person whom for the last week she'd tried to beat to smithereens with a wooden sword.

She turned around. "Yes." Then her pent-up anger crowded her chest and she knew what would help. "Do you want to go practice?"

"Now?" Lucas asked.

"I need to burn off some aggression."

"On me?" He half smiled.

"Not ... Do you want to practice or not?" she snapped, in no mood for humor. Face it, someone had sent her a sword to learn to fight—and if they expected her to fight, then they obviously meant for her to stay alive. And she planned to stay alive to protect her mom from creeps like John.

Yup, staying alive sounded like a good idea.

"Sure." His blue eyes filled with concern. "Let me tell Burnett." His gaze didn't move from her face. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk," she said. "I want to fight."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie had already broken one sword without Lucas

having said anything about loving her, how beautiful she was, or about them making out in the grass.

He made her go through some stretching exercises, insisting he could see the tension rolling off of her. It wasn't rolling off of her, it was rolling around inside of her. Fear for her mom's safety chopped away at her sanity, fear for Lucas and what would happen to him if the pack completely turned against him ate at her peace of mind.

"You still don't want to talk?" he asked as their swords banged against each other.

Yes, but I just don't know what to say. "No," she lied, changing her stance and managing to get her sword past his, and then tapped the tip against his chest.

"You are getting good." He stared down at the sword pointing at his heart.

She pulled back to let him get his footing. In a few seconds, they were back to sparring when she felt the cold wash over her.

Too good. The student is besting the teacher. You need a new teacher.

Kylie glanced at the ghost standing there with her sword. *Who else can teach me?*

Me, of course. But no pansy stuff fighting with wooden swords. You must learn to fight with a real weapon.

Kylie's heart raced, remembering her main fear. *Am I going to die?*

The ghost sighed. *That is up to you.*

How sad was it that she preferred to take the word of a murdering spirit than that of her father? But the fact remained that she wanted to live.

"You ready?" Lucas asked.

Kylie faced him. "One second." She looked back to the spirit. *Do you know my father?*

Her question left her lips at the same time the spirit vanished.

Facing Lucas again, Kylie held up her sword and the sparring resumed.

"Do I need to teach him a lesson?" Lucas asked as his sword clashed again hers.

"Who?" she asked.

"Your mom's boyfriend." Lucas blocked her sword.

“No, I need to stop him,” she said. If she didn’t die first.

Then she felt a fire burn in her belly. She wasn’t going to die. She was going to fight and win. And Lucas had to do the same, she realized.

“You’re getting gutsy,” Lucas said, but suddenly she lost her focus and his sword got around her and tapped her shoulder.

Kylie looked at the sword’s point. “That wasn’t a death blow. You can’t count that as a win.”

“No, but you’d be bleeding so badly that you wouldn’t last much longer.”

“Fine. Count it.” She stepped back and prepared to start again.

This time she was more careful, blocking him blow for blow. Sweat poured down her brow. Her muscles ached, her heart ached. She opened her mouth to say something about his new moves. But something completely different came out.

“You should have told me about Monique,” she said, not realizing what she meant to say. The sound of wood being slammed together filled the air like thunder. “If I had known...” What would she have done? Was there any chance in hell that she would have said it was okay? Probably not, but perhaps she wouldn’t have felt so betrayed. Maybe she wouldn’t have lumped him together with all the other betrayals of her past.

“You wouldn’t have accepted it,” he finished for her. It was the truth. He started those fancy foot moves around her again. “And you would have been right not to accept it. It was a bad judgment call on my part.”

“Bad for us, yes. But maybe it was the right call for you,” she said. “You have too much to lose, Lucas.”

“I have you to lose!” Their swords slammed together; the loud noise crackled in the air.

They backed away from each other. “I told you that we’re over. Find Monique, tell her you’ll marry her.”

“I am not marrying her. I never planned to.”

“Then go back to your original plan, say you’ll do it, get on the Council, and then back out.”

“No. It was a bad plan then and it would be a bad plan now.”

She breathed in and caught the air in her lungs. “Everyone blames me for

ruining your dreams,” she said. *And someday you will, too—if I live.* And that was what hurt the most right now. Not dying. But the fact that forgiving him seemed easy compared to accepting that he would one day resent her. Resent the choice he’d made.

He lifted his sword to start sparring again. She went along with it because just looking at him hurt too much.

He started talking as he moved. “Anyone who blames you is a fool. I was the one who chose not to sign the betrothal agreement. Not you.” The swords hit again.

“Your sister believes it. Even your grandmother believes it. I saw it in her eyes today when she started to come over to talk to me.”

“My sister is stupid. I love my grandmother,” he said, and the sound of his sword slicing through air sent a chill down Kylie’s back. “But that doesn’t make her right. She follows a lot of the beliefs of the elders.”

“Your pack is turning away from you. I saw that.” Her throat tightened again. “You can’t lose them, Lucas. You’ve told me a thousand times how important they are to you.”

“But you are more important to me,” he said. “I can’t lose you.”

“You’ve already lost me!” she seethed, and blocked his sword again. She couldn’t let him do this. She couldn’t let him sacrifice everything he had wanted. She couldn’t watch him grow to hate her someday.

He pulled back. She expected him to come to the left, but he came to the right, and she failed to block him. He placed his sword right over her heart.

This one was a death blow.

“No.” He purposely tapped his sword to her chest. “Your heart belongs to me. Don’t ever forget that.”

She stumbled back, anger vibrating through her. Anger, not so much at him, but at knowing how much he could lose. She slung the sword down and turned around and stared at the water, her throat knotting, her vision becoming blurry.

He came up behind her—not touching her, as if he knew she wouldn’t allow it.

Instead, he stood so close his words brushed against her cheek and sent

shivers of regret down her spine. “I became blinded by what I thought I needed to do. I was wrong. I was stupid. But not for one minute did I ever stop loving you. And that’s why I deserve to be forgiven.”

Just like that, she felt the tight emotion in her chest lessen. He was forgiven. But as she’d known for a while, forgiving him wasn’t the biggest issue. A tear slipped from her lashes. She moved a few feet away.

“I’m finished,” she said. “I want to go back to the cabin.”

“Okay,” he said, but he sounded rejected and she felt the same emotion echoing inside her chest.

When he went to pick up the swords, she turned to watch him. He looked up. She saw so much in his eyes—hurt, regret, a longing for her to say she forgave him.

But if she gave him that, he would only work harder to convince her to come back to him. And how could she when she knew that someday he would resent her for it?

After a few seconds, he said, “I think you’re ready to start practicing with the real swords.”

She considered how many times her sword had touched his body accidentally, but then she remembered what the ghost had said. Dying was her choice. And she chose to live.

She needed to be ready—ready to fight for her life.

“Okay,” she said, and tried not to let the fear into her voice.

* * *

Are you ready?

Kylie had just fallen asleep that night, after fretting for a good hour, when the voice and chill woke her up.

“Ready for what?” she asked, not opening her eyes.

For practice. I told you. You need a better teacher.

“He’s a great teacher,” she said, defending Lucas before she even realized it.

He’s great to look at. And I’ll admit he has some skills, but you need more. So wake up.

Kylie pried open one eye and saw the spirit, her face inches away. “You do know that the living need eight hours of sleep?”

That’s the rule for humans. Supernaturals can survive on much less. Now get up and let’s get started.

“I don’t have my sword.”

Ahh, but if you get up, you’d see it’s already here.

Kylie remembered Holiday saying it wasn’t possible. “A ghost can’t move objects.”

I didn’t say I moved it. I said it was here.

“So who’s moving it?” Kylie asked.

Don’t pretend that you don’t know. The same ones who delivered the sword to you. The death angels.

Kylie’s breath caught. “So they want me to kill Mario?”

Well, I haven’t spoken to them directly. She leaned in. Frankly, they make me very nervous, but as for killing Mario, it would appear that way, now, wouldn’t it?

“And you?” Kylie asked. “What do you want? The same thing?”

You know, I’ve tried to figure that out myself. But every time I get close to the answer, it’s as if it moves farther away. Why is that? She sounded genuinely puzzled and vulnerable.

Kylie recalled the ghost grieving over her son. Maybe she wasn’t all bad.

Kylie sat up and saw the clock. “It’s two in the morning. You really want me to get up?”

I don’t think you can fight reclined in your bed. I’d have you gutted before you ever raised your sword.

Okay, the spirit was bad after all. However, her words had Kylie crawling out from under the covers. She spotted the sword at the end of her bed. And she also spotted Socks, his little feline face barely sticking out of the dust ruffle.

“Okay ... where do we begin?” Kylie picked up her sword.

Put on a white gown. Or something white, the spirit said.

Kylie looked down at her black nightshirt. “Why?”

Don’t you want to die in white?

Kylie's heart stopped.

The spirit laughed. *You are so easy to tease. Put on white because how else will you know if you're cut and bleeding?*

Kylie put the sword back down. "I'm not sure I want to play."

The spirit laughed again. *Don't fret. I'm just going to mark up your gown. I can't actually cut you. Though the latter is a much better teaching tool.*

Kylie relented and grabbed a white shirt and pair of boxers. They went into the living room. Kylie's sword glowed a bright yellow.

They had just started to spar when Della shot out of her bedroom, eyes aglow, and looked at Kylie holding up the sword.

"I'm just going to practice a bit," Kylie said.

"In the middle of the freaking night? With a freaking glowing sword?"

Kylie nodded. "You drink blood, I play with glowing swords."

Della wrapped her arms around herself as if cold. "You've got company, don't you?"

Unable to lie, Kylie nodded.

"Oh, hell!" The vamp went back into her room, slamming the door behind her.

That girl had some serious issues.

Kylie frowned. "Not as many as other people I know," Kylie said to herself. "Now, let's do this and get it over with."

The next fifteen minutes were the hardest Kylie had ever fought. She used every technique she'd learned from Lucas, but this woman didn't abide by the normal techniques. She fought dirty. And was proud of it.

Every time the spirit's sword came in contact with Kylie's body, a red mark would appear on her white shirt or boxers. Every time Kylie's sword made contact with the spirit's body, she would show an open wound and blood. Of course, the ghost only had one little scratch on her upper left arm. Not a lot of damage considering Kylie's clothes were covered in red marks.

It only made Kylie feel more vulnerable and less capable of facing a real battle. A battle that Kylie sensed was her destiny. A battle with Mario. A battle she very well might lose.

After a few minutes, the spirit started spouting orders, much like Lucas

did. Move this way, hold her sword this way. Move quicker. Never lose sight of her sword.

Kylie finally got the hang of it and actually blocked some of the spirit's blows. But all that stopped when the front door to her cabin cracked open and then was knocked off its hinges.

The wood panel landed with a big *clunk* on the floor.

Before Kylie got a good look at the cabin's intruder, Della's door hit the floor with the same sharp noise.

The vampire rushed out, her eyes glowing bright green and her fangs fully extended.

Chapter Thirty-three

The intense cold faded with the spirit. Kylie stood, feet apart, body tense, her sword poised to fight. She looked from Della, all fangs and fury, to the front entrance.

Confusion had Kylie holding her stance. Burnett stood atop the downed door, his eyes brighter than Della's. Behind him was an army of Shadow Falls campers: Lucas, Derek, Chris, and Jonathon. All of them stood mesmerized by the glowing weapon.

"Holy shit." The words came from Chris and Jonathon. While Jonathon had seen the sword, he hadn't seen it glowing.

"You don't repeat what you've seen here!" Burnett snapped.

Kylie lowered her sword and breathed, hoping air would lessen her adrenaline.

What the hell was happening now?

She met Burnett's gaze. "What's wrong?"

He looked around. "Who's here?"

"Just the spirit," she said.

Chris and Jonathon stepped back.

Derek, accustomed to the whole ghost issue, stayed where he was. So did Lucas. She noticed the were's bright orange eyes, as if he was prepared to fight. His gaze stayed trained on her.

Burnett's posture lost some of its fierceness. But not nearly enough to put Kylie at ease.

Another set of footsteps sounded from the porch. Hayden entered, giving the door a quick glance.

“What’s going on?” Kylie asked.

“Can I second that question?” Della bit out, and brushed a curtain of straight black hair from her face. Her eyes no longer glowed, but their green hue remained, made even more noticeable by the solid black nightshirt that hung just above her knees.

“Someone jumped the fence. Broke into the camp.” Burnett took another step inside.

“Who?” Miranda walked out of her bedroom, holding on to her teddy bear, wearing Smurf pajamas, and yawning.

Kylie’s grasp on the sword tightened as only one person came to mind. Was she ready to stand up to Mario?

Probably not, the answer came back. But nothing would stop her from trying. Not when so many people she loved were standing around as possible victims for the rogue.

Burnett said, “I heard the alarm. Then I heard you fighting and assumed you were being attacked.”

“Told you practicing in the middle of the night wasn’t good,” Della muttered.

“Where’s Perry?” Miranda asked as if she suspected he would be involved in this.

“Circling the property to see if he sees anyone.” Burnett turned to Hayden and nodded as if giving him a silent order. The chameleon moved back out on the porch. At first Kylie was confused, then she understood. Burnett had instructed Hayden to turn invisible to see if he heard any other chameleons. She considered checking herself, but with everyone’s eyes on her, she didn’t want to freak everyone out.

In a few minutes, Hayden reappeared behind the others. “It seems clear,” he said.

But Kylie knew that if an invisible intruder remained completely still, he might not be detected.

Burnett shifted his gaze to Della. “Stay and guard Kylie. We’ll go look around.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay here as well,” Lucas spoke up.

His words caused an emotional flinch in Kylie's gut. Letting go was hard. Letting go, with him always around, felt impossible.

Burnett nodded. Then footsteps thundered down the porch steps as everyone left.

Kylie looked from Lucas to Della, and then Miranda.

The witch still clung to her teddy bear. "Who do they think is here?" Miranda asked.

No one answered. Then Miranda's gaze shot to Kylie. "Oh, him."

Della sighed. "Looks like it's gonna be a long, bat-shit crazy night."

Lucas planted himself in the living room chair. Kylie, trying to ignore him, placed her sword down on the coffee table. She watched it lose its glow and then she glanced at Miranda. "Do you feel anything?"

The witch closed her eyes. After a long second, she opened them and looked at Kylie. "Yeah."

Kylie's heart tightened. Oh, shit. Was Mario here? She almost reached for her sword.

"But it's not evil this time." Miranda glanced at the weapon on the coffee table. "Maybe that's what I'm feeling."

"You didn't feel it the other night, did you?"

"No. But it has an aura, so it makes sense I might feel it."

Kylie let out a deep breath. She hoped Miranda was right—that whoever was here wasn't evil.

The sudden sound of footsteps on the front porch had everyone on alert again. Lucas shot up from the chair. Della shot across the room. Kylie however, moved fastest and was closer to the door. If it was Mario, no way in hell was he going to hurt them before getting through her.

Steve walked inside. His gaze shot past Kylie, to Della.

Della frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you're okay."

Della frowned. "I don't need you to protect me."

He stomped out at the same time Kylie heard a roar. Not a human roar. She'd bet anything that the shape-shifter had just turned himself into a big pissed-off feline. Kylie considered going after him to help soothe his ego, but

since she'd nearly become supper for one angry lion when she first got here at Shadow Falls, she decided to let Steve handle his own ego.

Miranda made a disapproving noise. "That's no way to treat the guy who gave you a hickey."

Della growled. "What? You saw how quickly he left. If he'd really been concerned, he'd have stayed."

Kylie rolled her eyes at Della's logic.

Lucas raised his brows—probably at the hickey comment. Then his gaze shifted to Kylie with a look of protection. But in less than a second, something softer flashed in his eyes, something tender. *Love you*, those blue eyes seemed to say.

The lion somewhere out front roared again and then a huge prehistoric bird came down with a loud thud in the open threshold.

Miranda squealed, lost her teddy, and went to hug the bird.

Kylie plopped down on the arm of the sofa. The vamp had hit the nail on the head when she said it was going to be a very long and bat-shit crazy night.

* * *

"What's the tape for?" Kylie asked Lucas the next day as he unloaded his bag again and prepared for practice. Kylie had slept in and missed classes, and Lucas had called a little after eleven and asked if she wanted to cancel practice since they'd been up most of the night. She'd wanted to say hell yes, but heeding her heart, as well as the ghost's warning that she needed to learn to fight, she agreed to practice.

"For protection. We wrap the ends of the blade." He looked up the line of trees as if he'd heard something. Or someone.

Kylie's thoughts went from fighting with real swords to Lucas's cautious surveillance. "Who's out there?"

"Chris and Will," he answered.

Since the intruder hadn't been found last night, and they hadn't gotten another security alarm saying anyone had left, the entire camp was on Red Alert. For now she didn't just have one shadow, she had three.

Lovely.

Just lovely.

As she watched Lucas pull out the swords, a breath of cold moved across the back of her neck. Make that four shadows.

He's such a pansy. Tell him not to tape the blades. You need to learn to fight for real! Time is running out.

Looking over her shoulder, Kylie saw the spirit had donned her blood-soaked gown again.

What happened to you? Who killed you? Kylie asked.

The spirit looked down at her gown and frowned. *I'm not important. You are.*

Suddenly feeling desperate for answers, Kylie continued, *How do you know me? How are we connected? I need answers.*

You need to learn to fight. Or you will be as dead as I am.

The warning sent dread stabbing at Kylie's heart. She watched Lucas crouch down and start to wrap the end of the blades. "Do we really need the tape?"

He looked up, surprise in his eyes. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "You need to teach me how to fight for real."

He stood up, concern in his face. "Why? What is it that you know?"

"Just a feeling," she lied.

"I don't like that feeling," he said.

"Join the crowd." She blinked. "Just teach me to fight, Lucas."

Appearing resigned, he picked up the two swords. Her weapon started glowing the instant she wrapped her hand around it. Perhaps it was her imagination, but it seemed to be glowing brighter. What did that mean? Did the sword, like the ghost, know the time for battle drew near?

Lucas stood beside her and commenced doing warm-up stances. She immediately followed suit.

Kylie's phone, tucked in her pocket, beeped with an incoming text. She waited for the next break before she pulled it out. It was from Derek.

Call me.

Was he back to trying to convince her to rekindle their relationship? She

recalled seeing him frown last night when Lucas had insisted on staying at the cabin to protect her.

“Who is it?” Lucas asked.

She hesitated, then just spit it out. “Derek.”

He frowned but remained silent. They went back to the basic form exercises.

“When are we going to spar?” she asked as she copied his moves.

“When are you going to tell that fairy that it’s really over between you two?”

“I already did,” she answered before she realized the wisdom against it.

He stopped moving. His sword, pointing upward, came down in a whoosh. He faced her. “You did?”

It was too late to take it back. “Yes.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

She frowned. “I didn’t do it for you. I did it for him.”

His smile remained strong and one eyebrow arched up. “But I’m the reason you did it.”

It wasn’t a question, but she could deny it. Then too much time had passed for her to do it. It would’ve sounded false. It would’ve been false.

An even bigger smile appeared in his eyes. A smile of confidence. Of hope.

“I love you,” he said, his voice almost musical with happiness.

She shot him a scowl. “Isn’t saying that a bit dangerous considering these aren’t wooden swords and the ends aren’t even taped?”

He laughed. A real laugh, and the sound of it washed over her like a soft summer rain on an extra-hot day. Then flashing in her mind was the look on his face when the weres had left him alone on parents’ day. Then she recalled that Will and Chris were out there, probably listening to every word they said. Will was supposed to be a friend, but would he, too, turn his back on Lucas?

She cut her eyes to the woods and whispered, “We’re not alone, remember?”

“I don’t care who hears it. I love you!” His voice rose louder this time.

She frowned. “Nothing’s changed.”

“Everything has changed,” he said.

No it hadn’t. He might think he could walk away from everything that had mattered to him, but she wasn’t about to let him do that. She loved him too much.

“Are we going to practice? If not, I’m leaving.”

“Then let’s practice,” he said.

They continued with the exercises for another ten minutes. Finally, he faced her. “We’ll start, but remember, this isn’t wood. We start slow.”

He wasn’t joking about slow. They moved at a snail’s pace and continued for the next fifteen minutes. “Who were you fighting with last night?” His question broke the long tense silence as they finally started picking up speed.

“The ghost.”

“Is she good?” he asked.

The fact that he asked about a ghost surprised her.

“She claims she’s better than you.”

“I knew I didn’t like her,” he said, and half smiled. After a pause, he asked, “Who is this ghost?” His gaze stayed on the swords.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully. And just like that, Kylie sensed it was imperative that she find out.

* * *

Kylie didn’t remember to call Derek. She and Lucas had a good practice. They didn’t really let loose and spar like they would have with wooden swords, but almost.

When she checked her phone at almost midnight that night and found another text from Derek, she felt guilty. *Call me now!*

She’d seen him at dinner—that had been after his text—and he hadn’t said anything. He hadn’t even sat with her; instead he’d grabbed his dinner and left.

Still a bit worried, but not knowing if he’d still be awake, she texted him back. *What’s up?*

She waited up for a good forty-five minutes to see if he would text her

back. Nothing.

Frustrated, she flopped back on her pillow. The ghostly chill waved through the room for about the third time since she'd come to bed, but the spirit didn't stay.

Kylie's conversation with Holiday this afternoon added merit to her feelings. If she could just figure out the spirit's identity, it might help to answer a lot of questions.

While the spirit hadn't confirmed it, Kylie was almost certain the ghost was connected to Mario.

"Who are you?" Kylie asked the wisp of cold moving like a quick shadow in the room. "Tell me. Or at least show me something."

No answer came. Accepting that no spirit spoke before they were ready, Kylie rolled over and tried to sleep. Tried to think about something other than the ghost.

Anything other than killing someone.

Anything other than dying.

Anything other than Lucas and the hope she'd seen in his eyes.

Sleep had just about lured her in when she heard a slight noise. Footsteps on the wood floor. She opened her eyes and reached under her pillow for the sword.

Under her pillow? She didn't sleep with the sword.

Instinctively, she knew they were coming after her.

Who was coming for her?

Something wasn't right. Yet Kylie pulled out the weapon and lunged out of bed. Her feet landed on carpet. She looked down at the Oriental rug. Plush. Expensive.

Where was she?

Or a better question was: Who was she?

Heart pounding at the sound of the approaching footsteps, she looked around the room. A bedroom. Not Kylie's bedroom.

Heavy, expensive-looking wood furniture glistened from the little moonlight filtering through a large bay window that looked out at palm trees.

The taste of fear and fury lingered on her tongue. She raised her sword.

Only to realize it wasn't the sword that had been delivered to her, but the sword of ...

Everything made sense now. She was the spirit and she was in a vision. She spotted a heavy framed mirror over a dresser. For a flicker of a second, she stared at the image. Her dark hair hung loose, uncombed.

But causing Kylie's first stirring of panic was the gown. The one the spirit had obviously been wearing when she'd been murdered.

And Kylie was going to live it. Her first impulse was to scream out "Hell, no." Her second was to be aware, to find the answers she needed.

The thundering of footsteps drew closer, thudding as if climbing old wooden steps. Instinctually, Kylie knew that the spirit had expected her attackers. She had known that the night would bring her death. She'd chosen to wear white, yet had questioned if the sign of purity would do her any good.

Now as she waited for the end to draw near, a surge of regret, remorse for the life she had lived, crossed her mind. But deep down she accepted it was too late. Too late to change how she'd lived. But she could and would change how she died.

Who are you? The question whispered through Kylie's mind. She prayed the answer would make itself clear so she could leave this vision before she had to live this woman's death.

The spirit looked to the window almost as if considering escape. *Get out,* Kylie told her. *You don't have to die.*

Even before the thought was complete, Kylie knew the actions of the spirit on this eve of her death had already been written. Kylie had not been brought inside the body, or the memory, to change what was. She'd been brought here to live it.

To learn the truth.

What truth? Why hadn't the spirit left? Kylie sensed that leaving had been an option. The spirit had chosen to die. For what cause?

"Mama." The young boy ran through the door.

"He found us." His eyes rounded with fear and tears. "He found us. Now what do we do?"

She grabbed the boy by his shoulders. The spirit wanted to embrace him,

to bury her face in his hair so she could die with the smell of her only son still filling her senses. But time had run out. She pushed him into the closet. “Use the trapdoor like I showed you. Run and don’t look back.” She shut the closet door at the same time the bedroom door crashed open.

Chapter Thirty-four

The woman, with Kylie living inside her, turned to fight. Not because she thought she could win, but for the little time her son would need to escape. She knew she would die, but it was for her son.

They moved in. There were three of them. They wore black, no masks, and she recognized them.

Knew them well.

Had eaten at their tables.

Laughed at their jokes.

She also recognized the look in their eyes, the drive to complete a job. Killing her was their duty.

She raised her sword and fought. Fought for her son. For a few seconds, she actually bested them, blocked their attempts to draw blood. No one could say she had gone down easy.

The first piercing pain went into her ribs. Kylie screamed for it to stop. She tried to tell herself it wasn't real, that it wasn't her, but it felt real. She felt the pain the spirit had felt those last horrific moments of her life.

Felt their weapons slashing into her skin, hitting bone.

Her body grew limp, the pain too much. She dropped to her knees and fell forward to the floor. Her own blood oozed out. The thick flow of fluid warmed the sudden chill. She didn't fight it. She willed the blood to flow faster. The faster it flowed, the less she hurt.

The coppery scent of blood filled her senses. The stickiness of it seeped beneath her cheek pressed to the cold floor. The last thing she saw was the closet door ajar and her young son watching in horror as she took her last

breath.

He hadn't run. Fury filled her soul.

Would he know? Would he know that the reason she died had been to keep him safe—to protect him from the kind of life she and his father had lived?

The second before death took her, she vowed revenge. Not revenge on the ones who killed her—they were nothing more than pawns doing the devil's work. She knew, for she had been one of them. The revenge she sought was for the one who'd sent them, the devil himself. As well as the one who had allowed it, the devil's son.

* * *

"Don't get too close. She might cut your head off with that thing." Miranda's shrill voice registered in Kylie's mind, but it was in the distance.

"She won't kill me," Della responded.

"I don't mean she'd want to." Miranda's voice came again. "But hell, you saw how she was dancing around with that sword."

Her consciousness fought against the void of blackness. She wanted to fall back into the void. It held no memories. It offered escape from what she'd just experienced. The damn voice, the one she couldn't really identify spoke again. *You need to remember.*

Taking a breath, she opened her eyes.

Della's black, slightly slanted eyes came into focus. "She's back," she said in a singsong voice, sounding like a horror film.

Kylie tried to push up but felt too weak.

Della helped her sit up. Kylie looked around. She was in her cabin's kitchen. Still clutched in her hand was the sword. The vision must have provoked her to pick it up. Remembering parts of the vision, she dropped the sword and ran her hand over her stomach to check for wounds.

None. Only the memory of pain remained. It was over. Everything but the crying. Tears welled in her eyes. How could life be so brutal? So evil?

"You're not going to kill us, are you?" Miranda asked. Kylie shook her head. As painful as it was to remember details, she needed to remember—she

needed answers.

A flash of the little boy in the closet filled her mind, something familiar tickled her memory. Yes, *he* was familiar. Even more, bits and pieces of the story played déjà vu with her mind. Someone had told this story. Who? All of a sudden she knew.

She stood up. Her knees buckled. Della caught her.

“We’ve got to go,” Kylie said.

“It’s kind of hard to go when you can’t stand up,” Della said.

“I can.” Kylie forced herself to stand on her own accord and pushed Della’s hand away.

“Okay, you’re standing,” Della bit out. “Step two is being able to walk.”

Kylie took a few steps and glared back at the vamp.

“Step three is making sense. And it doesn’t make sense for me to walk out of this cabin before I know where we’re going.”

Kylie inhaled. “To Derek’s. I need Derek.”

“Derek?” Miranda said. “And here I thought she’d given up on him and was almost back with Lucas.”

Kylie shot the little witch a pleading look to give it a break. “I’m serious.”

“Can I get my bra on first?” Della asked.

“You don’t need one.” Miranda snickered.

Della shot her a scowl. “You are the witchiest bitch I know.”

Kylie, too emotionally distraught to deal with their bickering, started for the door. She had to know.

Della must have decided Miranda was right about not needing boob support, because she followed Kylie out the door. Pajamas and all.

“You know Burnett will have my head for letting you do this without calling him.”

Kylie started running, her need for answers giving her will. She felt the wind in her hair and the tears run wet down her cheeks.

In less than two minutes, Kylie came to a stop beside Derek’s cabin.

“Okay, wise one, are you going to knock on the door?” Della looked at her, and her smartass expression vanished into one of concern once she saw Kylie’s tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It must have been bad.”

Kylie nodded. “I’ll try the window.” She ran to the side of the cabin. The windows were a lot taller than she was. Jumping up, she latched her fingers onto the top of the window ledge and pulled herself up to peer inside.

And what she saw had her ... had her ... confused.

Befuddled.

Shocked.

She blinked—as if it would change what she was looking at.

But two or three flutters of her lashes later, she could still make out not one, but two people in Derek’s bed. One was Derek. She could clearly make out his masculine form. But the other was ... Kylie couldn’t see her face.

But it was definitely a *her*. She had long black hair and a very feminine-shaped pajama-covered butt protruding from the blanket. And Kylie just happened to recognize those PJ bottoms as Derek’s.

The girl shifted. Kylie held her breath, hoping she’d roll over so she could see who was warming up the other side of Derek’s bed.

Kylie took a second to ask herself if she was jealous. Somewhere deep down, very deep, there was a touch of green emotion. But with it came a sense of rightness. Derek needed to move on.

But did he have to do it so dang fast?

The girl rolled over.

Kylie saw her face and ... “Crap!” Her fingers accidentally let go of the windowsill and she fell, landing with a thump on her butt.

How? How could this be?

Chapter Thirty-five

“What is it?” Della asked, looming behind her.

“Nothing,” Kylie lied, still on the ground where she had fallen.

“Try again,” Della said, obviously having heard her heart’s untruth.

“Let it go. And please ... give me some privacy to talk to ... him.”

“I’m shadowing you,” she said and watched Kylie stand up.

“I know,” Kylie answered. “But I’m begging you. Please. I need some privacy.”

“To do what? Go jump his bones?” Kylie didn’t even reply to that. Della swung around and stomped off.

Kylie pulled back up on the windowsill, hung on with one hand, and knocked with the other. Both parties in bed bolted up.

Derek’s sleep-filled gaze shot toward the window. Kylie wasn’t sure what Jenny—as in Hayden’s sister, Jenny—did. She’d vanished.

Brushing a hand over his face, Derek came to the window. Kylie dropped down as he lifted the window up. He reached out and offered her a frown and a hand to pull her up.

“It’s about damn time,” he muttered as he hoisted her up. “What the hell took you so long?”

Feet on the bedroom floor, Kylie frowned. “You saw me at dinner and didn’t say anything.”

“What could I say in a room filled with vampires?”

Hell, he was right. “What’s going on?” She looked around. “And Jenny, you can make yourself visible. I already saw you.”

Jenny appeared and her cheeks turned red. “This isn’t what it seems. We

weren't..." She pointed to the floor where a blanket and pillow were thrown.

"You were supposed to sleep on the floor," Jenny snapped at Derek.

"I couldn't sleep, so I just..." He glared at Jenny. "I didn't touch you."

Kylie shook her head. "I don't care about that."

"I do," Jenny said, and glared at Derek.

"I didn't touch you!" he repeated.

Kylie moaned. "Jenny? What are you doing *here*?" Right then Kylie remembered the alarm. "That was you that jumped the fence."

Jenny frowned. "I didn't know the place was wired. Even the compound doesn't have an alarm."

But the chameleons weren't waiting on a psycho rogue to attack. Kylie shook her head, reminding herself to focus on one issue at a time. And this was a big issue, too. "Shit!" she muttered. "Does Hayden know you're here?"

Both Derek and Jenny shook their heads.

Kylie looked at Jenny. "You ran away, didn't you?"

Jenny nodded and gripped her hands together. "Please don't ... don't be mad."

Derek looked at Jenny with empathy and then stared at Kylie as if frustrated. "Why are you upset? You said you wanted to help her."

Kylie frowned. "I do, but ... running away isn't the answer."

"Please," Derek muttered. "For someone who ran away a couple of weeks ago, I don't think you have a lot of room to judge."

"I didn't run away. I told everyone I was leaving. And I'm not judging." Frustrated and yet a bit amused at Derek's defense of Jenny, Kylie inhaled and looked from Jenny to Derek. "If a chameleon runs away before they're mature they are excommunicated from their family."

Derek cut his eyes to Jenny, up and then down. "She looks pretty mature to me."

Kylie rolled her eyes. "I'm not talking about her body. I'm talking about her being able to change her pattern." Moving her gaze to Jenny, Kylie realized something. "But you're able to go invisible. I thought that didn't happen until later?"

"It doesn't normally. I've been working really hard on my own for the last

couple of years so I could leave early. But I still can't control my pattern." A sadness entered the girl's eyes.

"Are you really ready to completely walk away from your family?"

Jenny dropped on the bed and bunched a handful of Derek's loose-fitting pajamas in her hands. "It hurts like hell, but that family is trying to force me to marry someone I don't love. And he doesn't love me, either. I don't want to live like that."

Kylie's mind raced. She had told Holiday that what the chameleon elders were doing was almost as bad as the weres. Now she realized how right she was. The elders were doing to Jenny what Lucas's father was doing to Lucas.

Did that mean Lucas was right to stand up to his pack, and to his dad? Everything felt so mixed up. Realizing Derek and Jenny stared at her, she decided now wasn't the time to think about Lucas. One problem at a time.

Problem one, her grandfather and the entire chameleon community were going to blame this on Kylie because she was the reason Hayden was here. How in the hell was she going to fix that? She looked at Jenny again. "Okay, so now explain to me why you haven't gotten with Hayden?"

"Because," Jenny said. "Every time I talked to him about me leaving, he'd tell me it was wrong. To stick it out until I matured. But everyone knew that the day I matured, I was out of there, so the elders were trying to find another way to stop me. They were going to force me to marry Brandon next week." Her expression grew solemn. "Besides, I didn't come here because of Hayden. I came here because of you. I thought you'd understand. I guess I was wrong."

Guilt filled Kylie's chest. "You're not wrong, I just ... I don't know how to make this right." Kylie looked around. "How did you end up with Derek?"

"You always had people around you. I saw Derek and I figured if you trusted him, then I could, too."

Kylie sighed. "Are you really ready to lose the right to see your family?" Was Lucas?

Tears filled the girl's eyes and Kylie felt the same emotion stir inside her.

"No," Jenny said, "but I wasn't ready to marry Brandon, either."

"I know," Kylie said. "We just have to figure out how to deal with this."

The same went with Lucas. But God help her, she didn't have a clue how to do either.

She glanced at Derek and remembered why she'd come here to begin with. "We have a lot of stuff to deal with," she muttered.

"What stuff?" Derek asked.

Kylie hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud. Then parts of the vision played in Kylie's head like a horror movie. "Do you remember when you told me about Roberto, Mario's grandson? You said he witnessed his mother's murder?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember how she was murdered?"

He ran a hand through his dark hair. "I think one article said she was stabbed."

Kylie frowned. "I was afraid of that."

"Why?" Derek asked.

"She's my ghost."

Derek looked concerned. "Roberto's mom is your ghost?"

"Please tell me she's not here right now." Jenny pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

"It's okay." Derek moved closer to the girl. He rested a palm on her shoulder to ease her fear.

"Stop it!" Jenny slapped his hand. "I don't like you touching me. You ... make me feel things I don't ... feel."

Derek frowned. "I was trying to make you feel better."

"Maybe I don't want to feel better!" she snapped, and they stared at each other.

For some reason their bickering reminded Kylie of Burnett and Holiday, or better yet, Kylie and Derek in the beginning, and she knew why. Sexual tension. If Kylie was a vampire she'd bet she could smell the pheromones.

Derek looked at Kylie. "Do you see what I've put up with the last twenty-four hours?"

The only thing keeping Kylie from smiling were the remnants of the vision and the realization that she didn't have a clue how to deal with Jenny.

If she went to Holiday, she wasn't sure the camp leader would or even could allow her to stay. But how long could they keep her hidden?

All of a sudden, Derek's window shot up and Della lunged inside. "Okay, here's the thing. I just got a call from Burnett. He was doing walk-bys of our cabins and realized we're gone. He's on his way here. You've got one second to hide Girl Wonder over there, or he's gonna know she's here."

Jenny vanished. Della, seeing the vanishing act for the first time, looked stunned. Burnett came bolting through the opened window. "What the hell is happening now?"

"I had a vision." Kylie offered part of the truth. "I wanted to ask Derek about it."

"And you couldn't have called me first?"

"You know how I am after a vision, I was crazy, all I could think about was finding out the truth."

"What truth?"

"I know who the ghost is now. She is ... was connected to Mario. She was his daughter-in-law, Roberto's mother. Mario had her killed." Kylie's heart ached, remembering the last few minutes of the woman's life. Remembering how Roberto had witnessed the terrible death.

Burnett sighed. "And the sword? Is it from her, too?"

"No, she says it's from ... the death angels."

A long pause filled the room as if everyone had to take a few seconds to believe it. "Do you know why they sent it?" Burnett finally asked.

Kylie frowned. She suspected it was because she was going to have to face Mario. And deep down she figured that Burnett suspected it as well. But nobody wanted to say it. "No, not really." It wasn't even a lie. There was a difference in knowing something and suspecting it.

"Come on, let's go talk to Holiday about this vision," Burnett said.

Kylie left Derek's cabin to deal with one issue, knowing that sooner or later, she would have to deal with the one she was leaving here. Jenny.

How long could they hide a runaway chameleon? Hopefully long enough for Kylie to come up with a plan.

* * *

Both Burnett and Holiday walked Kylie back to her cabin after their powwow. She'd managed to get through the talk without lying by keeping the topic on the vision. Kylie hadn't told them anything about Jenny or about her father repeating his message concerning them being together soon. To be honest, she tried not to think about her dad's message. Hadn't Holiday said that a person who started preparing oneself for death cheated themselves out of what little life they had left? And ... somewhere deep in her gut, she held on to the fact that her dad could be confused. That his definition of soon could be in about eighty or ninety years.

The first thing Kylie did after Burnett and Holiday walked away was grab her phone.

Derek answered on the first ring. "You survived?"

"Barely," Kylie said.

"How did you lie to Burnett?"

"By avoiding the truth."

He sighed. "Speaking of the truth. I reread the articles about Roberto's mom. The cause of death had been listed as multiple stab wounds. Oh, and her name was listed as Lucinda Esparza."

"Thanks." Kylie repeated the name in her head.

"So what's the plan with *my* problem?" he asked.

So he considered Jenny his problem, did he? "I don't know, but would you mind continuing to hide her until I brainstorm a plan? Since you don't have a vampire rooming with you or Burnett doing walk-bys. She has less chance of being detected with you."

"I planned on her staying here," Derek said, sounding almost insistent. It was then Kylie knew for sure. Her old flame had managed to fall out of love with her and was on his way to falling for Jenny. Kylie felt their connection, just like she'd felt the thing between Burnett and Holiday, Perry and Miranda, and Jonathon and Helen.

She could almost hear Derek and Jenny telling their kids how they'd first met. "Your mom just jumped out of nowhere expecting me to give her a

piggyback ride!”

Jenny was lucky. And Derek deserved to be happy.

And so do I. And her happiness was tied to Lucas. It was as if something switched in her head and she realized how wrong she’d been. She shouldn’t have been trying to push him away. She should have been pushing him to find a way to make it right. “Hey ... uh, I just realized I need to do something. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“Do what?” Derek asked, obviously reading something from her.

Convince someone I’m worth fighting for. “Bye.” She hung up, and then went to dial Lucas’s number. An instant before she hit the last number, she changed her mind. There was another way. A better way.

* * *

It took ten minutes to fall asleep, and another few to get in control and dreamscape her way to Lucas’s cabin and into his bedroom. He looked adorable asleep in his bed. The sheet came low on his waist and she couldn’t help but wonder if he had anything on at all. She really doubted it.

Mentally dressing him in a pair of long boxers, she slipped into his mind and into his dreams.

“Lucas,” she whispered his name. While she could have taken him anywhere, she hadn’t. They remained in his bedroom. She eyed his bare chest again and wondered why she hadn’t dreamed him in a shirt. Probably because she liked seeing his bare chest.

Then she looked at his bed and her mind went to joining him there. That’s when she decided she needed to get them away from here.

Lucas sat up. “Hey.” His voice came out deep and sleepy.

“Come on, let’s go,” she said.

“Go where?” he asked.

“Somewhere to talk,” she answered.

He patted the bed and looked at her through his dark lashes with a sexy grin. Had he read her earlier thoughts? she wondered.

“We could talk here,” he said in a husky voice.

She rolled her eyes. “Nice try.”

He laughed. Then he pulled up the sheet and glanced beneath it. “At least they don’t have smiley faces on them,” he said, referring to the time she’d dressed him in another dreamscape.

She concentrated and moved the dream to behind the office where they often went to talk.

He looked around, and then back at her. The night was dark; only a few stars brightened the sky. “I think I liked the lake dream better,” he said, talking about the dreamscape they’d shared of them skinny-dipping.

Reaching out, he caught her shoulders and pulled her against him. His chest was so warm. So inviting. She would have loved to stay there. To explore all the things she wanted to explore between them. *But not yet.*

“Behave,” she said, and pulled loose.

His smile faded. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Well, yes, it’s wrong. Everything’s wrong.” She inhaled. “You have to get on that Council, Lucas.”

“I’m not marrying Monique,” he growled.

“Not by marrying Monique. You have to find another way.”

“I need my father to vouch for me, Kylie. He’s not going to do that now.”

She gritted her teeth. “Talk to him. You said he’s protective of you. He obviously cares. Maybe if you—”

“You don’t know him,” he said.

Fury rose in her chest. “Then find another way. Find someone else to vouch for you. Or talk to the Council yourself. You’ve told me all the young people want change. Make the elders see this. They were young once. Can’t you make them remember what it was like? I mean ... who was it that said if the door is locked, find a window. If the window’s locked, well ... break it. If it won’t break then find a freaking sledgehammer and make a new one.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know how they are.”

“Yes, I do! The elders of the chameleons are just like your elders. They want to arrange marriages and tell all the young chameleons what to do. I don’t know how I’m going to change things, but I’ll be damned if I’m not going to try.”

“It’s not the same,” he said, as if taking offense to her accusation.

“Maybe it’s not exactly the same. But you’re still giving up.”

“I’m not giving up on us,” he said. “That’s what matters.”

She shook her head. “But you are giving up on us. If you don’t get on the Council, Lucas, there is no us.”

“You don’t mean that!” he said, his anger thickening in his voice.

“Don’t think I want it,” she said. “But I know if you lose who you are and all you ever wanted, you will resent me for it. Maybe not now, but someday you will. And I can’t go into this knowing that you’ll hate me someday. I can’t.”

In a flash, Kylie ended the dreamscape and shot up in her bed. Then she cried herself asleep. But right before she did, she heard her father one more time.

Soon. Soon we will be together.

She couldn’t help but wonder if, when she was dead, would she still ache for Lucas?

* * *

The next morning, Kylie, running on only an hour of sleep, stood with the crowd waiting for Chris to do his dog and pony show and get Campmate hour under way. Perry, her official morning shadow, stood beside her, with Miranda leaning against him. Della had a vampire meeting and was going to miss out.

Lucas wasn’t here. But she’d gotten a text from him that read: *I think I found a window*. Hope gave her energy. Energy to reminisce over how good Lucas had looked in the bed last night and how tempted she’d been to curl up with him and let things just happen. Pushing the sexy were from her mind, she searched for something else to think about—like figuring out how to proceed with Lucinda, who was standing in the crowd as if she belonged but wasn’t speaking to Kylie. Was Kylie’s fighting Mario honestly what the spirit needed Kylie to do to pass over? Pass over to hell?

It was one thing to encourage the souls destined for the pearly gates to leave their lonely existence on earth and move on. But how could she encourage someone to head off to hell?

Kylie shivered at the thought.

“You’re quiet,” Miranda said. “Everything okay?”

Kylie nodded and spotted Derek moving into the crowd. Her thoughts shot to Jenny and how she was going to deal with that. Her gut told her the right thing to do was to confront Hayden.

She knew Jenny was frightened he would insist she return home, but Kylie wasn’t so sure Hayden would do that.

The chatter in the circle of students quieted. Kylie looked up. Chris moved into the front of the crowd, drawing Kylie’s attention from her own woes. “Today we have...” He looked down into his hat and then glanced up. Up right at Kylie.

Oh, hell, Kylie thought, who was it this time?

“Kylie Galen.” Chris smiled. “The girl who happens to be the person who has brought us more blood than any camper in the past.” He hesitated. “You, my friend, get the pleasure of...” He paused for dramatic effect. “Of Steve’s company.”

Kylie saw Steve, the shape-shifter with the cute ass, the one who’d given Della a hickey, start strolling over. Not for one minute did Kylie assume Steve had an interest in her. She knew he was merely looking for some romantic advice.

Advice Kylie didn’t have. What the hell could she tell him? Her normal reply to someone trying to gain someone’s attention was to be patient. But Della was the most adamant and stubborn person Kylie knew and it would take the patience of a saint to wear the vampire down.

* * *

“Be patient? That’s all you’ve got for me?” Steve complained ten minutes later.

Kylie glanced up at Perry, circling them as they sat behind the office, and then frowned at Steve. “I don’t know why everyone thinks I’m the love guru.”

“Come on, give me something that would help me. You know her better than anyone.”

Kylie dropped down beside the tree. “What can I tell you? Della’s difficult.” So difficult that if Della found out that Kylie had offered Steve advice, the vamp would revoke Kylie’s best friend card.

“You think I don’t know that?”

Kylie looked up into his desperate eyes. “She was hurt really badly by someone.”

“I know that, too.” He crossed his arms over his wide chest. “She deserves so much better than him.”

“Oh, hell,” Kylie said, and decided to throw caution to the wind. “Okay, here’s all I can tell you. Della loves a good fight.”

“I don’t want to fight,” Steve said. “What I want is...” He blushed as if thinking about what he really wanted.

But damn it, Kylie liked Steve.

“Look, I don’t mean to fight with her. Fight *for* her. When she tells you that you can’t sit with her at lunch, sit down anyway. When she tells you to leave, don’t. She’s gonna get pissy. That’s Della, but I think it’ll win you brownie points.”

The shape-shifter paused as if contemplating. “Damn. You’re right. When we were on the mission, she tried to push me away, but I didn’t let her. I couldn’t because Burnett warned me if anything happened to her, he’d have my head on a platter. And that’s when we ... Hey! I know what I have to do.”

“What?” Kylie asked, afraid of what she’d set in motion.

“Just wait and see.” A smile spread his lips. Sparkles started popping off around him. He changed into a bird, not one as big or magnificent as the one who guarded her from above, but still impressive. Flapping his wings twice, he flew off, squawking at Perry as he did.

Perry came in for a quick landing. “You are good at this,” he said, still in bird form. “She’ll be putty in his hands. Of course, she’ll have already ripped your heart out for betraying her.”

“Don’t talk to me when you’re not a human!” She dropped her forehead on her knees.

Crap! Perry was right. Della was going to kill her. But since destiny may already have Kylie earmarked to die, she wasn’t sure it really mattered.

Chapter Thirty-six

“You waiting for a call?” Kylie asked Hayden Yates when she walked into his classroom ten minutes later and he was holding his cell.

“Hoping.” He frowned and looked around as if making sure they were alone. “It’s Jenny. She’s left home. God only knows where she is.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. “If you found her, what would you do?”

“What do you mean?” Suspicion made his eyes tighten.

“Would you take her back to her parents? If she’s run away, it’s probably because she’s like you when you were young, and she can’t handle that lifestyle anymore.”

His suspicion faded. “She doesn’t know how hard it is to be completely alone.”

“She wouldn’t be alone,” Kylie said. “She’d have you.”

He frowned. “I know nothing about dealing with a teen.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “You’re a teacher. You deal with us daily.”

“I teach, I don’t parent. There’s a difference. But discussing this is silly.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “She’s young, she’s naïve.”

“She’s not that naïve.” Kylie remembered Jenny standing up to Derek and how she helped them escape. “What if I knew where she was?”

Hayden glared at Kylie. “Christ! The alarm?”

Kylie nodded. Hayden frowned. “Do Burnett and Holiday know?”

“Not yet.”

He blew air through his teeth. “If the elders find out she’s here, they’ll expect Burnett and Holiday to bring her back.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “That’s the problem.”

Hayden locked both of his hands behind his head. “And Holiday and Burnett will have to do it. They can’t legally keep her without some serious consequences.”

Kylie sighed. “That’s the other part of the problem.”

He pressed a hand on his desk. “This is so screwed up.”

Kylie’s mind raced. “I want to talk to Holiday and Burnett about it, but if this whole Mario thing calmed down, I think I’d have a better chance of convincing them.”

He shot up. “Where is she right now?”

“She’s staying at Derek’s.”

He looked puzzled. “Derek?” Hayden’s expression went from teacher to big brother and Kylie got the feeling Derek could be up against some issues.

“It’s better than my place because Burnett is watching me like a hawk. When Jenny jumped the gate, she couldn’t get close to me because I had shadows. Jenny and Derek met the night I escaped and she thought she could trust him. And she’s right. Derek’s the nicest guy I know. He would never ... you know.”

“He better not ... you know!” Hayden bit out.

“I think it would be safer to move her to your place. Not because of Derek. But...”

He exhaled. “It would be safer if she went back and—”

“No!” Kylie said. “Just give me some time. I think I can solve this.”

“How? She’s not mature yet.”

Kylie pointed to her pattern. “I’m not completely mature and I’m doing just fine.”

“You can really say that with a straight face?” he asked. “You have a murdering rogue after you. The FRU is chomping at the bit to get their hands on you to test you. In my book that’s not doing okay.”

“Just give me a few days. Please.”

“You can’t fix this, Kylie,” Hayden said.

Hayden’s earlier words echoed in her head. *The FRU is chomping at the bit to get their hands on you to test you.*

For the first time, Kylie saw this for what it was. A window! “I can try to

fix it,” Kylie said. Maybe die trying, Kylie thought, but maybe not. Besides, staying alive might not be in her cards anyway.

She popped off Hayden’s desk and started walking backward to the door. “I gotta go. I’ll tell Derek to bring Jenny to your place after classes today.”

* * *

During lunch, Kylie waited to see if Lucas showed up. She sat beside an angry Della, who scowled at her the whole time because she’d heard Kylie had gone off with Steve. Across from her sat a suspicious Miranda, who’d been pre-warned by her shape-shifter and Kylie’s shadow that she was acting strange.

Perry was wrong. She wasn’t acting strange, she was acting scared. Yet even scared, she knew it was the right thing. Her gut told her.

Her mind shot away from her fears when Lucas walked into the room. He wore a navy T-shirt and his older jeans, the ones that were faded in all the places the material caressed his body. His hair looked windblown as if he’d been out on a run. In less than a week, they’d see a full moon. No doubt he ran to burn off some of the anxiousness.

He looked around the room.

She met his dark blue gaze head-on.

He started toward her, without even going to get a food tray. When he sat down, his shoulder brushed against hers. She dropped her fork and glanced at him. “Would you be up to skipping class for practice?”

His brows tightened. “What’s up?”

Was she that readable? “I’ve already cleared it with Holiday.” And the camp leader had asked the same question. *What’s up, Kylie?*

She gave Lucas the same answer she’d given Holiday. “I feel like practicing.” Face it, she couldn’t tell the truth. Not here. But she planned on telling him when they were alone.

“How’s your window?” she asked.

“Still jammed. But I’m working on it.”

The optimism in his voice had her smiling. He grabbed the roll off her plate.

When she looked at him oddly, he said, "I'll need some kind of nutrition to take you on. You seem extra feisty today."

"You're right. You'd better eat the rest of my salad, too," she teased.

He leaned his head down and whispered, "I love you."

Love you, too, Kylie thought, but couldn't bring herself to say it yet. She wanted to save it until all their windows were open and life offered them promise. And more than anything, she wanted that promise.

* * *

As they walked to Lucas's cabin to collect the swords, Kylie tried to figure out how to tell him about what she was doing. Instinctively, she knew he would fight her on it. And today of all days, she didn't want to fight.

"So this window you mentioned, you got a plan to get it open?" she asked.

He nodded. "It was what you said about the elders being young at one time. I remembered not too long ago my grandmother asking about one of the elders on the Council. She said he and her twin sister had fancied each other when they were young, but that she'd already been promised to someone else. I hadn't even known my grandmother was a twin. When I asked about her sister, she said she'd died. But I got a feeling there was more to the story. I went to see her this morning."

"And?" Kylie asked.

"She confessed that her twin killed herself the day before she was supposed to marry the other guy."

"So you're going to go and talk to this elder?"

"It's not that easy. He wouldn't agree to see me. But he might agree to see my grandma and she could perhaps talk him into seeing me."

"Did your grandma agree to do it?" Kylie asked.

"No," he said, frustration sounding in his voice. "She's stubborn. I'm supposed to go meet her for tea in a couple of hours." He sighed. "Tea always softens her a little. I think I'll be able to convince her."

"I think you will, too."

They arrived by the lake, and Kylie still couldn't find a way to tell Lucas

her plans. So she just let it slide for now. They warmed up for a good twenty minutes, practicing the same moves he'd taught her. Kylie didn't need to watch him to keep up. But she watched him all the same. She loved how his body moved, with strength, with control, and the way his muscles rippled under his jeans and cotton T-shirt. Cotton had never looked so good.

He stopped the warm-up exercises and faced her. "You ready?"

She nodded. They held up their swords against each other. He pulled back and moved in, his blade swiping in the air a good six inches from her. She followed his lead, and after five minutes, she felt like they were really fighting for the first time.

The sense of danger didn't hold her back, it actually enthralled her. Who knew deep down she was such a thrill seeker?

She felt the sweat pour from her brow. And in the quick glances she caught of him, she saw the sheen on his skin and the damp shirt clinging to his chest. Wet cotton looked even better than dry.

"You're amazing when you fight," he said, sounding winded.

She looked up and lost her focus, never realizing how deadly that little mistake could be until she felt her blade make contact.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Kylie's breath trapped in her lungs. She dropped the sword. Lucas's sword slipped from his hand and landed beside hers. He stepped back. His shirt hung open, ripped by her blade.

"Oh my God! Are you—"

"It's okay. Just a scratch." He pressed his palm on his upper abs.

"Let me see." She moved to him.

"I'm fine." He took another step back. "It's my fault. I made you lose your concentration."

"Let me see!" she demanded again.

"It's really a scratch," he said.

She took the last few steps separating them and reached for his shirt. Her heart clutched, fearing what she'd see. Tears filled her eyes and air slipped from her lungs when she saw the red mark running over his belly button.

"A scratch, see?" His voice came out deep.

He was right. It wasn't much more than a scratch, but it still looked painful. She pressed two fingers to his bare flat stomach. Inhaling, she concentrated on healing. Her hands grew warm, and slowly she moved her touch across the wound.

She heard him groan, or was it a growl? She met his eyes. "Am I hurting you?" Then she recognized the heat in his eyes.

"No," he said, the hypnotic hum vibrating from him signaling that his body sought a potential mate.

Feeling brave, she brushed her hand up and over his abdomen. The soft, warm ripples of muscle and skin felt wonderful against her palm. She wanted

more. More of him. More touching. She wanted to be touched.

As if reading her mind, his hands were on her waist, pulling her against him. His lips found hers and the kiss was smoldering. Deep and demanding from the moment his mouth met hers. She wasn't sure how they ended up on the ground, but suddenly they were there. The soft grass tickled her neck, but she mostly felt Lucas. Felt his hand brushing under her shirt. His sweet, soft touch on her breasts. Felt his weight half on her, his leg positioned between hers.

Everywhere a part of him touched her, she burned and ached for more. His hum filled her ears like music and she was lost. Lost in the moment, in the desire. Lost with yearning.

She wasn't afraid. She wanted this, wanted Lucas. She slipped her hand inside the back of his shirt.

She heard him make another sound, a mixture of both pain and marvel. And then his weight and all the wonder were gone. Opening her eyes, she saw Lucas standing over her, his eyes ablaze and looking almost wild. His hands were locked behind his neck and he breathed in and out as if he needed more oxygen.

"We can't ... I'm not prepared ... I don't have..."

Doing her own share of trying to breathe, it took her a second to understand what he was attempting to say. He didn't have condoms. Even if he did, this shouldn't happen as an accident.

"We need ... Not like this," he said.

"I know." She sat up and the cumbersome feeling crowded her chest and she felt her cheeks heat up.

Standing up, she swallowed the tightness down her throat. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..." She looked away, not sure how to put it.

He closed the distance between them and gently turned her face to his. "You didn't do anything wrong. We didn't do anything wrong. We just need to plan it."

She nodded. Her phone chimed with an incoming call. She hadn't reached for it when Lucas's started to ring.

She inhaled and pretty much knew what this meant. The FRU were here.

Early. She pulled her phone out and saw the call was from Burnett and knew she was correct.

“It’s Burnett,” she said. “I’m sure it’s Holiday calling you, too.” She reached for the swords. “Don’t answer it. We just need to get to the office.”

He studied her. And she felt guilt swirl in her chest. She should have told him. Now it felt as if she’d kept it from him.

“Why shouldn’t I answer it?” He opened the bags and pulled out the cloths to wrap the swords in.

“I was going to tell you, but...” *I knew you would fight me on it.*

“What’s going on, Kylie?” he asked as he put the swords in the bag and then picked it up.

“It’s my window,” she said.

“What’s your window?”

“The reason Burnett and Holiday are calling. It’s the FRU, they’re here for me.”

“Why the hell are they here for you?” he asked.

She swallowed and started walking. He grabbed her by the elbow, questions in his eyes.

“I agreed to be tested.”

He shook his head, his eyes went from blue to burnt orange instantly. “No!”

“I have to, Lucas. It’s my quest. Just like your quest is to change things with your kind. I have to do this.”

“No, you don’t!” He moved in front of her and stopped her from taking another step. “Are you forgetting that I saw part of the vision of what they did to your grandmother?”

“That was over forty years ago. Things are different.” That’s what she’d been telling herself, that’s what she had to believe. She moved around and continued forward.

“No!” He grabbed her arm.

She looked at him, pleading for understanding. “I have to do it, Lucas. And you have to let me.”

“Burnett and Holiday won’t allow this,” he seethed.

“Burnett doesn’t believe they would hurt me,” she insisted, feeling a cool breeze brush her skin. And she knew she wasn’t alone. Her father was here. She prayed he approved of what she was doing.

“He believes there could be risks to doing it, he told me that himself. He told me he hid your grandmother’s body because of it.”

“There’s risk in everything, Lucas.” She touched his stomach. “In learning how to fight. In not learning how to fight. I’m doing the right thing. I know it.”

* * *

“We didn’t contact her,” the male voice came from Holiday’s office. “She contacted us.”

Kylie and Lucas walked inside the office. Lucas remained furious. She could tell from his posture, his silence, but he didn’t try to stop her. She knew he sensed how serious she was.

“Kylie wouldn’t have done that. She wouldn’t even know how to get in touch with you,” Holiday demanded.

Kylie stopped at Holiday’s door. “I called my mom and got his number. Told her I needed to talk with him about something I was doing for Holiday.” Kylie met the camp leader’s worried eyes. Burnett stood beside her, his eyes showing signs of anger. She just hoped it wasn’t targeted toward her.

Holiday shook her head. “I refuse to let this happen.”

Kylie moved all the way inside, followed by Lucas. She looked at Burnett, hoping she would find an ally in him. “From the very beginning, Burnett said that they wouldn’t intentionally harm me.”

Holiday stood up. “He also admitted there could be risks, which was why he ... agreed that you didn’t need to do it.”

“She’s right,” Burnett said. “I don’t want to chance—”

“The risks are practically nonexistent,” the gray-haired FRU agent spoke up. “It’s what we’ve been telling you from the beginning. But you refused to listen.”

Kylie ignored the agent and spoke to Holiday. “It’s my quest. You yourself said that it was a good quest.”

“But I didn’t mean you should put your life in jeopardy.”

“It’s not in jeopardy,” the FRU agent said again.

“Then why couldn’t a regular doctor perform the tests?” Holiday asked, her tone sounding like an angry parent. No doubt she was going to make a good one.

“I already told you when we spoke months ago. It’s nothing more than a brain scan and some blood tests. And the reason they can’t be done in a regular hospital is because these tests aren’t for humans.”

“But they could do a brain scans and blood tests in a regular hospital,” she accused.

“It’s different,” the man answered. “The scan is set to look for things a regular brain scan doesn’t search for. The same for the blood test. A regular lab can’t do this.”

“And how many of these tests have been done?” Holiday asked.

“Thousands,” he said. “It’s been used by the FRU for several years.”

“For what?”

He frowned. “Research.”

“On who? What kind of research?”

“Mostly to study criminal cases. But—”

“You use it on criminals and you think it’s fine to use on a teenager?” she demanded.

“It’s safe.”

“You’re going to tell me that there haven’t been any negative side effects?”

“None to speak of.”

“So there have been some that you won’t speak of!” Holiday snapped.

“I have to do it, Holiday. It’s the right thing. I know it. Please, don’t try to stop me, because I won’t let you.”

Kylie saw tears appear in Holiday’s eyes, and it was killing Kylie that she was causing her friend pain, but everything inside her said it was the right thing.

She looked at the agent. “Did you bring the papers I asked for?”

“What papers?” Burnett asked.

“A written document from the FRU containing their promise that if they prove that I’m found to be a special race that they will acknowledge that we exist to the supernatural world.”

“But then what?” Hayden appeared, standing in the corner. “Are you going to insist everyone that comes forward go for these tests?”

The FRU agent looked puzzled at Hayden’s appearance, but he didn’t miss a beat. “We will need to confirm it with at least one other of your kind. But once we have Kylie and this other person on record, all we’d require is a blood test to be registered.”

Hayden looked at Kylie and she knew what he was thinking. “You don’t have to do it,” she said. Putting her life on the line was one thing, asking someone else to do it was another.

“Yes, I do. You were right. It’s time things change.” Hayden’s gaze went back to the agent. “You have your second person.”

The agent, right along with Lucas, tightened his brows and stared in awe at Hayden’s pattern.

“I still don’t like it. What if they don’t keep their word?” Lucas asked.

Kylie glanced to Lucas and then Burnett and pleaded for him to speak up. He’d never lost his loyalty to the FRU and she trusted his opinion more than he would ever know.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Burnett said.

* * *

The room was cold and reminded Kylie too much of the vision she’d had with her grandmother. But she held tight to the knowledge that Lucas, Burnett, and Holiday all waited outside. First, they had her dress in a hospital gown. Beautiful.

The nurse came over. “I’m going to give you a couple of shots to numb you. It’s sort of the same thing a dentist uses when he’s working on a tooth. We need to get blood from your radial artery for this test, so it’s slightly more uncomfortable than just drawing blood. But these injections should help.”

The nurse was right, it was more uncomfortable. Kylie didn’t know if the prior injections helped, but it still hurt like the devil. She closed her eyes and

squinted tight, waiting for them to be done.

In a few minutes, it was over. Before Kylie was led to the other room for the brain scan, they let Lucas, Holiday, and Burnett come in. She knew they'd done Hayden's brain scan first.

"Is Hayden okay?" It was the first thing she wanted to know when they walked in.

"Just saw him," Burnett said. "He's fine, said it was a piece of cake."

Kylie nodded. Holiday still didn't look happy.

"You can still call it off."

"Holiday," Kylie said. "I'm doing this."

The fae exhaled as if exasperated and pressed a hand on her stomach. "I hope my kid isn't half as stubborn as you."

Kylie glanced at Burnett and grinned. "With the daddy being who he is, I'd say you don't have a chance in hell of the child being anything *but* stubborn."

"Hey, I'm not that bad." He smiled, but she could tell it was forced. He was trying to lighten the mood, but the concern shined in his eyes as well.

In a few seconds, Burnett and Holiday left. Lucas stayed behind and moved to stand beside the bed. He picked up her hand with the Band-Aid and brushed his thumb over the bandage. She could tell he was thinking about her healing him.

"When all this is over with, we need to talk. I don't like the fact that you didn't tell me what you were planning to do, or that the other teacher was chameleon. And I know, I didn't deserve for you to tell me about it then. But you were right when you told me that day that we didn't need any secrets. I don't want any more between us."

She swallowed. "Me either."

Suddenly, Kylie remembered something. "You were supposed to meet your grandmother for tea."

He shook his head. "This is more important."

"No it's not, Lucas. You have to get on that Council."

He frowned. "I haven't given up. I just postponed talking to her." He exhaled. "But I don't care what you say. If I make the Council or not. I'm not

losing you.”

“Okay.” A nurse walked in. “We’re going to take her now.”

Lucas frowned but let go of her hand.

Kylie refused to be wheeled into the lab where the scan would take place. She wasn’t sick. But she did make sure her gown was tied before giving everyone a peek at her pink bikini underwear.

Holiday squeezed her hand before she walked into the lab. Burnett gripped her shoulder. Lucas, looking half-pissed and half-very concerned, stayed back. The nurse walked ahead of her into the room, Kylie turned to follow her and was tugged back.

Lucas’s mouth pressed against hers briefly. The words *I love you* sat on the tip of her tongue, but she didn’t say them. She didn’t want him to think the fear of what was about to happen was the only reason she said them. And then there was that little doubt that if he knew he had her now, he might not work as hard to get on that Council.

The door swished shut behind her. A chill ran up her spine, but not from a spirit; the room was simply that cold. Kylie glanced around, noting the lack of color in the room. Not a speck of color. Everything was white or off white.

“Okay,” the nurse said. “Have you ever had an MRI?”

Kylie nodded. “When I was having night terrors.”

“Well, this is very much like that. The machine is a little loud and you might feel crowded, but you’ll need to remain completely still. It will take about ten minutes to complete the test. You don’t have claustrophobia, do you?”

“Not really,” Kylie said, but then remembered being caught in the small grave with the three dead girls. Then again, it was more the dead girls than the small space that freaked her out.

“Good,” the nurse said. “Here’s some earplugs. Now climb up here and we’ll get this done.”

Kylie put in the earplugs and swallowed a sudden feeling of anxiety. In the back of her mind, she heard her father’s words. *But soon. Soon we will discover this together.*

Her heart raced to the tune of fear, but she climbed onto the table and laid

down, trying to fight the chill, and yet wishing she could feel another cold. That of her father. A little word from him that she wasn't about to die would be good.

The machine pulled her inside. Her nose was less than an inch from the top and the sides of the machine actually touched her forearms. *A machine, not a coffin*, she told herself. But that's where her mind took her—being in a closed coffin.

The noise started. Even with earplugs, the sound grew so loud she could hardly hear herself think. She closed her eyes. Tried not to listen. Tried not to think. She wasn't sure how long she was in there when she felt a light tickle in her head. That tickle grew until it was a pain. A sharp pain.

She opened her mouth to scream, tried to move but couldn't. Suddenly she felt like a light exploded in her head and all she could see was darkness.

Soon, baby, soon we'll be together.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Someone was holding her hand. In the distance angry voices rumbled. One she recognized. Burnett. Kylie opened her eyes, unsure of where she was. The moment she saw the white ceiling, she remembered the pure white room. The big white machine.

The pain.

She didn't hurt now.

"Thank God." Kylie turned toward Holiday's voice. Ah. Holiday was the hand holder. Worry pinching her brow, she pushed some button on a remote control and called for the nurse. "She's awake."

"What happened?" Kylie asked.

"You passed out." Holiday had tears in her eyes. "Scared the shit out of us! Are you okay?"

"I can feel my fingers and toes," Kylie said.

The door burst open and Burnett, a very angry-looking Burnett, came storming into the room. Right behind him was a man wearing a white coat. And following the doctor was the agent who'd picked her up. Following him was Lucas—a very worried-looking Lucas. And last was Hayden Yates—looking equally concerned.

"I told you she was going to be okay." The doctor looked at Kylie and then Holiday. "Is she talking?"

"Yes," Holiday said.

"Is she moving?" he asked Holiday.

"Yes, and I can hear you, too," Kylie said.

He frowned at Kylie. "Of course you can."

“Wait,” Kylie said. “Did they finish the test?”

The doctor nodded. “It was wrapping up when you started experiencing pain.”

“Do we know anything yet?” she asked the other agent.

“We need others to read it,” he said, “but it appears you have the markings of all the supernaturals, just as Mr. Yates does.”

Kylie sat up a little. “Does that qualify as a new species?”

“I’m under the impression that it would, but again, others have to review it.”

Kylie bit down on her lip. “How much of this did you already know from the tests in the past?”

The room went silent. Kylie saw Burnett’s shoulders tighten.

The agent paused. “The results we had pointed to the same thing, but ninety percent of the evidence was destroyed by the doctors and administrators running the study to hide their wrongdoings. What evidence we did have, we didn’t know if it was valid.”

“If you even suspected what was done, why haven’t you tried to make it right before now?” Hayden asked.

“We tried,” the agent said. “Maybe not hard enough, but in our defense, the one thing your species is best at is hiding. We searched for family members of those few that we maintained files on. They and their families had disappeared. At one point we considered putting out notices asking people to come in, but no matter how we tried to approach it, it sounded like a witch hunt. And considering what had already happened, it just didn’t feel like the right thing.”

“And how soon will this information be released to the supernatural world?” Kylie asked.

“Probably no later than a few weeks. We’ll also be announcing the internal investigation on the FRU and our wrongdoings in the past. Anyone affected by the studies, or their family members, will receive financial compensation if they come forward.”

Kylie thought of her grandmother. “Money won’t bring back lives.”

“No,” the agent said. “But it’s the human way of showing the

organization's wrongdoing. And since we live in a human world, it's the best we can do."

"Why?" Kylie asked.

"Why what?" The agent looked confused.

"You don't just admit wrongdoings and offer compensation for no reason. Someone is threatening to expose you. Who is it?"

The agent's expression went cold. "What's important is that it's being done."

Kylie got the feeling they didn't know the person forcing their hand. But she had a feeling she did know. A few minutes later, the doctor and the agent walked out.

Kylie looked at Burnett. "You wouldn't know anything about this, would you?"

He shook his head. "Not a thing." It was a lie, she could see it. He'd been trying to make the FRU do right by her the whole time. She knew she loved this man.

Kylie glanced at Hayden and smiled. Hayden returned the gesture. They had done it. Well, with the help of Burnett. She knew it wasn't completely over, they still had to convince the elders to trust that things would be different, and they still had to come clean about Jenny, but at least now chameleons wouldn't have to hide.

* * *

The next morning Lucas dropped by at five A.M. Kylie was still asleep when he jumped through her window. He'd rescheduled his meeting with his grandmother for this morning and just wanted to check on her before he left. As he started out, she pulled him in for a kiss.

When the kiss ended, he was humming. "You trying to convince me to stay?" he asked, his eyes bright with need and passion.

"No," she said, and laughed. "Go. We can do this later."

"Promise?" he asked.

"Promise," she told him, and she meant it. She didn't tell him all bets were off, that she'd take him any way he came. On the Council, or off. If he

didn't make it and grew to resent her later, she'd just face it then. But she loved him too much to turn away from him now.

As Kylie pulled her clothes from her closet, Della invited herself into Kylie's bedroom.

"That was a quicky," Della said, referring to Lucas's short visit.

"He just came by to tell me he's meeting his grandma."

"I know, I heard," she smarted off.

Kylie frowned. "You could cover your ears and not listen in, you know."

"And you could stop buddying up with Steve!" she hissed.

Kylie just shook her head. "Look, I need to get dressed. I'm going with Hayden to confront Burnett and Holiday about Jenny."

"Burnett's gonna be pissed," Della said.

"I know," Kylie said. "But when he's done being pissed he's usually reasonable."

"Yeah," Della said. "But it's always that pissed part that scares the shit out of me."

Kylie laughed. Della eyed her. "Why would you talk to Steve behind my back?"

Frowning, Kylie answered, "What was I supposed to do? He paid blood for the hour."

"Tell him no. Believe it or not, that's usually enough to send him packing."

Maybe not anymore, Kylie thought.

"What did he want anyway?" Della dropped on Kylie's twin bed.

Kylie rolled her eyes. "You know what he wanted. Advice on how to deal with you."

"So what did you tell him? And remember I can tell if you lie."

Kylie picked up her brush and started putting up her hair. "I told him to be patient. To fight for you, because you were worth it."

"Stupid advice," Della said.

Kylie put her brush down. "Not stupid. True. You are worth it." Moving to the bed, she hugged the vamp.

"What's with all the hugging stuff lately?" Della whined.

“I love you,” Kylie said, and grinned.

“You told me that already. So seriously, what’s up?”

She couldn’t lie to Della, so Kylie vagued up the truth. “You tell people you love them so if anything happens, they’ll know how you felt.” Now if she could just find the courage to go and tell Lucas.

Della looked suspicious. “What do you think is going to happen?”

“I hope nothing,” Kylie said, thinking she’d lived through the FRU testing, which hadn’t turned out to be nearly as scary as she’d thought, but she still had to face Mario, and that might not be quite so easy.

“What do you mean?” Della asked.

A light knock sounded on the door of the cabin and saved Kylie from having to explain. “Hayden’s here. Gotta go.”

As Kylie walked out she heard Della’s parting remark. “Perry’s right. You’ve got secrets. You can’t hide them from us!”

Yes, she could, Kylie thought.

Soon we’ll be together. Her father’s words whispered through her head. She bit down on her lip.

If you don’t mind, Daddy, I’d like to hang around about a hundred years first.

* * *

Hayden and Kylie walked into the office. Burnett met them at the door. Holiday was standing behind her desk looking worried.

“What’s wrong?” they asked in unison.

“Nothing, really,” Kylie said.

“We need to talk,” Hayden said.

Burnett motioned for them to sit with a concerned look. As soon as Kylie and Hayden sat down, Burnett spoke. “Are the elders having a problem with you two being tested?”

“It’s not that,” Hayden said. “Supposedly they have contacted all the elders of the other compounds and the consensus is that it is a good thing. Of course there is still a lot of suspicion of the FRU. Something like this doesn’t change overnight. There will be a lot of fences to mend. Trust to build.” He

glanced at Kylie. "I personally think a few of the elders are just ashamed that it took a sixteen-year-old girl to force us to face our fears."

"I didn't go in alone," Kylie said, giving Hayden his credit.

"No, but I wouldn't have gone if you hadn't set it up." Hayden glanced back at Burnett and Holiday. "But this isn't why we are here."

"Why is it I don't think I'm going to like this?" Burnett sat down on the edge of Holiday's desk.

"Don't start projecting." Holiday touched his leg.

"First, I want to say I take full responsibility for this," Hayden said.

"No," Kylie said. "If you are going to blame someone, blame me."

"I'm still not liking it," Burnett snapped. "But I'd like to find out what it is I'm not liking, so I can do what Holiday says and stop projecting!"

"Remember when I told you that one of the other chameleons helped Derek and me escape?"

"Yes," Burnett said, and Holiday nodded.

"That girl was Hayden's sister."

"And?" Burnett said.

"She ran away."

"And?" Burnett snapped, motioning for Kylie to move faster.

"She ran here," Kylie said.

"Here?" Burnett asked. "She's here now?"

Both Kylie and Hayden nodded.

"How could she be..." He scowled. "The night the alarm went off?"

Both Kylie and Hayden nodded one more time.

Kylie saw one of the crystals in the room flicker. For some crazy reason, she sensed Jenny had walked past.

Kylie met Burnett's eyes. "Please don't get too mad and start yelling. Not for my or Hayden's sake, but for Jenny's. You make her nervous."

"She's been here all along, and now is when you decided to tell me? You let me search this whole damn camp for almost twenty-four hours and you knew the whole time who it was?" He stood up from the desk and started walking back and forth.

Holiday stood up, and as he moved past her, she placed a calming hand on

his arm and brought the vampire to a halt.

“We didn’t know right away. She was hiding, she...” Kylie didn’t see any reason to throw Derek to the wolves. “I didn’t find out about her until a day later and Hayden didn’t know until I told him.”

“Is she still here?” Burnett barked out the question.

“Yes,” Kylie said. “And she’d like to stay here. To finish school.”

“Will her parents sign for her?” Holiday asked.

Hayden’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know how they are going to feel when they learn she’s here. With the news of the FRU, they may allow it. If they don’t, I’ll be taking legal action to get custody of her.”

“Is she here now? In this room?” Holiday asked.

Kylie nodded. “Jenny.”

Jenny appeared, standing against the wall farthest away from Burnett. Kylie didn’t know if it was just Burnett’s warm and fuzzy appearance right now, or if it was because Jenny knew he was part of the FRU that had sheer panic in the girl’s gaze.

Burnett must have recognized the look, because immediately his posture softened. He offered her a nod.

“Hello, Jenny,” he said. “Welcome to Shadow Falls.”

Kylie saw Holiday beam with pride at her soon-to-be husband’s transformation. No doubt Holiday was schooling him on softening his approach. And it was working.

Kylie just hoped that this meant Jenny’s chances of staying on at Shadow Falls were good.

* * *

Holiday and Hayden were going to have a conference call with Kylie’s grandfather to talk about the possibility of Jenny staying on. Until then, Jenny was going to hang out with Holiday, with plans to introduce Jenny to everyone at lunch.

Kylie suggested she introduce Jenny to some of her own friends first. Maybe Jenny wouldn’t feel as if everyone at Shadow Falls were rude gaping individuals.

Kylie made some phone calls and asked everyone to meet her in the office at 10:45. She didn't tell anyone what it was about, but she had good faith they would all show up.

As Kylie left the office, Della met her outside and they went to wait for Campmate hour. Miranda came running up with Perry. "So what's the meeting all about?"

"You'll find out," Kylie said, not wanting to explain with so many ears around. Since Della already knew about Jenny, or as Della had dubbed her, Girl Wonder, she'd told Della the truth.

"I know," Della said, teasing Miranda.

Kylie frowned at Della.

"Why did you tell her and not me?" Miranda asked.

"I promise you'll understand later."

Miranda frowned. "You aren't leaving again, are you? Because you pinky promised me you wouldn't." Tears actually appeared in the witch's eyes.

"I'm not leaving," Kylie assured her. Not by her own accord, Kylie thought, and then thought again about the sword and what it all meant.

"You're gonna come clean and tell us that you and Hayden are lovers," Perry said.

Kylie scowled at him.

"Hey, I'm just guessing. I mean there's something going on between you two."

Lucas showed up right then and growled at the shape-shifter for the comment. Then Lucas leaned down and kissed her.

"What happened with your grandma?" she asked in a low whisper.

"Window's open." He kissed her again. "She's going to talk to him about meeting me. He could tell her hell no, but it's a start."

"It's a great start." Kylie let out a squeal and for just a few minutes, she felt certain everything in her crazy life was going to work out.

Then Chris, announcer of the grand event, pulled his hat from behind his back and his gaze started moving around the crowd and stopped on Kylie. She wanted to scream, enough was enough. But then his gaze shifted a little to her right.

Was he looking at her? Or was he looking at ...

“Okay,” Chris said. “One of our own vampires brings in a little blood. About time.”

Oh, hell, Kylie thought, and got a feeling she knew who’d paid blood for Della. And she wasn’t sure this was a good thing.

“Della, our friend, you get the pleasure of spending an hour with Steve, the amazing shape-shifter.”

Della’s mouth dropped open. She looked around, eyes bright with fury for the culprit.

Steve strutted out of the crowd, and went to confront the pissed-off vamp with a confident gait.

Kylie knew she’d told him to fight for Della, but she hadn’t meant for him to do it in front of everyone. Della, not liking being shown up, was likely to fight back.

“You ready?” Steve asked.

Della scowled. “I’m not going to spend an hour with you.”

Steve just stood there. “I paid good blood for you.”

“Then you really screwed up.”

“Nope.” Steve looked back at Chris and then the forty or so other students enjoying the show. “What are the rules, Chris? Hasn’t everyone pretty much agreed to honor the blood drive?”

Chris looked shocked that Steve dared to argue with Della. But he shook his head. “Yup, that’s pretty much it.”

Steve turned back to Della. “You ready?”

Della tilted her chin and glared daggers at the boy.

Perry leaned over and whispered to Kylie, “If she kills him, it’s your fault.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

Oh, hell, Kylie thought, and prepared herself to intervene.

“I’m not going!” Della snapped, and put her hands on her hips.

“We’ll see about that.” Steve shrugged and looked as if he was going to walk away, but then he swung around and grabbed Della by her lower legs and tossed her over his shoulder and started walking.

Everyone started hooting and hollering with laughter.

Kylie didn’t laugh. She saw a very pissed-off vampire brace her hands on Steve’s butt and look up. Her eyes were green with fury, but there was something else there, too. Something that told Kylie that Steve’s ass wasn’t about to get chewed up.

With every fraction of a second that passed, Kylie felt more confident that Della wasn’t going to go ape-shit on Steve, she was actually going to go with him.

Damn, Kylie thought. Maybe she really was good at the whole matchmaking thing.

* * *

“Can I vanish?” Jenny asked Kylie as they stood in the door of the lunch room with Holiday.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Kylie said. “Just smile. Believe it or not, you sort of get used to it.”

The meeting with Jenny and Kylie’s friends had gone off without a hitch. Everyone genuinely seemed to like her. Derek, of course, showed the most

interest.

Lucas had come up behind her and said, “Another secret.”

Kylie offered a quick “Sorry,” and nothing else. She had the feeling keeping him at bay until he met with the Council was going to be tough. For both of them. But she was determined.

“Don’t they know it’s rude to stare?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah, but they just can’t seem to help themselves,” Kylie said.

Hayden stood up from his seat and moved to Jenny’s side.

He wasn’t smiling and she saw the big brother protective attitude in the way he looked at all the students. “Eat your lunch and stop gawking,” he ordered.

Holiday spoke up next. “Mr. Yates is right. This is no way to welcome a new student.”

Kylie and Jenny both looked at Holiday with questions in their eyes, and Holiday smiled and nodded. Then she turned back to the crowd. “Everyone, I’d like for you to meet Jenny Yates. She’s Hayden’s little sister. So mistreat her and you might be getting extra homework assignments.”

“Is she the same as Kylie?” someone asked.

Hayden took a step forward. “And the same as me.”

Everyone’s eyes tightened and gasps filled the dining hall. Kylie went to sit with Hayden and Jenny at what she realized was the chameleon table. A feeling of rightness filled Kylie’s chest. This was part of her quest and she’d accomplished it.

Of course, all Kylie’s friends quickly joined them. Lucas included. And that was just fine—because while it was nice to have someone like you around, a person’s pattern shouldn’t dictate who you welcomed into your life, or at your lunch table.

* * *

Later that evening, they went down to the lake to swim because with fall upon them, the water would be too cold soon. Kylie had almost declined but when she saw Della wanted to go, she gave in. She put on her bathing suit and slipped a black coverall dress over it. As everyone swam, Kylie moved to

sit on the pier and call her mom.

She hadn't shaken the feeling that John was up to no good. The conversation was short. Her mom and John were out to eat at one of the nicest restaurants in Houston.

Hanging up, Kylie stood there and tried to soak up the sunset. Just when the sun slipped away, nightfall came and turned the sky an array of colors. The birds flew from one tree to another, feasting on insects. Kylie was about to rejoin the others by the water's edge when the spirit's cold washed down on her. Kylie looked around and the spirit sat on the edge of the pier as if in a stupor, looking lost, looking so damn sad.

"I know who you are, Lucinda," Kylie said. "You were Mario's daughter-in-law."

I know. I've figured that part out. But things came to me one piece at a time, like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. I could almost see what my whole life was like, but when those last dozen pieces fell into place, I saw the whole picture. Her voice sounded tight, ready to break. I didn't like it.

After a long pause, she looked at Kylie. *I lived a terrible life. Did terrible things. Hurt so many people. And my own son paid the price. I should have lived to be a good example for him.*

Kylie looked up at the beaconing sky. The hues of gold and oranges had faded and it was now ten different shades of pink. She noted the birds were now flocking around the pier. Could they, like her, see the dead?

Looking back at the sadness in the spirit's eyes, Kylie said, "He's in heaven."

The spirit shook her head. *I don't think so. I'm sure his grandfather taught him all his evil ways. He was so young and impressionable. Then his own grandfather killed him.*

The mood surrounding the spirit—devastation, doom—pressed on Kylie's heart. "You were an example for him. He died saving someone else, just the way you did to save him. You taught him that. And that's what saved his soul."

The ghost's eyes grew wet with emotion. *Are you sure? How do you know this?*

Kylie hesitated, worried the spirit might blame her. “He died saving me.”

The spirit sat as if lost in thought for a second. *Then that’s why they sent me here?*

“Who sent you here?” Kylie asked, pretty sure she knew, but she wanted to hear it.

The death angels.

“Is that whose voice I hear every now and then?”

That would be them.

“But why do I hear them more than ... Holiday and other ghost whisperers?”

They watch over protectors closer. They have to because you can only fight to protect others.

“Do they want me to kill Mario, or is that just you?” Kylie hoped she was wrong about her assumptions.

At first I thought it was just me, but then I realized it was their plan, too.

Kylie’s heart clutched.

He has to be stopped. You are the chosen one. No one else has been able to stop him.

“But if I can’t protect myself, then ... who will I be protecting when I fight him?”

I cannot see that future.

“But what if I can’t do it? I’m not that good with a sword.”

Then you die trying. Sometimes that’s all we can do.

Kylie knew the spirit referred to herself, too. She’d died trying to save her son. Yet as much as she felt for the ghost, fear bit down on Kylie.

“I’m not ready to die.”

Then you have to practice. That’s another reason I’m here. To help teach you to fight—because if you fail, bad things will happen to so many people. People you care about. People who trust you to protect them.

She felt the sting in her blood at being a protector. “Then I’ll have to win,” Kylie said. Because damn it, she wouldn’t let Mario hurt anyone else that she loved.

“What?”

Kylie looked over her shoulder at the sound of Lucas's voice. His lack of a shirt had her staring. His hair was still wet. A few droplets of water still clung to his chest. He'd been in the water just a few minutes ago. He must have slipped his jeans over his swim trunks. She could see the edge of suit sticking out over the waist of his jeans.

Her gaze moved across that spot on his belly button where she'd run her hands to heal him, and then just to touch him.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded, but it was a lie. Her heart was caught on the possibility of dying, of others suffering because she couldn't rise to the challenge. And just like that, seeing him made her realize how much she wanted to live.

She looked back at the water and heard his almost-silent steps on the pier as he moved closer.

"You got company?" he asked, now standing beside her.

She looked around. "No, she's gone now."

His phone rang and he grabbed it out of his pocket as if he'd been waiting for a call. He frowned at the little screen, and then turned it off.

"Is something wrong?" Kylie asked.

"No, it's just Will."

"He still calls you?"

Lucas nodded. "He's not persuaded by the old rules."

"He's a good friend," she said.

"Yeah." Lucas slipped it back into his pocket. "I was hoping it might be my grandmother."

She saw the concern in his eyes. "About meeting with the elder?"

"That and she told me she wasn't feeling well this morning. I called a bit ago and she didn't answer. She probably went out to play bingo. She's like this bingo fanatic. Bingo and gardening, that's her life."

"You really love her, don't you?" Kylie asked, hearing the devotion in his voice when he talked about her.

He inhaled the way a guy does when he's worried something he's about to say is going to make him sound weak. "She was there for me when my parents decided I was too much trouble. She was the best thing that ever

happened to me, but I didn't know it then. I felt abandoned by them. I made her life hell for a while. Then when my parents split up and my dad came to get me, my grandmother threw all kinds of hell to keep me. I wouldn't be who I am today if she hadn't done what she did."

"You are lucky to have her." Kylie felt a little guilty for disliking the woman and for avoiding her last Sunday.

"Yeah, I am," he said. They grew quiet. "I've been practicing what I'm going to say."

She looked at him. "Say to who?"

"The elder I'm hoping to get the meeting with."

She smiled. "That's good."

"I'm going to be accepted. Because if that's what it takes to get you back, then that's what I'm going to do."

She swallowed. "No, you do it because that's your quest."

"That, too," he said. He reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "But lately, I think you're my quest."

He moved in and slipped his hands around her waist.

She put her hand on his chest, felt his warm heat, felt the thumping of his heart.

He leaned down and kissed her. She knew she shouldn't let it happen, but she wanted it, needed it. His taste and the wet slip of his tongue moving across her lips was heaven, but the kind of heaven one found in life and not in death.

And she wanted to choose life. Hoped it would be so.

She heard the humming coming from him instantly, and it would be so easy to let it lure her in.

He ended the kiss, smiled down at her, and exhaled. "I'd better go before I can't leave."

She watched him go and then looked up at the dark pink sky, and hoped with everything she had that she wasn't taken from this world until she had experienced life. And she truly hoped that Lucas was part of that life.

* * *

That night, after listening to Della and Miranda bicker for the last two hours, Kylie darted out of the bathroom, wearing a towel, and headed to her bedroom. She barely got two steps when Della shot in front of her.

“No. Solve it yourself!” Kylie snapped, certain that was what Della wanted. “I’m tired of being the referee!”

Della paused, smiled in an evil little way, and then said, “Never mind.”

Skirting around Della, Kylie shut her bedroom door with just a touch of attitude. She tossed her towel on her dresser and turned to the bed where she’d left her PJs. Only it wasn’t just her PJs on the bed anymore.

Lucas, eyes wide, sat on the foot of her bed, about four feet from where she stood completely naked.

She squealed.

He laughed.

She dashed for the towel.

Once she had it around her, she glared from a still grinning Lucas to the door. “I’m killing Della!”

He laughed again. “I’m afraid I might have to protect her for this one.”

“I tried to tell you,” Della called out, laughing, and Miranda laughed with her.

Kylie’s fury faded to embarrassment, then when she saw the sexy way Lucas looked at her, her emotions changed into something else.

He stood up and started walking toward her. “You are so damn beautiful.”

She tightened her hold on the towel.

He stopped about a foot from her. “I just came to tell you that I got a call from my grandmother. The elder has agreed to meet with me.”

Kylie smiled. “That’s great.”

His gaze traveled up and down her towel-clad body. “I don’t suppose I could get another peek of what’s under that piece of cotton, could I?”

She cut her eyes at him.

“I don’t want to be too presumptuous, but you do know that sooner or later I’m probably going to get to see it all anyway.”

“I know,” she said, and she was actually looking forward to it. Just not with her two roommates listening in.

His smile widened. "Okay, so just a kiss good-bye."

She nodded. He moved in. In less than two minutes he'd left. The kiss was hot, wet, and toe curling. He'd run his hand inside her towel and touched her bare back.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still only wearing the towel, staring up at the ceiling in a happy haze, when her phone rang.

She snatched it up, thinking it would be Lucas. "I don't know why you left in such a hurry," she teased. But she had known, he'd wanted her.

"Uh, I didn't leave. This is Sara?"

"Oh. I thought you were..."

"You thought I was who? Or should I say which one."

Kylie blushed and decided to just come clean. "I thought you were Lucas."

There was silence for a second and then Sara asked, "Can I ask you something?"

What was it with Sara wanting her to lose her virginity? "Sure, ask away." At least this time, Kylie could tell her that it would probably be happening soon.

"Do you consider you and Trey completely done with? Like ... last year's news? Or is there a chance you two might—"

"It's so over." Kylie gripped the phone tighter. "Look, if he's trying to get you to talk to me, it's not going to work."

"No. It's not ... that. It's ... Where do you stand on friends dating another friend's old boyfriend?"

Kylie stared at the ceiling and tried to wrap her head around this. "Wow. Uh. Well, I would tell this friend to be careful because Trey has a few flaws."

Sara sighed. "I know, but ... he's sort of been there for me during the whole cancer thing, and you know ... some people deserve a second chance. I got one. Maybe Trey deserves one."

Kylie heard something in Sara's voice she liked. She heard the old Sara. Kylie smiled. "You're right. Everybody deserves a second chance. And when I think about it, until he got all sex crazed, he was a pretty good guy."

"So you really wouldn't object?" Sara asked, sounding unsure.

“No, I give you my blessing. I’ll sing at your wedding.”

“Please.” Sara chuckled. “I’m probably one of the few people who knows you can’t sing worth a damn. Remember in the sixth grade when our moms made us try out for the play? And you had to sing. You got out a couple of words and then you puked on the stage.”

They both laughed. And Kylie accepted that while she and Sara would probably never be as close as they once were, Sara was a part of her life that Kylie would forever cherish.

When the laughter stopped, Sara cleared her throat. “So, when are you going to come clean about healing me?”

Kylie tried to think how to say it. “You know what, Sara? If you want to believe I healed you, then believe it. But I wouldn’t tell a lot of people. They’ll think you’re crazy.”

* * *

Thursday night Kylie practiced with Lucinda. The last three days had passed without major chaos. Steve and Della were actually speaking. Kylie couldn’t swear on it, but she’d bet the vamp and Steve were seeing each other on the side.

Jenny was adapting, though she still had issues with everyone staring. While Hayden didn’t like it, she and Derek were hanging out a lot. Derek had even come to see Kylie and basically told her he had feelings for the chameleon.

At first, Kylie thought he was there to make sure Kylie didn’t want a second chance with him before he moved on, but then she realized what he’d really come for. He wanted relationship advice. She gave it to him, too. “Just be yourself, Derek. You’re a hell of a catch and she’s gonna love you.”

Holiday had gone to the doctor and found out she was farther along than she’d thought. For that reason, she decided to move the wedding up to this weekend. It wasn’t going to be a big event. Just Holiday’s immediate family, the students, and a few of Burnett’s FRU coworkers.

Della, Kylie, and Miranda all helped Holiday pick out her wedding dress from the Internet. They had laughed, stayed up way too late talking,

munching on junk food, and trying to come up with names for Holiday's baby. She really didn't want to name it Burnett Bankhead James Jr., and nobody could blame her.

Kylie and Lucas met every morning before he took off to spend his time with the elder. The man had not only listened to Lucas, but had agreed to help him polish his case to the Council that he was supposed to present next week. So far, the old man kept Lucas busy every day debating and listening to all of Lucas's arguments and helping him with his points he needed to make. Which was great, but other than those short practices, she hadn't seen Lucas and she missed him something terribly.

What made it worse was that he hadn't touched or kissed her since the night he'd seen her naked. She knew why. The closer it came to the full moon, the less willpower he had. She noticed the change in him, too, body and mind. His body had grown buffer, the muscles in his arms more pronounced. She sensed his lack of patience. Not that he once got abrupt with her; she just sensed it, how he held himself, how he walked and talked.

Their sparring matches had grown more intense. Not that those scared her anymore. Her nightly practices with the spirit prepared her. The red marks where the spirit's sword touched her gown had lessened tremendously. The open wounds the spirit wore from Kylie's sword had increased.

"I think I'm done," Kylie said, looking away from the wound she'd just caused Lucinda.

You're getting better.

"I'd practice more if I didn't have to see you bleed."

It needs to feel real, Lucinda said.

"It already does," Kylie answered. She watched Lucinda check her wounds. "Do you think I have what it takes to fight Mario, to win?"

With the death angels' help, maybe. Without them, you don't stand a chance.

"Gosh, you know how to boost someone's confidence," she said.

I've only seen one person able to take him. His own son.

Kylie remembered the story Derek had told about him disappearing. "Whatever happened to him?"

I don't know. I hope he's rotting in hell. But chances are he is still alive. Her gaze met Kylie's. It's always the good that die young.

"Then maybe I should run out and do something bad," Kylie said, half teasing.

You couldn't. Good is bred into you. Sort of the way my husband's evilness was bred into him. Only because of you was my son saved.

"No, it's because of him that I was saved."

You see, that's part of your goodness. You won't even take credit.

Kylie pushed that thought away. "Was he behind your murder? Your husband?"

No, but he allowed it. And he allowed his father to take our son. To raise him to be evil. Crazy thing was, my husband hated his father, but envied everything he had. She looked over her shoulder as if she heard something or someone. Then she disappeared.

Kylie went to her room and grabbed her nightshirt, then headed for the shower. Sweat ran from the back of her neck down her back. Even with the spirit's cold, she always worked up a sweat.

Turning the water on to lukewarm, she dropped her clothes on the floor and stepped into the shower. Closing her eyes, the warm rush of water hit her skin and she waited for it to soothe the muscles she'd overworked during practice.

The sudden change of temperature had her eyes popping open. Her breath hitched. She stared at the shower wall. The cold sent goose bumps racing across her naked body. A thick steam billowed up around her.

She wasn't alone. Someone was in the shower with her. And it was a different cold. One she hadn't felt before.

Can't avoid me this time, can you? The voice, a voice she didn't recognize, came behind her.

Chapter Forty

Kylie turned, hiding what she could of her most embarrassing parts with her hands. The steam was so thick she could barely make out the figure. But a vague outline of a body stood behind the curtain of vapor.

All the scary tunes of horror movies with deadly shower scenes played in her head, but more than afraid, she was furious. Didn't ghosts have any sense of privacy?

"I'm in the shower!" Kylie demanded. "Couldn't this wait?"

No, it can not, the voice said. He is about to find me and it is going to hurt him so badly. He does not need to be alone.

The properness of the voice tickled some memory. Kylie knew this person, but from where?

No longer caring about her nudity, Kylie waved a hand through the air, the steam smearing like condensation on a mirror. When she saw who stood in the shower with her, her heart clutched. Not from fear, but from grief. And not for the woman who stood before her, but for her grandson—Lucas.

He's on his way to check on me now. Hurry. He can't be alone.

Kylie jumped out of the shower and ran to get dressed. As she fought to put clothes on her shower-wet body, her heart ached for Lucas, of how he would feel finding his grandmother's body. "Where do you live? Wait? Doesn't Burnett know?"

The vampire? Is this the person you imply?

"Yes," Kylie said, wishing that it didn't take so damn long to speak in a proper tone.

She nodded. *Yes, he's been there.*

“Della!” Kylie called out the girl’s name.

There’s a letter in my desk drawer that he needs to read. Make sure he gets it.

Della came running into the room in a flash. “What?”

He was right, you know.

“Who was right?” Kylie asked the spirit, ignoring the panicking vampire standing in her Mickey Mouse pajamas.

You are part of his quest, and he yours. I see things clearer up here. You see, you have been a part of each other’s quests since you met all those years ago. You are the reason he will complete his life’s mission and he will be there to save you when you need help to complete yours. But go now. Go help him.

“Is this a vision?” Della asked, staring at Kylie with uncertainty.

“Let’s go!” Kylie shot out of the cabin. She was almost to Holiday’s before she realized she was flying and that she must have turned herself into a vampire.

“I hope we’re going to a pajama party,” Della said in her sassy voice.

“Gotta get Burnett,” Kylie answered as a few hot tears trickled down her cheek.

They landed with a thud on Holiday’s porch and hadn’t taken one step when Burnett yanked open the door while still zipping up his jeans. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Do you know where Lucas’s grandmother lives?”

He looked confused, his eyes still dazed with sleep. “Yes. Lucas called about ten minutes ago, he was going to check on her.”

“We need to get there.”

“Why?” Burnett asked.

“She’s dead,” Kylie blurted out as more tears filled her eyes. “He doesn’t need to be the one to find her.”

“Oh, hell!” Burnett rushed back to the bedroom with his phone. He looked at Kylie. “He’s not answering.”

“You stay here,” he said to Della, and then he and Kylie took off. Her feet only hit the ground three times before she was in full flight beside Burnett.

In less than ten minutes Burnett finally started his descent. They stopped at a large one-story white brick house. It spoke of money and a love of gardening. The yard looked like something from a magazine.

Not that Kylie spent much time appreciating the landscape. Her feet had barely hit the manicured lawn and she was listening for life inside the house.

She heard deep intakes of air that expressed grief and sadness. "He's already here," she said to Burnett. "I'm going inside."

Burnett stepped in front of her. "No. I'll go in."

"No!" Kylie demanded, and started forward, her heart aching for Lucas.

"Kylie!" Burnett caught her arm. "When a were is distraught, especially this close to a full moon, he sometimes lashes out with anger. He can't control it. Especially with a vampire."

She brushed a few tears from her eyes. "You don't get it. He loves me. He won't hurt me. He would never hurt me."

Burnett hesitated.

"It's just like you and Holiday," Kylie said.

He exhaled and stepped back from the door. She moved into the house. It smelled like the lemon Pledge that Nana used to use. Everything in the house, from the antiques to the fancy oil paintings, spoke of wealth.

"Lucas," she called his name.

He didn't answer. She moved down the hallway where she heard the sounds of anguish.

Lucas sat on the edge of the bed. His grandmother's lifeless body was centered on the mattress.

"Lucas," she said again, and walked in.

He swung around. His eyes were the deepest, darkest shade of orange she'd ever seen.

"Leave!" he growled.

"No," she said. "You need me now." His grandmother had said so.

He bolted across the room and backed her against the wall. There was nothing but wild pain in his eyes. He growled, and for the first time she saw his canine teeth extended.

"It's me, Lucas," she said, feeling his fingers dig into her forearms.

She felt the instant he came to his senses. He dropped his hands from her arms, shifted away from her, and pressed his head against the wall.

She went to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her face between his shoulder blades, and held him.

“She’s gone,” he said, his voice hoarse with grief.

“I know.” She hugged him tighter.

He turned around and pulled her to him. They stood there for the longest time, just holding on to each other.

“I’m so sorry,” Kylie whispered, and she felt his pain, remembered with clarity how she’d felt when they told her Nana had died.

He released her, and then met her eyes. His gaze was still bright, but the wildness was gone. The dampness on his cheeks wasn’t a sign of weakness, but a sign of devotion, of the love he felt for the only real mother he’d known and then lost.

“I knew she didn’t have long, but I wasn’t ready yet. I thought I had another year, maybe two.”

Kylie reached for his hand. “I’m so sorry. I know how it feels.”

He exhaled and looked back at the bed and her body. She heard his breath come short. She pulled him out of the room.

When she stopped, he met her gaze. “How did ... how did you know?”

“She came to see me. Told me you might need me.”

His eyes filled with more tears. “Even in death, she was watching out for me.”

He fell back against the wall and let out another low growl. “I’m going to miss her so damn much. She was my grandmother and my mother rolled into one. She was the only one who cared about me when I was a kid.”

Kylie moved to him. He folded his arms around her and held her. She finally pulled back and looked at him. “She said there was a letter for you in her desk drawer.”

“I’ll look.” He ran a palm over her cheek. “I left a message on my uncle’s phone. He and the other family members might be here any minute. I need you to go.”

“I want to be here,” she said. “I want to be here for you, Lucas.”

"I know, and if it were my choice you could stay. But the were custom to prepare one for death is closed only to blood relatives." He reached down and kissed her. "And even if it weren't the custom, you are a vampire right now. I can't chance you being hurt. Please understand," he said. "Because if anyone lays a finger on you, I'll kill them."

She nodded. She didn't like it, but she understood. "Will you be okay?"

"Thanks to you," he said.

"I didn't do anything." She pressed a hand to his chest, knowing his heart was breaking.

"You came." He stopped as if remembering something. "God, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you when you first came in?"

"No," she said.

He pushed the sleeves of her T-shirt up and no doubt saw bruises on her arms. "Damn it! I did." He closed his eyes in more pain.

"It's nothing but a couple of bruises." She reached up on her tiptoes and kissed him gently, hoping to ease his pain. "I'm fine, Lucas. Look at me."

He opened his eyes. She smiled. "I'm fine."

He let go of a shuddering breath, then tilted his head up and sniffed the air. "Is that Burnett outside?"

She nodded.

He frowned. "He shouldn't have let you come in. He knows it's dangerous."

"He tried to stop me. I insisted. I knew you wouldn't hurt me."

"But I did," he fumed, and glanced down at her arms.

"This is nothing. It will be gone tomorrow."

He looked deep into her eyes. "I love you, Kylie Galen. Hurting you is the last thing I want to do."

She smiled. "I love you, too."

The shadow of pain in his eyes changed for one second. He leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers. "Did I hear that correctly?"

She looked up. "Yes, you did. And you also need to know that while I want you to get on that Council really badly, it's not going to change anything between us."

“I wasn’t going to let it.” He kissed her again and then set her back down. “I wish I didn’t have to send you off.”

“I know,” she said.

He walked her to the door, his hand holding hers, and she could tell he really didn’t want to let her go.

As soon as they opened door, Burnett met them.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Burnett said.

“Thank you.” The way Lucas spoke, the manner in which he held himself in front of Burnett, was him hiding his pain. And yet he’d let her see it. He hadn’t hidden from her. He trusted her that much. For some crazy reason that endeared him to her all the more. Tears tightened her throat again. He needed her just as she needed him. Which meant she couldn’t die.

Lucas looked at Kylie. “Tomorrow is the full moon, then there are ceremonies. I probably won’t see you for several days.”

She nodded, again not liking it. She wanted to be with him in his time of grief. But she accepted that this was something she couldn’t change.

Burnett looked over his shoulder and then back at Lucas.

“Someone’s coming.”

“Go,” Lucas said.

* * *

“Is it just Lucas, or something more?” Holiday asked the next morning.

Kylie looked out at the falls. She had gone into Holiday’s office at first light and asked if they could come here. Burnett as usual waited outside.

“I just needed this,” Kylie said. She’d woken up this morning worried about Lucas and worried about ... what the ghost had said. That if she fought and lost, people she loved would suffer.

She needed to feel the warm energy from the falls telling her it was going to be okay. She didn’t want to die, she wanted to be there for Lucas through all of life’s ups and down. But she especially didn’t want to die knowing she’d let the people she loved down.

Holiday looked at her. “What’s wrong, Kylie?”

Kylie forced a smile and fought the tears from rising in her throat. She felt

it here. The peace, the acceptance that all would be well. She just didn't know if she'd be alive to see it herself.

"Haven't you ever just needed to come here?"

"Normally there's something picking at my sanity. So what's bothering you?"

"It's everything," Kylie said. "I'm worried about Lucas. He was so upset, Holiday. He cried. And I don't think he can do that in front of his father or his family. He needs me, but I can't be there because of some stupid were rule! And I'm worried about my mom, I still don't trust John." *I'm worried about leaving everyone I love and if they will be okay.*

The ambience of the falls seemed to enter her chest and calm her. That along with Holiday's touch on her forearm.

"It'll be okay." Holiday hiccuped. "And if you want, I'll have Burnett do another check on John."

Kylie inhaled. "No. You're right. It's going to be okay." She had to believe it. She had to.

"Have you told your mom how you feel about him?" Holiday asked.

"Yes, and she thinks I'm just upset because she won't go back to my stepdad." Kylie dipped her toes in the cool water. "I actually called her before I came to see you. Woke her up and everything. She's staying at his beach house—using up her vacation days before she quits her job to go work for him. It's as if he's sucking her in. She's practically living with him; now she's going to be working for him."

Holiday gave Kylie's arm another squeeze. "As much as we wish we can make our parents behave, they are as bad as we were when we were in our terrible twos sometimes. My mom actually dated a stripper after the divorce."

Kylie looked at Holiday and chuckled. "Okay ... enough about bad stuff. What do you want me to wear to the wedding?"

Holiday got that giddy look in her eyes. It happened every time someone mentioned the wedding. "You can wear shorts for all I care. You're my maid of honor. You should wear what you want."

"I have a paisley dress in pastel colors that I think would work."

"It sounds perfect," Holiday said. "Oh, did I tell you I invited Blake to the

wedding?”

“You mean, Blake, the ex-fiancé?”

“That would be him,” Holiday said.

Kylie made a face. “Does Burnett know?” She envisioned Burnett ripping off some of Blake’s limbs for showing up.

She grinned. “It was his idea. He said he wanted the man to see it so he’d realize I was off the market.”

Kylie grinned. “That sounds like Burnett.”

“Of course, Blake declined. I think Burnett scares him a bit.”

“That goes to show you, you only fall for smart men,” Kylie said, and giggled.

They lay back and stared at the roof of the cave. “I know you’re young, but Burnett and I were thinking, we’d like to make you the godmother of the baby. I mean, it is because of you that we got together.”

Kylie grinned. “I would be honored.”

After a few minutes of silence Holiday spoke again. “I got the college forms you asked for. Burnett or I can help you guys fill them out whenever.”

After another moment of peaceful silence, Holiday sighed. “Can you see it?”

“See what?” Kylie said.

“I just got this glimpse into the future. You finishing college in about five years and coming back to Shadow Falls to work here.”

“You’d hire me?” Kylie asked.

“In a snap,” Holiday said.

Kylie grinned. “Since you have it all figured out, what am I going to take in college? What kind of work am I going to be doing here?”

“Psychology, of course. You’ll make a great counselor.”

Kylie grinned. “You know, that’s exactly what I was thinking about.” Kylie paused. “When you look in the future, can you see if Miranda and Della and I will get into the same college?”

“If you guys want that, it’ll happen. Heck, maybe we’ll hire all three of you. Miranda would make an excellent teacher. With her own disabilities, she’ll know how to work with other students with problems. And Della, heck,

she'll be working with Burnett on security."

"I like your idea of the future." Kylie paused, then asked, "Will Lucas be here?"

"You bet." She sighed. "He'd be working with Burnett at the FRU and here part time."

"I love him," Kylie said.

"I know."

"Wow, none of this 'you're too young to be in love' talk?"

Holiday sighed. "You are young, but damn it, you have an old soul, and sometimes that just makes you wise before your years."

Holiday reached over and patted Kylie's hand. "It's really going to be okay."

Yeah, Kylie thought. She really liked Holiday's glimpse into the future. All she had to do was stay alive.

Chapter Forty-one

That night Kylie sat in her bed watching the clock and twisting the charm bracelet her mom had given her around her wrist. Almost midnight. Lucas would be shifting soon. She'd spoken with him today twice. He'd called the last time just to hear her say it again. She knew what he was talking about, so she obliged him.

I love you.

He hadn't said he'd come by tonight, but she still hoped.

Kylie's gaze shifted to the bright light on the other side of the room. The sword hadn't stopped glowing all day and she wasn't even touching it. It was as if it was trying to tell her something. Obviously, Kylie didn't speak swordese.

Not that she hadn't tried. After dinner, she'd actually sat down and had a conversation with the thing. Asked if there was something she needed to know. Told it her concerns about staying alive.

It didn't talk back. Not that she expected it to, but seriously, she wouldn't have been too shocked if it had. Face it, crazy shit happened at Shadow Falls.

Seeing it was almost twelve, Kylie got up. Della walked out of her bedroom the moment Kylie stepped out of hers.

"Where are you going?" Della asked.

"I just want to sit on the porch. Alone."

"You're hoping he'll come, aren't you?"

Kylie nodded.

"Fine," Della said. "But if tomorrow you have doggy breath..."

Kylie giggled and went outside. She gazed at the moon and wondered if

shifting would help Lucas deal with his grief. She hoped so.

The memory of him as a wolf when he'd stopped Fredericka from charging her still teased her memory, and she ached to see him in that form again. There were so many things she wanted to know about him. What he looked like when he first woke up in the morning. What side of the bed did he normally sleep on? Did he snore?

Pulling out her phone, she checked her e-mail to see if maybe he'd sent her something earlier. She had only one, from Derek. He had forwarded her all the links he'd found in connection to Lucinda Esparza. Since the spirit hadn't actually passed, Kylie suspected she wouldn't leave until after the confrontation with Mario. Or maybe she just wasn't eager to head off to hell.

The thought sent a shiver down Kylie's spine. She went to cut off her phone, but she accidentally hit one of the links. She read it, not really learning anything new. Then she read the last one on the list, an old newspaper clipping announcing the wedding of John Anthony Esparza and Lucinda Edwards.

Kylie pulled up the link. She saw a picture of Lucinda in her wedding gown. She was pretty, young, and innocent all dressed in white. The next picture was the couple cutting the cake.

Kylie looked at the picture. Her heart stopped. Completely stopped. She blinked, praying her eyes were playing tricks on her, but no, it was him.

No wonder she didn't like him. John, her mom's John, was John Anthony, Mario's son.

Thrown instantly into protective mode, her blood buzzed, as adrenaline spread from limb to limb. The sword appeared beside Kylie—glowing, beckoning her to action. With clarity, Kylie remembered Mario's threat. *You will come to me, Kylie Galen, come to me willing to die, to suffer at my hands for my pleasure, because the price will be too great! Your weakness will take you down.*

He'd had this plan all along.

Kylie considered calling for Della, or going after Burnett, but something inside her knew this was her fight.

Hers to win.

Or hers to lose.

She didn't have an exact address for John's beach house, but her mom had said it was on the same street as one of the old plantation homes they had visited a while back. The sword flickered and Kylie sensed it might know exactly where they were going.

Picking up the weapon, Kylie could swear she heard something stir in the woods. She looked back, didn't see anything, then willed herself invisible and took off.

She flew over the gate knowing the alarm would go off, but never looked back. Burnett would be livid. Yet everything in her said this was right. Living or dying wasn't even important. Saving her mom was.

Right then she knew exactly what Mario had meant by her weakness. Love.

Weakness or not, it was the only thing worth dying for.

* * *

She followed the coast past Galveston, to the next little island. The moon hung in the dark sky, round and bright. The sound of ocean moved with the wind and carried Kylie closer. She found the street where John's beach house should be, and as she moved lower to the ground the sword grew brighter. When she came up to a large yellow house on stilts with an eight-foot-high block gate around the property, she instinctively knew she'd found it. She noted the house backed up the beach, but they only had a small gate opening up to the sand and ocean. Who bought a house on the beach and then closed it off? Someone afraid of intruders.

The sword seemed to pull her even closer to the property. Hell, maybe she and the sword did speak the same language after all.

Kylie almost landed inside the block fence, but she realized John might have an alarm system that rivaled the one at Shadow Falls.

Heart racing, blood fizzing in her veins, she told herself to slow down and think before taking some action that could get her, or her mom, killed.

Remaining in one spot, she checked out her surroundings. Vegetation was sparse compared to Houston and the hill country area. Palm trees and some

large oleander bushes with salmon-colored flowers lined the block fence. She heard voices in the distance. She darted to the black shadow lining the gate, away from the moon's glow, and followed the tall block gate around the property, closer to the voices. Instantly, the sword's light faded as if to keep her from being seen. But her hand holding the sword still felt the weapon's power, its energy.

Around a slight bend, she spotted a side driveway and an iron gate. She moved in quietly until she got to another large oleander bush. Peering through the limbs and leaves she saw two men behind the thick gate sharing a conversation. Guards.

What kind?

She needed to know what she dealt with. Tightening her eyes, she focused on their foreheads—chameleons. But their patterns were murky, almost black.

Evil.

Her breath caught for one second, knowing and accepting just what she was up against.

The humming sound of a motor caught her attention. The silver Cadillac they stood beside had the engine running. Another motorized sound filled the moonlit night. The gate clinked and started to open. She watched from the shadows as one of the guards got into the white car.

This was her chance. Maybe her only chance. She had to get inside that gate. She had to save her mother.

The thought hit her that she might be too late. She pushed it away, unable to accept it.

Willing herself invisible, aware that she dealt with other chameleons, she listened to hear if anyone else was in the invisible realm. The sounds made by another invisible always seemed almost closer. Louder.

Only silence echoed in this unique world, but like her, they might be standing silent.

Listening.

Aware her footsteps might be heard, she waited for the gate's motor to grow a bit louder, offering the tiniest advantage. When the gate opened a few

more inches she could slip inside.

Breath held, trying to make herself as light on her feet as possible, she moved in. She got just inside the gate when she heard another sound—a footstep. She wasn't the only one invisible.

Another guard appeared a few feet from the other. He cut his eyes around.

“Do we have company?” the first guard standing by the gate asked.

“Maybe? Get the damn gate shut off so I can know for sure.”

Knowing now, before he faded again, was her only chance, she took off at a dead run. Crouching behind a prickly bush, realizing her odds of being seen in the visible realm might be less than being heard in the invisible sphere, she willed herself to appear.

The buzz in her protective mode still ran high and she found herself needing more oxygen. Still gripping the sword, she closed her eyes one second, and that's when she heard it—a deep angry growl.

Shit. They had guard dogs.

Opening her eyes, she stared at a snout with snarling teeth exposed and glowing yellow eyes. The black spiked collar told Kylie she was right, it was a guard dog, but the wild look in his eyes told her the animal was at least part wolf.

Kylie swallowed her fear and smelled the animal's breath. It jerked its snout up, showing more teeth. His growl became lower, more intense. The tags hanging from its collar clinked and seemed too loud.

Looking the animal right in the eyes, she tightened her hold on the sword. *Don't make me kill you. My fight is not with you. I even kind of love wolves.*

Instantly the animal backed up. His yellow eyes never blinked. He crouched down on his haunches, his gaze shifting away from her eyes. Kylie remembered the wolf she'd run across at Shadow Falls and how it had shown submissiveness.

She didn't understand it, but she'd take whatever advantage she had right now. Because face it, she had a feeling she was going to need it.

She glanced back where the men stood by the gate. Only one remained. The other had gone back into the invisible realm. He could be anywhere.

Willing herself invisible again, she listened. Heard the footsteps moving

in front of the bush. They slowed down. Her heart pounded so loud, she was certain he could hear it.

The dog/wolf turned and bolted out of the bush.

“Damn it, you mongrel,” the guard’s voice rang out. “I thought I had something.”

Through the leaves, Kylie saw the man appear. He stomped over to the animal and kicked his back leg. Hard. The dog yelped, and Kylie’s blood raged for the defenseless animal. When the man drew his leg back again, Kylie reached down and picked up a stone and tossed it to the bushes to her right.

The man swerved around and went to look in the bush beside her. The closer he came the harder it was to breathe.

“Got anything?” the man from the gate yelled out.

“I don’t think so,” he muttered, and started toward the gate. “Just that damn ugly-ass dog.”

That ugly-ass dog just saved my butt, Kylie thought, her heart still bouncing off her breastbone with the need to protect.

When the man remained visible and started chatting with the other guard, she knew this was her opportunity to move away, maybe find a place to actually get inside.

Becoming invisible again, she quietly moved around the house looking for an entrance. The wolf/dog came limping toward her, confirming her suspicion that it could see her.

Willing herself visible, she reached down and touched the dog’s back leg. She felt her hand grow warm. *Get me inside the house, friend*, she told the animal with her mind, unsure if it would work, or if she was simply hoping. Then again, Derek could communicate with animals. Maybe she’d changed herself into fae.

The canine turned and started moving beneath the stilts holding up the beach house. She started to continue on her own way, but the dog stopped and looked back at her almost as if to say, *This way*.

Chancing it, she followed the dog. After moving in and around multiple beams, she questioned her decision, but then the dog stopped at what

appeared to be a ramp that led up to a doggy door. Still invisible, she tried to move in rhythm with her canine friend. Not an easy feat carrying a sword.

She accidentally hit the sword on the edge of the door. If anyone lurked inside this dimension, they would have heard her.

Inside, she stopped and listened. Not a sound echoed in the darkness. She saw a couple of sleeping bags and empty dog bowls. *Bet they don't feed you regularly, either, do they, buddy?* But if they were fed here, that meant there had to be a door into the house. Whether it would be locked was another matter.

Scanning the dark room, she saw the door. She petted the animal again. *Thank you.* She stood up and reached for the doorknob. It turned in her hand. An almost silent twist of the wrist. She inhaled, feeling successful so far. But she didn't kid herself, the hardest part was finding her mom and getting them out of here.

Getting them out alive.

The sword seemed to vibrate in her hand, as if reminding her that escaping tonight wasn't that simple. Tonight she would use the weapon, only this time it wouldn't be practice. It would for be real.

* * *

At first she thought everyone in the house was asleep. She moved her way through a big kitchen, then she came into a large living room with a big rock fireplace. This room seemed to be the center of the house. A door led off from both sides. She spotted a light at the end of one hallway. She heard voices. Moving with baby steps down the hall, she listened to see if she could hear her mom.

One voice was clear: John. A second voice spoke and chills ran down her spine. She swallowed the taste of fear down her throat: Mario.

No female voices entered the conversation. Debating what to do, she decided to search for her mom. At this time of night, her mom would be asleep. She turned down the other hall, where it looked like bedrooms would be.

The first room appeared to be a guest room. With hopes her mom might

be sleeping there, she opened the door. The room stood eerily silent and empty.

She saw a room at the end of the hall and figured it was the master bedroom. Right then, she somehow knew that's where her mom slept.

She'd been sleeping with John.

Sleeping with the enemy.

But Kylie was here to fix that. She held tight to her sword as she quietly turned the knob.

In the bed was a familiar shape. A nightlight cast a glow onto her mom. Kylie recalled all the nights as a kid that she'd walked into her mom's bedroom with nightmares, or a stuffy nose. Not once had her mom gotten angry. She might not have been the biggest on offering affection, but she had always been there. The anger Kylie felt over the whole Brighten situation suddenly seemed irrelevant.

Moving in, she got to the side of the bed. "Mom?" she whispered.

Her mom didn't budge, and for one second Kylie panicked, then she saw her side shift with an intake of air.

Looking at the dresser, she saw a wineglass. The nightlight shined on the glass and showed tiny flecks of something filming the bottom. Picking it up, she held it to the spray of light, and sure enough, it appeared something other than wine had been in her mom's drink—like crushed pills. John had drugged her mom?

Putting the glass down, feeling another surge of protectiveness moving through her veins, she gripped the sword and leaned down. "Mom," Kylie said.

Her mom stirred a bit, but barely.

Reaching for her shoulder, she gave her a slight shake. "Mom, I need you to wake up."

Her mom's eyes popped open. "Kylie? What are you...?" She looked around as if she couldn't concentrate. Was it because she was still asleep or the drugs? "Where's..."

"John?" Kylie finished for her mom.

Taking a deep breath, Kylie realized she hadn't taken the time to figure

out exactly what she was going to tell her mom. With no time to come up with something clever, she knew it would have to be the truth.

Was it time to spill everything? Could her mom handle the truth? Or maybe just part of it?

“John?” her mom called out.

Kylie pushed two fingers over her lips, praying she hadn’t been loud enough for him to hear. “No, you can’t...”

“My God, what is that?” Her mom lurched back, looking at the sword, which was now gleaming, it was so bright. Her mom made a face. “This is a dream, right?”

“Mom.” Kylie tried to speak calmly. “John is not what you think. He’s not a good guy and we need to leave.”

Her mom looked away from the sword back to Kylie. “You need to stop thinking that. I know it hurts that your dad and I—”

“Mom, I really need you to be quiet and just do what I say, okay?”

Her mom’s brow wrinkled and Kylie felt certain she was partially drugged. “How did you get in here?” Her mom gave her head a little shake as if trying to wake herself up. Then she glanced at the sword again. “It has to be a dream.”

“Come on.” Kylie pulled her mom up.

Her mom rose to her feet, but then fell back to the bed. Kylie pulled her up again and this time noticed she wore a sexy nightgown. But she didn’t have time to worry about that. She had to get her out of here.

She took her hand and started walking her to the door. Right before they got there, it swung open.

John stood staring at Kylie. Then, as if out of an evil dream, Mario appeared beside him.

Kylie pushed her mom behind her and held out her sword. “Get out of our way.”

Mario’s answer was a devilish smile that spoke of evilness. “I told you that you would come to me.”

“Who are you?” her mom asked, and tried to move in front of Kylie.

Kylie caught her mom by the arm and held her back.

“And look what you brought.” Mario motioned to her sword. “A toy for us to play with.”

Chapter Forty-two

Kylie wasn't sure what to do next. But she went with the first thing she thought of. Tightening her hold on her mom, she willed herself and her mom invisible. Her mom screamed, obviously from not being able to see herself or Kylie.

Unable to give in to her mom's panic, Kylie didn't hesitate and bolted for the door, dodging the two men. Unfortunately, her mom was yanked from Kylie's hands. Swinging around, Kylie couldn't see her, but she heard her mom gasping for air and she knew Mario had gone invisible and now had her.

"Let her go!" Kylie seethed, and willed herself visible.

Mario appeared seconds later with her mom. His hand gripped her mother's throat so tight her face looked blue.

Kylie brought up the sword.

Call him a coward! The spirit's voice rang in Kylie's ears at the same time the cold shot down her spine.

Insist he fight you like a man.

"Don't be a coward. Stand up and fight me like a man!" Kylie bit out and prayed it worked.

Mario, his hand still around her mom's throat, stared at Kylie, his eyes growing tight. "Fine." He threw her mom at John.

Her mom fell at John's feet gasping for air. He picked her up, none too gently. Everything in Kylie wanted to attack. To forget the sword and use her bare hands to rip these two men apart. The only thing that stopped her was the spirit standing there repeating the same words over and over again.

The power you have is in the sword. The power is in the sword.

The moment her mom got air into her lungs, she yanked free of John and charged at Mario. Her mom might not be supernatural, but a mother's love was pretty damn powerful.

Just not as powerful as the magic of these two. John snagged her back by her hair. "Stop fighting, you fool!"

Her mom's eyes went wide and she cut them toward John. In her expression, Kylie knew she saw John for who he really was for the first time: someone evil, someone who had used her.

Kylie's heart ached for her mom and she prayed that this wouldn't be her last moments of life. For no one should die thinking only of their mistakes. Consumed with regrets.

Mario waved a hand through the air and a sword appeared. "I will kill you slowly, and your mother will get to watch. How much fun will that be?"

"No!" Kylie's mom screamed.

John pulled her mom's arms behind her back and held them there, making her struggles useless.

"Not here," John said. "I paid over fifty thousand for this rug."

Her mom screamed again and John yanked her against him. "Shut up or she will die sooner."

Mario looked at his son. "The blood would add to its worth!"

Her mom looked at Kylie, tears spilling from her eyes. The spirit stared at John. *You will rot in hell for all you've done.*

Kylie could only pray the spirit was right and his trip to hell would come soon.

"But then again, a little more room to play would be appreciated." Mario moved to stand in front of John and put the tip of his sword to her mom's chest, looking at Kylie. "We will walk out of here. If you choose to not follow, or try anything foolish, I'll kill her. And with pleasure."

Kylie's mom let out a horrible sound, a cry of pure terror. When she glanced up, Kylie read the plea for forgiveness in her mother's eyes. She thought they were doomed, and Kylie wasn't so sure she was wrong.

"I'll follow you," she said.

And she did. She followed him down the hall and into the living room.

Mario waved a hand and the furniture moved back, giving them the entire room to fight. Kylie had no idea where Mario got his powers, but she could guess it was from evil.

“Give me a second, I want to enjoy the show.” John, dragging her mother with him, opened a drawer and pulled out a roll of duct tape and wrapped it around her wrists. Then he did the same with her ankles. Roughly, he pushed her down against the wall as she fought him and begged him to stop. His laugh rang out cruelly. He ripped off another piece of tape and put it over her mouth.

Kylie watched in horror and fury, barely able to stop herself from leaping on the sorry excuse of a man and ripping out his black heart.

Not now. Not yet. Patience, patience, the spirit whispered in Kylie’s ear. *There is a plan and you must follow it if you are to cheat death.*

Kylie didn’t understand what the spirit meant, but she had no time to contemplate. The scream of the spirit warned her just in time of Mario’s charge. She brought her sword down against his. The clatter sounded in her ears, but she barely heard it over the sound of the blood humming through her body.

He came at her again, and Kylie responded blow for blow. Their swords clanked, clattered. Lucas would have been proud. But as good as she was at blocking his blows, she never got the chance to go on the offensive, she was too busy defending herself.

While she never stopped to look, she could imagine her mother watching in horror. And while she tried not to listen, she heard the desperate screams, muffled by the tape.

Help us. Kylie cried out the words in her heart, cried out to the death angels, to God, to anyone who might listen. In the distance, the howl of the half wolf/half dog broke through the air, as if he prayed for her as well.

Don’t lose sight of his sword. Watch him, he will move low this time. The spirit’s orders came quick and fast. Kylie tried to listen, tried to forget that this was life or death. She took orders and listened to the sound of metal against metal.

For one brief second, Kylie caught sight of Mario's face. He grinned as if he were simply toying with her. How long could she do this? How could she win?

Don't stop believing in your gifts! the spirit called out.

Then Kylie saw John appear behind his father with his own sword. Two against one? The memories of the Lucinda's vision filled her head. Yet only the slightest bit of fear entered Kylie's heart. No time to be afraid.

Like Lucinda on the night she'd lost her life, Kylie didn't think of death, she simply fought. Fought with everything she had with a prayer on her lips.

She watched in revulsion as John swung his arm back and thrust the sword into his own father's back. The end of his sword plunged through the man's chest. His shirt front darkened with blood around the extended blade. Mario's eyes turned bright green just before the life went out of them. A black wisp of fog-like smoke billowed out of the man's mouth.

Kylie knew it was the man's soul—stained and evil from all his sins. Then the ugliest sound Kylie had ever heard bled into the air—like rats screeching and cockroaches feeding. Several shadowy beings, hell's minions, swept through the room and took Mario's black soul with them.

John yanked the sword out, blood squirting from the hole in Mario's chest. With the sword no longer holding up his body, he crumbled to the floor.

Death wasn't pretty.

* * *

Kylie stared at the body, her own sword held motionless before her. Why had John done this? Had she been wrong about him?

When she glanced at the man's face, the cold smile he wore told her she'd been wrong about nothing.

How fitting, the spirit said. *You killed the man who killed your son. But not for our son.* She moved closer to him, looking him in the eyes. Then her gaze shifted to Kylie. *Don't trust him.*

"Why did you do that?" she asked John, keeping her sword poised to fight.

“I’ve been waiting for him to die so I could take his place. This was just the opportunity I sought.”

Kylie felt the despicableness in his gray eyes. “Now what?” she asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” He smiled. “You have choices. Accept that you and your mother belong to me. You do what I say, your mother lives. You don’t, and she dies.” He cast a glance at her mom, who stared up at him with hatred.

“I think we’d both rather die,” Kylie said, “but I don’t plan on doing that right now.”

“You think you can best me? You are nothing but a child with powers you can’t even control.”

He came at her with fierce swiftness. His sword moving in and out. She could barely keep up.

Go left. Now right. The spirit yelled instructions.

Kylie fought to defend herself. Her sword came down, but his came faster. She felt the razor-sharp edge slice into her left forearm. The sting and the blood followed.

She didn’t slow down. She couldn’t. To slow down, to take her eyes off his sword for one second, would mean death.

For her.

For her mom.

Then she felt the cold, a familiar cold of her father. He was here. But was it to help her, or take her with him?

A loud crash sounded somewhere nearby. She forced herself not to think or to focus on anything but the fight.

Then a low ugly growl vibrated in the room. She saw the wolf leap up from across the room. His mouth opened, his teeth exposed, as if ready to tear into flesh. Her friend had come to fight with her.

Recognition hit in a flash.

This was not the half-wolf outside.

The wolf flying in the air toward John was Lucas.

John swung his sword toward the new threat, ready to pierce Lucas’s chest.

Using every ounce of strength she had, feeling her blood hot with the need to protect, she brought her sword down on his, knocking it from the man's hands. John roared with fury, dodged Lucas, and reached again for his sword.

Before he got to it, Kylie got to him. She buried her sword into his side. She pulled the weapon out and started to go at him again.

He collapsed.

His body shook.

He gasped for air.

Blood dripped from the tip of Kylie's sword.

Kylie looked at Lucas, his eyes ablaze, his teeth still barred.

Then, just as before, the hideous sounds filled the room as the devil sent his own to collect the dirty soul that seeped from John's mouth.

Dropping her sword, Kylie felt soiled for taking a life. Then she swung around to her mom, who still lay staring at the scene. The realization came quickly. She hadn't taken a life, she had saved one.

Dropping down on her knees, she struggled to get the tape off her mom's mouth.

Lucas, in all his wolf beauty, moved toward her. Her mom squirmed as if in fear of the wolf. Lucas brushed against Kylie's side, met her gaze briefly, then turned and left. Kylie remembered again what his grandmother had said. *You are part of his quest, and he yours.*

"Mom," Kylie said. "It's going to be okay." She finished pulling the tape from her mom's mouth.

Her mom's scream bounced off the walls.

"It's okay," Kylie said again. "It's okay. Now, be still so I can get the tape off of you."

As soon as Kylie took the tape off her mom's wrists, she grabbed Kylie and held her. Held her hard and long. "This is the worst dream I've ever had."

Kylie pulled back and debated what to say, but then just nodded and ripped the tape from her mom's ankles. Her mom curled up in a ball, rocking back and forth, as if just waiting to wake up.

Kylie looked back at the two bodies. She needed to call the police, didn't she? She glanced back at her mom and wondered how it would play out with her spouting out things about dreams and wolves.

Then Kylie remembered, she might have come here alone, but she had friends. She grabbed her phone and started punching in Burnett's number. Right before her finger hit the call button, another noise filled the room. A soft comforting sound. The sound of trickling water. The sound of the falls. The warm feeling, the sense of rightness, of justice, filled Kylie's chest.

The moment of peacefulness was shattered when her mom screamed again, her eyes focused on something behind Kylie.

"He ... What? How?" Her mom started scooting back.

Kylie swung around, grabbing her sword as she did, and praying it was her mom's panic talking.

She was wrong.

Chapter Forty-three

Standing before Kylie, fully manifested, was her father. Not just fully manifested but brighter than ever before. The sound of the falls grew louder. The hum of peaceful water.

“Daddy?” she whispered.

Hey, baby girl.

“Hey,” she said.

He looked over her shoulder and frowned. *Your mom’s passed out.*

Kylie glanced back. “She’s had a hard night.”

So have you. He motioned to the blood on her shirt.

“Just a flesh wound,” she said, or was it more? She glanced down wondering if she’d only imagined it was small and now her father was here to take her with him.

Blood had soaked through her shirt, not a lot of blood, but enough that the peaceful feeling lessened and fear took its place. Oddly, it was not fear for herself, but fear that her death meant she’d let others down. Or had her victory over John and Mario resolved that? And it was simply her time to go?

Glancing up, she stared at her father, her vision slightly blurred with tears. “Am I going to die? Are others going to suffer because—”

No, Kylie. He rushed to her. His hands holding her shoulders. His cold a comfort she welcomed. *You have so much life to live, child. I’m not here to take you. I’m here to help you explain this to your mother.*

She blinked. “Did the death angels give you more time on earth?”

Only a little more, but what they offered me was better. I have a place with them now.

It took Kylie a second to understand. “You’re going to be a death angel?”

I will be after I help you this last time. But the beauty of it is that from now on, I will always be watching out for you. The wisdom you hear in your heart will be from me, daughter.

Tears filled her eyes again. She realized something he said about helping her explain this to her mom. Kylie had been so intent on saving her mother, she hadn’t even considered how she was going to explain it. “How am I ever going to get Mom to accept this?”

That is what I am here for. We will do it together.

Then Kylie recalled. “She could see you ... before she passed out.”

Yes. She had always felt my presence, but I was granted enough energy so she may see me. He looked around, frowning at the dead bodies. *But for now, call Burnett.*

Kylie picked up the phone and redialed Burnett’s number.

* * *

“She is almost awake.” Kylie’s father appeared. Kylie, sitting in a chair beside the bed in the extra bedroom in John’s house, looked up at her daddy.

Her mom had been out for almost four hours now.

Burnett and Holiday had shown up minutes after she’d called them. And he’d immediately called a crew to clean up the mess. The FRU were going to make it look like a code red, which was a car accident. How they would make being stabbed with swords appear to be a car accident, she didn’t know.

She didn’t want to know.

After a good long cry on Holiday’s shoulder, Kylie explained what went down. She’d also told them about Daniel. Holiday was in awe that Kylie would have a personal connection with a death angel. Kylie had almost told her that she would have preferred to have had her dad with her in life, but this wasn’t about choices and she reminded herself that she had much to be grateful for.

When she explained that Daniel was here to help her explain things to her mom, Burnett expressed concern that Kylie’s mom couldn’t handle the truth. Kylie was worried about the same thing. Yet when he suggested they bring

Derek in to erase her mother's memory, Daniel had appeared and disagreed.

She needs to know the truth, Daniel had insisted. He hadn't given explanation; he didn't have to. Kylie had to trust her dad, even when her heart feared how her mom would take the news.

It was Holiday who pointed out that Kylie's mom wasn't just a normal human. Being a descendent of a Native American tribe had made her intuitive of supernatural powers.

So, with the help of Daniel, a future death angel, Kylie was about to tell her mother everything. And she wasn't looking forward to it.

Her mother opened her eyes. She focused on Kylie and then the words spilled from her mom's lips. "I had the worst dream." She sat up and looked around.

Kylie looked around as well, not knowing if Daniel was still visible. He wasn't. She supposed he'd show up when she needed him. But she felt pretty needy right now. Looking back at her mom, Kylie knew the moment when her mom realized they were at John's house. Her breath came short. "What are you doing here?"

Kylie took her mother's hand. "You were in trouble."

Her mom blinked, shook her head, and fell back against the pillows. "I'm still dreaming."

"No, Mom. It wasn't a dream."

"Yes, it was. It was awful, Kylie. At least parts of it were. You were fighting and—"

"It was awful. But it wasn't a dream." Kylie knew only one way to prove it. She pulled the collar of her shirt down and showed her mom the cut. It probably could have used some stitches, but Kylie had been too busy to worry about that. Of course, Holiday had seen the blood on Kylie's shirt and hadn't been happy until she searched the house for something to clean the wound.

Her mom's eyes got big as quarters.

"Are you ... okay?"

Okay was such a vague term, Kylie realized. It didn't come close to expressing what Kylie felt. But at the same time, words failed her.

She'd seen her mom nearly choked to death. Kylie had been forced to fight for their life with a glowing sword. She had watched her abductor kill his father. She'd been stabbed with a sword. Then she'd had to kill a man.

"Yeah," Kylie nodded. "I'm okay." She inhaled and tried to remember how she planned to tell her mom the truth.

"Of course you're okay," her mom blurted out. "It's just a dream."

Kylie gave her mom's hand another squeeze. Daniel had said he was going to try to go into her mom's dreams and help make all this easier. Had he been successful?

"Mom, do you remember telling me that you thought there was something magical about Daniel?"

Her mom nodded. "Yes, but—"

"Well, you were right. He was magical. And that made me magical."

Her mom gripped the bed sheets as something occurred to her. "I dreamed about him, too. Oh, goodness. This isn't making sense." She dropped back and covered her eyes with her hands.

"It will, but you're going to have to listen to me, Mom." Or maybe it wouldn't make sense. Hadn't it taken Kylie weeks to accept all this?

She paused. The expression *to make sense* was another vague term.

"Do you remember the stalker I thought I had? You know, when you sent me to see that shrink."

Her mom nodded, but weakly, almost as if she was about to pass out again. Then Kylie realized why that might be.

"Breathe, Mom."

Her mom took a big, deep swallow of air and Kylie continued. "Remember I told you he was dressed in army clothes?"

Her mom nodded again. "I realize now that probably freaked you out because ... well, my dad died in the army? Isn't that part of what upset you?"

"He said you would tell me all this. What's happening, Kylie?"

"Just what Dad told you," Kylie said calmly. "I know it sounds crazy and I know what you've ... what we've been through here is hard, but you have to try to believe."

Her mom's eyes, focused over Kylie's shoulder, suddenly went large. The

cold hit at that exact moment when her mom gasped and Kylie knew Daniel had appeared. And if her mom's expression was any indication, she could see him, too.

"Breathe, Mom." Kylie got tears in her eyes at the look of loss that passed on her mother's face as she gazed at the man she loved so much so long ago.

"The dream I had ... you..." Her mom's voice wavered.

I told you that you would see me. Daniel moved closer to the edge of the bed. Now, I want you to listen to our daughter. She's going to explain things to you better than I did. I have to go now, but remember what I said. You will find love again. Don't fight it.

Daniel leaned down and kissed her mom softly on her lips. *You were the love of my life*, he said.

Tears filled her mom's eyes again as Daniel pulled away. He glanced at Kylie and then placed a soft kiss on her cheek.

Daniel looked back at her mom and motioned to Kylie. *We did good, didn't we?*

Her mom nodded.

Her dad glanced back at Kylie. *I'll always be here when you need me.* He faded and Kylie wiped her own tears from her cheeks.

Her mom looked at Kylie. "I had a dream, he told me that he'd been watching over us the whole time."

Kylie nodded. "He has been, Mom. I only started seeing him recently, but he knew things about my life."

Kylie crawled in bed with her mom and hugged her and they cried. Cried for someone who had died years ago, but who they would forever miss. After a few good tears had passed, Kylie told her mom about Shadow Falls being for magical teens, and about Mario and Roberto, and how John was actually Mario's son. In a gentle tone, she told her mom that they were magical, but Mario and John were actually the bad kind of magic.

Her mom gasped. "I just remembered. John killed someone, some man? Where are the cops?"

"That was Mario. And, well, Burnett took care of that."

Her mom gripped Kylie's hand. "Burnett from ... your school?"

Kylie nodded and noticed her mom had stopped breathing again. “Breathe, Mom.”

She gasped and then asked, “Is he, this Burnett, magical, too?”

“Yeah.” Kylie decided to wait and explain the whole different species thing to her mom later. Vampires, werewolves, and such might freak her out. It certainly had Kylie, at least until she became best friends with one and fell in love with another.

Her mom closed her eyes as if trying to forget something, or maybe trying to remember. “Then there was a wolf and then you killed ... John. Oh, God, baby, you had to kill him. What are the police going to say?” She sat up some. “We’ll tell them I did it. Do you hear me, I did it, not you.”

Kylie’s heart clutched at her mom’s willingness to confess to murder for her. How, Kylie wondered, had she ever doubted her mom’s love? “There’s not going to be any police. Burnett works for an organization like the FBI. He’s taking care of it for us. That means we can’t ever talk about this to anyone.”

Her mom nodded and then she leaned in. “But, Kylie, how is Burnett going to explain the bodies? People will know I was dating John.”

“Burnett is taking care of that, too.”

She sank back into the pillows. “It’s going to take a long time to believe this.”

“I know,” Kylie said. “It did me, too.”

* * *

The following Monday morning, Labor Day, Kylie went down early and started breakfast for her and her mom. Kylie had stayed with her, and she had to remind her to breathe a lot. They slept in the same bed at night. Talked sometimes until after midnight.

Her mom asked a lot of questions. Some required difficult answers. Yup, she went into the whole species issue. Vampire and werewolf being the most difficult because of instinctual fear due to all the folklore surrounding them. Kylie told her mom she was a chameleon, and decided to wait until later to explain that meant she actually had a little of all of the species in her.

Over the weekend, Kylie had also spoken to Della and Miranda. Della was furious Kylie had disappeared on her watch again.

“It’s beginning to look bad on my record,” Della said.

Kylie promised to talk to Burnett and take all the blame.

Miranda reminded Kylie of her pinky promise to never leave, and Kylie assured her that she was coming back. And today was the day. It also just so happened to be Burnett and Holiday’s wedding.

She and her mom were going early to help set things up.

Lucas had called Kylie three times. He had been staying at his uncle’s since the full moon. Supposedly, a funeral was a several-day ordeal for weres. And today, before the wedding, he had his meeting with the Council as scheduled. She’d offered to go with him, but he assured her that he needed to do this alone. Kylie prayed they accepted him.

Not that it would change anything between them. As his grandmother had said, they were part of each other’s quests—quests that had been ongoing since they met all those years ago. Some things were just meant to be.

Kylie hoped it was true what Daniel had said about her mom finding another love. Sadly, Kylie got the feeling it wouldn’t be her stepdad. She’d actually spoken with Tom Galen this morning. They’d spent a good twenty minutes making plans for their next summer trip. Before they hung up, she told him she loved him, and she meant it. Even knowing she’d have Daniel close as her guardian death angel, her stepdad had his place in her heart and always would. She knew Daniel wouldn’t want it any other way.

Kylie went to the refrigerator to pull out the eggs. The steam rose from the carton in an odd way.

Guess what?

Kylie recognized the spirit’s voice.

“What?”

They aren’t sending me to hell.

Kylie looked back at the spirit sitting on her mom’s countertop and smiled. She wore a nice gown with no slashes, no blood, and she’d left the sword behind, too. “You’re going to heaven?”

No, well, not yet. They’re giving me a second chance. You know, to do

some work for them to make up for all my wrongdoings. Then, if I earn the right, I'll get to go there. I'll be with my boy. She beamed.

Kylie smiled at her. "I like second chances." She paused.

Do you know why they are giving me this second chance?

"Why?" Kylie asked.

Because I loved my son.

Kylie smiled and remembered Mario had called it a weakness, and yet it was that very thing that took him down.

"It's a powerful emotion," Kylie said. And she thought of all the love she had in her life. Her family. Her friends. Lucas.

I have to go now, the spirit said, her image fading.

"It was nice knowing you," Kylie said.

You, too. The voice faded with the last of the cold. Kylie turned back to her breakfast-making when her mom walked into the kitchen.

"Who were you talking to just now?"

Kylie debated telling the truth and decided to hold off. "Phone's been ringing all morning."

"Who called?" she asked as she went for a cup of coffee.

"Dad, Lucas, and Sara," Kylie said.

Her mom's eyes widened. "Your dad?"

"Tom," Kylie clarified.

Her mom nodded. "I guess ... your dad wouldn't use a phone to contact you."

Kylie grinned. "I don't think so."

Her mom poured her coffee and added a teaspoon of creamer into the cup.

"Is this Lucas guy ... is he ... important to you?"

Kylie nodded. "Very much so. I love him."

Her mom's eyes grew wide. "Are you two ... you know?"

Her mom still couldn't say sex. "Not yet," Kylie said. "But it's going to happen soon."

Her mom nodded. "You should probably see a doctor about getting..."

"On the pill," Kylie finished for her.

Her mom nodded.

“I will,” Kylie said.

Her mom inhaled as if the conversation had been painful, then she asked, “Is Sara coming by before you head back?”

“No, she’s in New Orleans at a family reunion. That’s what she called to tell me. That and to tell me her aunts were smothering her with their boobs.”

Her mom giggled and then her expression went flat. She just stood there, staring at her coffee, stirring it around and around. The spoon clinking against the side of the cup seemed to be the only noise in the room. She finally looked up, concern tightening her brows. “When I took Sara to see you, she told me you healed her. You didn’t really ... did you?”

Okay, Kylie couldn’t keep everything from her mom. “Yeah.” Kylie got busy making the French toast and pretended it wasn’t a big deal.

“Is there anything else you can do?” her mom asked, caught her breath, and waited.

“Why don’t I just tell you a little bit at a time?” Kylie said.

Her mom released a deep breath that sounded like relief. “Good idea.”

Chapter Forty-four

Kylie had been holding her phone on the ride to Shadow Falls waiting for Lucas's text or call. Had he made the Council? Had he not? If he hadn't was he already beginning to resent her? Oh, she knew he'd said he wouldn't, but she knew how important this was to him, too.

It was around three that afternoon when they parked in front of the Shadow Falls Academy sign. Holiday and Burnett met Kylie and her mom at the gate. Hugs were given; even her mom was open to them. Yet as she started into the gate, her mom slowed down.

"Something wrong?" Burnett asked.

"Just a little nervous," her mom answered. "I mean, I'm just not sure I'm ready to meet any vampires or werewolves."

Burnett glanced at Kylie over her mom's shoulder and Kylie offered him a shrug that said she hadn't informed her mom about who was what. He looked back at her mom and smiled. "Don't worry, they're not nearly as intimidating as you'd think."

"Were any of them at the parents' day meetings?" she asked, sounding hesitant.

"A few," Burnett said.

Kylie rolled her eyes and knew her mom was going to give him hell when she learned what he was.

"So what should we start doing?" her mom asked, looking at Holiday as if wanting to forget the whole supernatural issue. "I mean we're here to help pull off this wedding."

Holiday walked them to where they were going to have the ceremony.

Several of the students were already helping to set up chairs.

The first chance Kylie got out of earshot from her mom, she asked Holiday, “Have you heard anything from Lucas yet?”

“No, he called earlier and said the meeting with the Council had been delayed a bit, he’ll be here in about an hour. But he can’t be late,” she said. “He’s one of Burnett’s groomsmen.” For the first time, Holiday’s eyes pinched with worry. She reached over her shoulder and twisted her hair. Then she hiccuped.

Holiday glanced over to Kylie’s mom. “How is she really doing?”

Kylie spotted her mom chatting with Chris, clueless that she was talking to a vampire. “Better than I thought,” she said. “Of course, when she finds out that she’s already had conversations with two vampires, she’s gonna flip.”

Holiday grinned and then grew serious. “How are you doing?”

“Better than I thought, too.” Kylie smiled. “But I’ll be better when I see Lucas.”

“I’ll feel better, too,” Holiday said.

“Where’s Della and Miranda?” Kylie asked, expecting to see them by now.

“They drove into town to pick up the cake and some flowers for the reception. If they get into an argument and drop the cake or something, I’m going to cry. I swear, I’ve never seen two girls love to fight as much as they do.”

Kylie grinned. “Yeah, but they love each other. But enough about everyone else, shouldn’t you be soaking in a tub, relaxing for the big event?”

Holiday smiled. “Believe it or not, this whole thing with your mom has been a blessing. I’ve been more worried about you two than the stressing about the wedding.”

The next hour flew by as Kylie and her mom finished helping put out chairs and assisted decorating the dining hall for the reception. Kylie had broken down and texted Lucas, but he hadn’t answered. Nor had Kylie seen Della and Miranda, and she was having withdrawals.

Suddenly Kylie heard a couple of squeals. Familiar squeals. Della and

Miranda squeals.

Kylie wrapped her arms around her two best friends and it turned into a group hug. “Have I told you how much I love y’all?” she said.

“Yeah,” Della said. “And the only reason I’m letting you get mushy now is because I heard you kicked ass the other night.”

Kylie pulled back and smiled. “I did kick ass!”

* * *

Kylie, Della, Miranda, and her mom had gone back to get dressed at Kylie’s cabin. Kylie had enjoyed sharing Della and Miranda with her mom. Or she would have if she weren’t still worrying about Lucas. Where was he? Fear that he hadn’t made it and hadn’t wanted to face her filled her heart. Kylie left the bathroom, where they were all putting on their makeup, to check her phone.

“You know a watched phone never rings,” Della told her, having followed Kylie out.

Kylie looked up. “I’m just—”

“Worried. I know. But my gut says he’s fine.”

Kylie looked up at her vamp friend. “Since when are you the positive one?”

“Since I was forced to room with a damn optimist.” She grinned.

Kylie laughed and hugged her. A few minutes later, her and her mom and her two best friends started walking to the front. They had told Holiday they’d arrive thirty minutes early to help out with seating. Kylie had almost texted Holiday and asked if she’d heard from Lucas, but decided not to worry Holiday any more on her wedding day.

The four of them had just turned the last bend when Kylie saw him.

He walked toward them slowly. His blue eyes, dark and hungry, were fixed on her. Obviously dressed for the wedding, he wore a navy suit coat, navy slacks, and a solid white shirt. There wasn’t one spot on him that wasn’t completely gorgeous.

Kylie hadn’t realized she’d stopped walking until her mom leaned down and whispered, “Breathe, Kylie.” There was a teasing tone in her voice.

“That’s your Lucas, isn’t it?” she asked.

I sure as hell hope he’s mine. Lucas stopped in front of her. “Mom, you remember Lucas, don’t you?” Kylie asked, but she couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Why don’t we let these two have a few minutes?” Miranda said.

Kylie’s mom looked as if she was nervous. “Sure, as long as ... there’s not any vampires or werewolves around.”

Della coughed to cover up her laugh.

“Don’t worry,” Lucas said, “I’ll protect her.”

And he would, Kylie thought. He had protected her. He’d save her life.

“Oh, I was worried about me,” her mom said. “Kylie’s friends with them. And I’m sure that eventually I’ll get used to them, but the thought of it still creeps me out.”

“I understand,” Lucas said, and cut his eyes to Kylie.

As her mom and Della and Miranda walked away, Kylie heard her mom say, “Do they only come out at night?”

Kylie rolled her eyes at Lucas and leaned in. “I’m not sure what she thinks they look like.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “She’ll get used to us. Her daughter did.”

Kylie grinned. “Why didn’t you answer any of my texts? I’ve been worried sick.”

“I had to cut it off and when I got out it was late and ... I wanted to tell you in person.”

“You got on the Council?”

His blue eyes brightened with a smile. “I did.” He looked over his shoulder, as if making sure her mom wasn’t looking. Then he pulled her against him and kissed her. A soft kiss.

“I got you something,” he whispered, his lips breathing words against hers.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a ring. A gold ring with a large diamond. A beautiful, teardrop-shaped diamond that looked like an engagement ring. Kylie’s breath caught.

“It was my grandmother’s ring. In her letter she wrote you should have it.

And before you start panicking, let me say that I know maybe we're too young to call it an engagement. That's why I got you this, too." He pulled out a gold chain. "I want you to wear it around your neck. Call it a promise—a promise that when you do slip a ring on that finger..." He ran his hand down to her left hand. "That it'll be my ring."

Emotion rose in her throat. "You don't have to give me anything for me to give you that promise."

"Perhaps," he said as he slipped the ring onto the chain and then reached around her and clasped it around her neck. "But this is just a little reminder for all the Dereks in the world that you're taken."

She lifted on her tiptoes and kissed him again. This time, he pulled her into the line of trees and deepened the kiss. A kiss filled with promises. Promises of more kisses ... of just more. She slipped her hand inside his coat and circled his warm waist. His hum vibrated through her body and she ached to give herself over to the lure of that sound. She came close to pulling his shirttail out and touching his naked back.

He pulled back, a little breathless. "I'd better get you to the wedding. Or we won't make it."

"If I wasn't the maid of honor, I might take you up on that." She arched a teasing brow.

He grinned. "Next week, I'm making a trip to Dallas to start to sort out my grandmother's estate. Do you think ... maybe you could come with me? We could stay in a nice hotel."

Kylie's heart raced, knowing what he was asking, and she didn't hesitate. "That sounds perfect."

As they walked up, Burnett came moving toward them. He looked concerned. "The Brightens are here," he said.

"For the wedding?" Kylie asked.

"No, they didn't know about the wedding, they just stopped by in hopes of seeing you." He frowned. "And just to make things difficult, your grandfather and aunt are also here. I could just send them all away, or I could ask them to the wedding. It's your call."

Kylie looked over at her mom talking to the other wedding guests

mingling by the chairs.

“No, I think it’s time.”

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Kylie stood up at the front waiting for Holiday to walk down the aisle. Lucas stood across the row watching her, caressing her with his gaze. She knew he was thinking about next week. God help her, but it was going to be hard to think about anything else.

Beside Lucas, Burnett fidgeted. She had never seen Burnett like this. He looked like a kid who needed to go to the bathroom.

When Kylie confronted him earlier about appearing nervous, he’d told her, “Hell, yeah, I’m scared shitless that she’ll realize she can do better than me.”

The music started. Kylie looked back at the crowd. Her mom sat by the Brightens. She had been nervous about meeting them, but Kylie assured her that they would like her. On the opposite side of her mom sat Kylie’s grandfather and her great-aunt Francyne. Kylie had introduced her mom to them, too. And a few minutes later, Kylie introduced the Brightens to Malcolm Summers and her great-aunt.

Because she couldn’t tell them these were Daniel’s real father and aunt, she introduced them as friends of the family. It was awkward for just a second, but then her grandfather shook Mr. Brighten’s hand, then embraced Mrs. Brighten and told them sincerely what a pleasure it was to meet them. Kylie could tell her real grandfather was grateful to the Brightens for the love they’d had for his son.

Everyone from that row looked at Kylie and smiled. Oddly enough, they looked like one big happy family. And they were her family. Kylie had never been so proud. And deep inside she heard her father’s voice say, *Perfect*.

In the row behind them, Kylie saw Miranda sitting beside Perry. Kylie would bet her best bra that those two were already planning their own wedding. And beside Miranda was Della, who stared at the row of chairs to her left. Stared at Steve. Would Della ever accept him? Yup, *for a few days Della had cratered slightly where Steve was concerned, but she was back to*

pushing him away again.

Hayden, sitting next to Jenny, smiled at Kylie. To Jenny's right was Derek. Kylie didn't miss that his shoulder pressed against hers. Those two had something special and they deserved it.

Kylie's gaze shifted to the very back row to Fredericka, who sat with the new teacher. Kylie hadn't heard anything from Holiday about Fredericka's asking about seeing him. But Kylie got the feeling that something had happened and it had been in Fredericka's favor.

Inhaling, Kylie felt love in the air. All of a sudden, Holiday started moving down the path between the chairs. The "Wedding March" started to play. Burnett stared at Holiday, mesmerized. Kylie didn't blame him. Holiday, in all her fae glory, was beautiful. Her green eyes sparkled. Her skin practically glowed.

For some reason, Kylie recalled the day her stepdad moved out, how she'd thought it was the suckiest day of her life, and how she'd felt everything in her world was changing, and nothing would ever be the same again.

And she'd been right about one thing. Everything had changed.

Everything.

Some of it had been hard to deal with, but most of it ... Wow.

She reached up and touched the ring hanging around her neck and looked across to Lucas, who was smiling at her. He mouthed the words, "I love you."

Kylie whispered those words back and she couldn't help but think that today might just be the best day of her life.

Turned at Dark

c. c. hunter

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“Turned at Dark”

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Sixteen-year-old Della Tsang had never seen a ghost until she saw her dead cousin zip across the street and duck into the alley. If it hadn't been for the streetlight spitting out its spray of wattage overhead, she might have missed him.

And if it hadn't been for a scar that ran along his chin, she might have thought it was just someone who looked like Chan. Then again, it was after midnight. But she *had* spotted the scar. A scar she'd sort of given him when they'd been six, jumping on the trampoline and he'd collided with her head.

Hardheaded Della had been her family nickname after that. Sometimes Della wondered if she'd really been obstinate then, or if the name had just been another thing for her to live up to. Being of Asian descent, there were high expectations, sometimes too high. But because she and her sister were half-white, her father insisted they work twice as hard to prove that their parents' love hadn't tainted the family tree.

A pair of headlights moving down the road pulled Della's attention from the alley where Chan had disappeared. Not that she completely believed it was Chan. Did she?

The car drew nearer, and thinking it was Lee to pick her up, Della stepped off her best friend Lisa's front porch, leaving the sound of the party still going on behind her.

At least twice a month, Della and Lee tried to sneak away so they could be together for an entire night. She knew her parents would freak if they knew she and Lee were sleeping together. It wouldn't even matter that they were practically engaged. But at least Lee had gotten a stamp of approval from her father. Luckily, she agreed with him, too. Not that she agreed with her father on everything. However, Lee was everything Della wanted in a boyfriend—hot, popular, smart, and thankfully for her father's sake, Asian. It didn't even bother her that Lee wasn't totally into the party scene.

She gave the alley one last look. It couldn't have been Chan. She'd attended his funeral less than a year ago—had seen his casket being lowered into the ground. She remembered she hadn't cried. Her father had insisted she not. She wondered if her father would be disappointed if he knew that very

night, while alone in bed, she had cried her eyes out.

When the car drove closer, Della realized she'd been wrong. It wasn't Lee. She watched as the car moved down the street, past the alley. She stood there, staring, suddenly feeling alone in the dark, when her phone beeped with an incoming text.

Pulling it out, she read the message. *Parents still up. Will b late.*

Frowning, she re-pocketed her phone and her gaze shifted back to the alley. What would it hurt to just...go check? To prove that ghosts didn't exist.

Moving slowly in the shadows, she neared the alley. The cold of the January night seeped through her leather jacket and the soft tap-tapping of her footsteps seemed loud. Maybe too loud. No sooner had she cut the corner than she heard yelling. She stopped short. Her breath caught at the sight of the fight—or out-and-out war—taking place. The sound of fist hitting flesh filled the cold darkness and she saw bodies being tossed up in the air like rag dolls.

Della might not have been familiar with this darker side of life, but she immediately knew what she'd stumbled on. A gang war. Her heart jumped into her throat. She had to get out of here and fast.

She stepped back, but the heel of her shoe twisted and she lost her footing. Her leg shot up in the air and she went down with a loud thud.

Slamming butt first, her hands went back to catch herself. She felt a sharp pain in her palm, no doubt from a piece of glass from a broken beer bottle a few inches away. Wincing, she muttered, "Shi..." The one-word curse hadn't yet left her lips when the dead silence suddenly drew her attention upward. The fighting had stopped and at least six guys, young, about her age, starting moving toward her. Moving oddly, as if... Their posture reminded her of a pack of animals coming to check out their prey.

Della's focus shifted from the group's strange body movements to their eyes. Her heart jolted when she saw their eyes glowing burnt orange. Then low growling noises filled the shadows. "What the—"

Before she could finish her sentence, they were upon her. "Human. Yum," one of them said.

Tension filled her chest. "I'm leaving." She jumped to her feet.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her, and knew they had her surrounded. The growling escalated and for a second she could swear the sounds weren't human. She turned, hoping to find a path to run, but instantly

something grabbed her around her middle and a cold wind blasted against her face. She felt dizzy, disoriented, as if she were suddenly traveling at high speeds like she was on a roller coaster. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Darkness surrounded her and it took a second to realize she had her eyes closed. She tried to open them, but the rush of air coming at her stung so badly she slammed them shut. What the hell was happening? Now it felt as if...as if she were flying.

Or falling. No, not falling—someone, or something had her.

Her lungs screamed for air, but what she thought was an arm wrapped around her stomach, cutting off her ability to breathe. She tried to yank herself free, but her efforts were futile. Whoever had her was built of steel, and his flesh felt cold, hard. Something wet seemed to ooze from her hand and she realized it was her blood from where she'd cut herself.

Right then, the cut started to burn. Burn badly, as if someone had just doused it with rubbing alcohol. The searing pain seemed to follow her arm upward, all the way to her chest, and for a second, her heart didn't beat. She gasped, hoping to breathe, but nothing seemed to get through to her lungs. Refusing to let the fear stop her, she forced the words out, "Let me go, you asshole!"

A jolt shot through her body as her feet hit the ground. The arm released her. Her knees buckled, but she caught herself at the last second and shot her eyes open. Blinking, she tried to focus, but everything appeared blurry.

"Breathe," someone said and she recognized the deep, masculine voice. Recognized Chan.

Ghosts did exist?

No, they couldn't.

A couple more seconds later, her vision cleared and holy mother of pearls, she was right. Chan stood directly in front of her. Nausea hit. Her palm still burned. She grabbed her middle, bent over, and puked all over the front of her dead cousin.

"Oh, shit!" He lurched back.

She stood upright again and stared, thinking that any minute now she'd wake up. Or maybe it wasn't a dream. Had someone slipped something into her drink tonight? She pressed her palms into her eyes and didn't care that she was probably smearing blood from the cut on her hand all over her face.

When she dropped her hands, Chan stared, only now his black eyes glowed a bright green color.

He jumped back from her. “You’re bleeding!”

“You’re dead.” She pressed her bloody hand on her middle hoping to squelch the nausea and wipe away the sting.

He pinched his black brows together and stared harder. “Friggin’ hell! You’re turning.”

“No, I’m not! I’m standing still. In one spot,” she snapped. “Then again, I do feel dizzy.” She closed her eyes and then popped them back open again.

“You needed help so I... I didn’t know you’d cut yourself or—”

“I did not need your help, I would have... I would have figured something out.”

He shook his head. “Still hardheaded, huh?”

She hugged herself. “What just happened? No, what *is* happening?” She looked around and saw they were no longer anywhere near Lisa’s house or that dark alley where she’d gone looking for... “You’re dead, Chan. How can you be here?”

He shook his head and stared at her forehead. “If I’d known you were bleeding, I wouldn’t have... I should have known you were a carrier. But if I hadn’t got you out of there, the dogs would have eaten you alive.”

She stopped listening and tried to make sense of the crap that had just happened. She remembered seeing the gang fight, then she fell, and then she’d been surrounded, and... “Oh damn, am I dead?”

“No. But you’re going to think you’re dying in just a bit. You touched me with an open wound. Your virus is turning live now. That’s why you’re feeling like you do.” He stopped talking and put his nose in the air. “Damn, the hounds are looking for us. I’ve got to get you out of here.” He reached for her and she jumped back.

“Stay away. You’ve got puke all over you.”

“It’s your puke.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want it on me. I think?” Whatever she thought went out the mental window. Once again, the wind whipped her hair around her shoulders. The long strands flipped around so hard, it stung when they slapped against her face.

* * *

Della’s head hurt something fierce. Was this her official first hangover? How many beers had she had, only one, right? She never drank more than... She opened her eyes, and found herself staring at her bedroom ceiling. She knew

it was her bedroom, because she could smell the vanilla-scented candles and the Lemon Pledge she'd faithfully polished her furniture with every Friday. And her pillow still smelled like Lee, from when he'd dropped her off at home from school on Monday and no one was home. She loved how he smelled.

But how had she gotten home from the...

Fragments of memories started forming—Chan, the gang fight, flying. *Flying?*

She jackknifed up. Her head nearly exploded. "Crap," she muttered and told herself it had been a dream.

"Hey, cuz."

His voice came at the same time the nausea did. She turned and for the second time puked all over her dead cousin.

"Ahh, gross," Chan said, but then he snickered. "I guess I deserve this. Not that I meant for this to happen. I really didn't." But then he laughed again.

Della wasn't laughing. "What's happening?" Tears, partly from the frustration, partly from the pain, filled Della's sinuses. She forced them away. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt and saw her leather jacket tossed over the foot of her bed.

Chan put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a nudge. "Lie back down and I'll explain."

"There was a gang war," she muttered, trying to remember.

"Yeah, vampires and werewolves. I went to watch. It's cool to watch us take out a few dogs."

Her phone, sitting on her nightstand, beeped with an incoming text. She tried to reach for it, but moving hurt. Another surge of tears filled her throat.

"It's your lover boy," Chan said. "This is like the tenth text he's sent. I think you missed your hookup date." Chan shook his head. "So my little cousin is getting it on with a guy, huh? I feel like I should go beat him up or something."

She dropped back on the bed.

"Do you want me to text him and tell him you're okay?"

"I'm not okay!" Talking made her head pound worse. Realizing she was talking to a ghost made it pound twice as hard. Pain shot in the back of her eyes and she closed them, wishing for relief.

"What's wrong with me?" she muttered to herself and not to Chan,

because logic told her that Chan wasn't really there. Someone must have put something in her drink at that party. Yeah. That had to be it.

She heard a chair being pulled up beside her bed. "You're not going to believe this, and that's to be expected. It will take a while to soak in. You see... I'm not dead. I...well, our family carries this virus. It's dormant and you can go your entire life and not even know it, but if and when we come in close contact with a live carrier, especially when there's blood involved, the virus turns active."

"I got a virus?" She swallowed another bout of nausea.

"Yup."

"Bird flu?" she asked.

"Not quite."

"West Nile?"

"No. Vampirism."

She opened one eye, that's all she could do, and peered at him. She would have laughed if she didn't feel as if she were dying. "I'm a vampire?"

"Not yet, it takes four days. And it's not going to be easy. But I'll help you through it."

"I don't need your help." She was her father's daughter, always figuring out how to help herself. Della closed her one eye. Another pain shot through the back of her head, and she realized the way she had to help herself right now was to get help. But not from a ghost. Using every bit of energy she had, she got to her feet. The world started spinning.

"Where are you going?" Chan caught her right before she fell on her face.

She started to ignore Chan, because he wasn't real, but what the hell.

"Gotta get Mom." Whatever someone put in her drink was pretty powerful stuff because she was sitting here talking to a ghost about vampires.

"I can't let you do that." Chan pushed her back on the bed, not that it took much effort. She had about as much energy as a snail on Xanax, skinny-dipping in a cup of chamomile tea.

"Mom?" Della screamed.

* * *

Della wasn't sure if she'd been in the hospital three hours or ten. She wasn't feeling any better, but at least she'd stopped hallucinating. Chan had disappeared. He hadn't appeared since her mom found her in the fetal position, throwing up again.

The nurses came in and out of her room, trying to force her to drink something. She didn't want to drink anything.

"What the hell did she take?" Della heard her father mutter.

"We don't know she took anything," her mom answered.

"Why would she do this to us? Doesn't she know how this will look?" her dad asked.

Della considered trying to tell them one more time that the only thing she'd done was drink one beer. Earlier she'd almost confessed her theory that someone might have put something in her drink, but stopped when she realized that would've gotten Lisa in trouble. Best to keep her mouth shut, and take whatever punishment came.

"I don't give a damn how it looks! I just want her to be okay," her mom said.

It was the same argument, different version. Mom hated Dad's pride. Della didn't like it either, but she understood it. She hated making mistakes, too. And on top of that, she'd seen the one-room apartment over a Chinese restaurant that her dad and his six siblings had been raised in. Her father and his family deserved to be proud of what they'd accomplished. And it hadn't happened by making mistakes.

Della heard the hospital door open again. "Why don't you take a coffee break, I'm going to be here for a while," a female voice said. Della thought she'd heard the voice earlier. Probably a nurse.

The sound of her parents leaving filled the room. Della felt an overwhelming gratefulness toward the nurse for sparing her from having to listen to the argument, but she didn't have what it took to express it.

"You're welcome," the nurse said, almost as if she'd read Della's mind.

Della opened her eyes. The nurse stood over her.

Blinking, Della tried to focus, but then something weird happened. She could see...something on the woman's forehead. Weird crap. Like lines and stuff, like some kind of computer-jumbled pattern. She blinked hard and slowly opened her eyes again. It helped. The odd stuff was gone.

Della went to push up and realized something else that was gone. The cut on her hand. How had it healed so fast?

The nurse smiled. "Has anyone talked to you yet?"

Della forced herself to reach for the large cup on the hospital table.

"About drinking my water. Yeah."

"No, about what's happening to you." The nurse took the cup from

Della's hand. "Don't drink anything. It'll make you sicker."

"Sicker? Have they figured out what's wrong?"

The door swished open and a doctor walked in. He moved to the side of her bed and stared down at her. "Does she know?" he asked the nurse.

"Know what?" Della blurted out.

"I don't think so." The nurse ignored Della's question.

"Know what?" she asked again.

"Her parents aren't live carriers?" the doctor asked.

"No," the nurse answered.

"Would you stop talking about me like I'm not here?"

The doctor met her gaze. "Sorry. I know this is hard." The intensity of his stare disturbed her. For some reason, everything about him disturbed her. Which was odd. She didn't normally instantly dislike people. It generally took at least fifteen minutes and a good reason.

She started to close her eyes, and bam, the weird crap appeared on the doc's forehead.

The doctor growled, a real growl. Della recalled the gang members doing

"Someone knows." The doctor nodded back to the door.

The hospital door swung open so hard, it slammed against the wall and sounded as if it took out a chunk out of the plastered wall. Della glanced up, but the doctor blocked her view.

"What the hell are you doing to her?" Chan stopped on the other side of the bed.

"Shit," Della said. "It's happening again." And when she glanced at the nurse that crazy thing was on her forehead again. It was as if Della could see inside the nurse's head like in some cheesy B-rated movie. She could see the front of her...brain. Yup, it looked like a brain, only it wasn't just wrinkled. It had strange-looking zigzaggy lines, a cross between bad modern art and ancient hieroglyphics.

"What's happening?" the nurse asked.

"I'm...seeing ghosts." Della had to force herself to stop staring at the woman's brain. She looked at Chan and now he had something on his forehead, too. Only his brain looked different.

"We're trying to help her," the doctor answered Chan.

Della's breath caught. "Can you see him, too?"

Chan snarled at the doctor, exposing his teeth, and she recalled the insane

talk about vampires earlier. “She doesn’t need your kind of help, Werewolf!”

“Did you do this to her?” the doctor asked. “Are you the one who infected her?”

“Yes,” Chan seethed. “But I didn’t know she was bleeding, and if you must know, I didn’t have a choice. It was snatch her up and get her out of the alley or let you dogs kill her!”

The doctor frowned. “Have you at least explained it to her?”

“I tried,” Chan said. “She’s not buying it.”

“Buying what?” Della asked, blinking furiously, trying to get the crap off everyone’s forehead. “He’s dead,” she snapped.

“We have to get her out of the hospital before Phase Two hits,” the nurse said.

Phase what? Nothing was making sense now.

The doctor looked at Della. “Look, your cousin isn’t dead. He’s...a vampire and thanks to his carelessness, like it or not, you’re about to become one, too.”

Della’s head started to pound again.

“I have to go,” Chan said. “Her parents are coming up in the elevator.”

“Wait.” The doctor said to Chan, “If I get her released, will you see her through this?”

“I don’t need anyone’s help!” Della insisted.

“Of course, I will,” Chan said. “She’s my cousin.”

The nurse looked back at Della. “When the turn is complete, I want you to call this woman.” She handed Della a card. When Della didn’t take it, the nurse placed it in her hand.

“Call who?” Chan asked as he backed toward the door.

“Holliday Brandon. She’s the director of the Shadow Falls Camp. She can help.”

“Oh, hell no! Della’s not going to that stupid camp to get brainwashed by the government.”

The nurse’s shoulders tightened. “They don’t brainwash anyone. They’ll help her decide what’s best for her.”

“I know what’s best for her. She’s going to come live with me.”

Live with Chan? Della struggled to keep up with the crazy conversation. Then she heard the elevator bell ding as if it were right outside her door.

“And fake her death, like you did? That’s why she thinks you’re a ghost, right?” The nurse shook her head. “Is that really what you want for her? To

have to walk away from her entire life, her family?"

Chan didn't answer. Della only saw a blur appear where he'd stood. The door swung back open and caused another chunk of plaster to rain down on the floor. The doctor and nurse looked back at Della with pity, sympathy. Della scowled at them.

"The nurse's right," the doctor said. "Call Shadow Falls. Trust your cousin to help get you through the next few days, but after that, don't believe everything he tells you. You look like a smart girl. Make up your own mind. With proper planning, we can live normal lives."

"We?" Della asked.

"Supernaturals," he said and pointed to his chest. "Werewolf." He motioned to the nurse. "Fae. And you're vampire. There are others, but you'll learn about them in time."

Della slumped back onto the pillow. "So it's official?" she muttered.

"What's official?" the nurse asked.

"I've lost my mind."

* * *

"You need to eat and drink something," Della's mother said and handed her a cup with steam billowing above the rim.

Della had been out of the hospital for a day. Her head pounded like a mofo, her body hurt like the worse case of flu she'd ever had. And mentally she was slipping. Her assessment no longer hinged on the fact that she saw Chan. It hinged on the fact that she was this close to believing him. She was turning into a vampire. And, according to Chan, the first two days were a stroll down Easy Street in flip-flops compared to what the next two would be.

She pulled the cup of hot tea to her lips, pretended to drink, hoping to appease her mom. The nurse, and then Chan, had told her that eating or drinking anything would make things worse. Oh, Della hadn't taken them at their word. Nope. She had to go prove it.

She'd never heard of anyone puking up a vital organ, but odds were she was missing a lung right now. Thank God, she had two.

"Lee called again," her mom said, straightening Della's covers.

"Is he coming over?" Della managed to ask, torn between wanting to see him, and not wanting him to see her like this. Upchucking a lung didn't leave one looking their best.

"I told him he could, but he said his mom was worried you might be

infectious.”

“She never liked me.” Della closed her eyes.

“Why would you say that?” Her mom stood up.

Because I’m half-white. “I don’t know,” Della lied and opened her eyes.
“Because I’m too ballsy.”

Her mom squeezed Della’s hand. “You are too ballsy. Too independent. Too stubborn. A lot like your dad. But I love him, too.” She brushed Della’s bangs from her brow.

When her mom left, Chan stepped out of the closet. He edged up against the bed. “You’re about to hit Phase Three.”

“How do you know?” she asked and oh, damn but every nerve ending in her body seemed to scream. If this was Phase Three, she didn’t like it one damn bit!

“Your heart rate is increasing,” he said.

Della pushed her head back into the pillow and muttered some ugly words.

“Listen to me, Della. This is very important. When your parents come in here, you have to act normal. Whatever happens, we can’t let them take you back to the hospital.”

“Why not?” she asked and moaned.

“There’s too much blood there. You might lose it. Even the smell of blood might send you over the edge. The first feeds have to be controlled feeds.”

Another pain wracked her body and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. “Can I die from this?” She bunched up a fistful of blanket and squeezed. She hated being scared. Hated it because it was a sign of weakness.

His black eyes met hers. “Yeah.”

Another sharp pain exploded in her head. “Am I going to die?” Her thoughts shot to Lee. She wanted him to be here to hold her. If she died, she wanted to see him one last time. Then her thoughts shot to her little sister, Joy. Della had sworn to be there for her, to make sure no one ever bullied Joy, like they had her. For some crazy reason, Della knew her sister wasn’t as strong as she was.

“No, you’re not going to die,” Chan said, but Della saw the doubt in his eyes. “You’re too hardheaded. Hardheaded Della can’t die. You hear me? You can’t die, Della. You’re going to be strong.”

* * *

Two days later, Della slowly drifted awake. She'd slept fitfully for most of the past forty-eight hours. She recalled sitting up and pretending to eat when her parents came in, so she wouldn't get stuck going back to the hospital. And she remembered talking to Chan a few times. But she'd been so feverish and out of it that her memory was still hazy. She opened her eyes and quickly slapped her hand over them to block the sun spilling through her window.

"Stop that," she seethed.

"Who are you talking to?" Chan asked.

"The sun!" she growled and nearly cut her tongue on her teeth.

"It pisses me off, too. We're night people now. But it's about to go down." Chan must have lowered the blinds, because the burning brightness faded. He continued talking. "As soon as your parents go to bed, we're going out. I need to educate you."

"Educate me in what?"

"Your new life."

She moved her hand from her eyes and looked around. The first thing she saw was the flowers. Red roses. Lee? Yes, she recalled her mother bringing them in and reading her the card. Lee said he loved her.

She smiled and realized she didn't hurt. Not her head. Not her gut. In fact, she felt...good. Strong. She felt more alive than ever.

"I'm well!" She stretched out her arms and did a little bed dance.

"Yeah, you made it. Scared me for a while there, but?"

"Where's my cell?" She wanted to call Lee.

"In the drawer, so I wouldn't have to listen to all the beeping. Your lover boy is worried about you."

Right then, all their talk about vampirism ran through her head. Did she really believe? And if she didn't, how could she explain Chan? She pushed it out of her mind, and decided to enjoy not feeling like day-old dog poop for a few seconds before traveling down that road. A road she somehow knew was going to cause her a lot of pain.

Sitting on the side of the bed, she remembered Chan propping her up on pillows and telling her to fake being okay, every time he heard her parents walking up the stairs. She couldn't remember how well she'd done, but probably not too badly because they never bundled her up to take her to the hospital.

She stood, stretched, and looked down at the chair positioned by the bed. And bam, she was slammed with the memory of Joy, her little sister stepping

inside the room. She'd held Della's hand and cried. Cried silently because even her sister knew how her dad hated weakness. Joy's words played like sad music in Della's head. *"Please don't die, Della. You're supposed to help me, help me learn to be strong like you."*

A big ache filled Della's chest. She was so glad she hadn't died and let Joy down.

Looking at the window, she had a vague memory of...standing on the roof.

"Did we go somewhere?"

"Yeah, you were getting cabin fever—needed to sort of test your wings. You did good, too."

Suddenly, she recalled moving at amazing speeds and feeling the wind in her face. What was real?

Her stomach growled. "I'm starved," she muttered.

Chan pointed to a big plastic cup with a straw. "You didn't finish your breakfast."

She reached for the drink and sipped. A thousand different flavors exploded in her mouth. Berries, dark chocolate, tangy melon. Flavors she didn't even recognize, but somehow knew she couldn't live without now that she had sampled them.

"What is this?" She licked her lips and immediately started drinking again.

His right brow arched. "It's what you'll be living on from now on. Blood."

She almost gagged, then stopped herself. She'd bitten her tongue before. "Blood doesn't taste like this." She yanked the top off and stared at...at what looked like blood.

"How can..."

"Nothing will taste like it did before. Don't you remember gagging on the chicken soup your mom brought you?"

She looked at her cousin and vaguely remembered trying to eat the soup. "Tell me you're lying."

"Sorry. Everything is different now. No use in me trying to sugarcoat things. Just accept it."

She stared down at the thick red substance in her cup. "This can't be real."

"It's as real as it gets."

“Oh, God!” She put the cup on her nightstand and stared at it. “What kind of blood?”

“AB negative. O is better, but I couldn’t find any.”

“That’s...that’s human blood?” Her stomach churned.

He nodded. “Animal isn’t nearly as good. But you’ll learn about that in time. I have a lot to teach you.”

She cupped a hand over her mouth and stared at the cup. But even as the thought of drinking blood sickened her, even as a part of her vowed not to become this monster, her mouth watered for another taste, another swallow.

She hadn’t ever known real hunger or thirst, but this...the feeling that said if she didn’t finish what was in that cup right now she might die, had to be the closest thing she’d ever experienced.

Chan went to grab the cup. Before she knew what she was doing she lunged, knocked him across the room, and grabbed the cup.

He laughed. “I figured as much.”

She finished the drink, and looked up at Chan. “I need more.”

“I know. Right after you turn, you’re ravenous. I think I put down fifteen pints my few first days. But you’re going to have to wait until after your parents go to bed.”

“I want it now,” she hissed, not even recognizing her own voice.

* * *

“They didn’t card me?” Della said, following Chan into the club several hours later. The place was dark, lit up by only a few candles, but amazingly she didn’t have much trouble seeing. Or hearing. Noise, crowd noise, the chattering of different conversations, and people shifting in their chairs, came at her from every direction, but somehow she could shut out the parts of it that she didn’t want to listen to. However, the ambience didn’t stem from the noise or the lighting. Energy vibrated in the place. Della felt it, felt it feeding her, like some forbidden drug.

“The only card you need for this place is right here.” He touched her forehead.

Immediately, Della remembered the weird things she’d been seeing on everyone’s forehead. She grabbed his arm. “What is that? The forehead thing?”

He grinned. “It’s your ID. All supernaturals have the ability to read brain patterns, and eventually you’ll learn to tell who is what. And if you

concentrate just a little bit you can get behind their shields and know if they're friend or foe."

He pointed across the room. "Look at the guy in the green shirt. Tighten your eyes, and stare at his forehead and tell me what you see."

At first all Della saw was his forehead and then... "I see...swirly lines."

"Now look at my pattern. "Do you see the similarities?" Chan asked.

"Yes. But they're not identical," she said.

"Not identical, but he's vampire. Brain patterns are like tracks in the snow, sooner or later, you'll be able to know what kind of animal made that print."

She nodded and glanced around the room.

"Look at that big guy's pattern, the guy in the black coat," he said.

She did. The pattern was completely different. Horizontal lines and...

"Now look deeper. Keep staring. Open your mind."

She concentrated and what she saw was black and dark and gave off the impression of danger. She took a step back.

He laughed. "It's okay. He's not going to hurt you. Not here, anyway. But meet him in a dark alley, and who knows."

"I wasn't scared," she insisted, but she knew it was a lie and she heard her own heartbeat speed up as if punctuating the fib.

"You should be. He's Werewolf and not someone you want to associate with."

Della remembered. "The doctor. He was a werewolf and he didn't seem...bad."

"They are all bad." He looked around. "There's a fae, the pretty brunette in the pink dress. Well, she's half fae, half human."

Della tightened her brows and recalled the pattern of the nurse in the hospital. "I think I sort of understand. But if these people don't get along, how come they come to the same bar? And why would they work together?"

"Because some supers think we should live as one big happy family. Like humans who want to live alongside lions. And I admit I've had my fair share of fun toying with a few breeds." He wiggled his brows. "Especially humans. It's fun to play with our food."

Della took a step back. "You're human. How can you..."

"I told you earlier, I'm not going to sugarcoat it. I'm not human anymore. Neither are you. You need to start looking at humans as prey because that's all they are for us."

Della put a hand over her mouth. "The blood earlier, you didn't...hurt anyone."

"Got it from a blood bank." He glanced away, almost too quickly, as if he were lying. "Oh, see the little guy in the black shirt? Check his pattern out, but...if he looks this way, glance away, quick."

Emotions swirled around Della's chest. She stared at Chan.

"Look at him, Della. This is important. You need to know this shit."

"Why?"

"Because he's a shapeshifter. You need to be able to recognize them so you can stay clear of them. They are one pissed-off breed. All that changing forms messes with their psyche. Most of them would just as soon kill you as speak to you in passing."

Her emotions were again swarming in her chest.

"Don't worry," Chan said. "Where you're going to live, you won't—"

Della recalled vague snippets of conversation about leaving her family. She couldn't do that. "Chan, I..."

"I'm taking you back to Utah with me. It's a vampire community. I'm actually thinking about joining a gang, and if you want to, we both can—"

She shook her head. "Even if I wanted to go with you, my parents would never let me go."

"Which is another reason we're here. There's a guy here, a mortician, he's going to help us fake your death. How do you wanna go, car crash? Maybe you fall and hit your head when you get out of the tub. He's really good."

Della stood there staring at him, the dark candlelit atmosphere making it seem surreal. Instantly, she remembered how Chan's parents had been devastated at his funeral, how his little sister and hers had cried. How Della had wanted to cry, but her daddy kept looking at her and reminding her she had to be strong.

"No," she said to Chan. "I won't do this."

"You don't have a choice."

"No!"

And just like that, Chan disgusted her. She had to get away from him. Away from everything he was telling her. She shoved him hard. Harder than she intended to. She saw him fly across the room. She didn't wait to see him land, or even to see if he was okay. She took off, darting between tables until she saw a door and ran for it. That room was even darker—only two or three

candles were placed on a bar. She darted away from the light, hoping to hide, hoping to lose herself in the crowd.

Suddenly a guy grabbed her by her forearms. “Slow down, sweetcakes. You okay?”

Sweetcakes? She looked at him, but with tears in her eyes, her vision wasn’t quite focused. Suddenly his forehead opened up and she saw his pattern. She didn’t know what he was, but when she looked deeper, she got a sleazy feeling.

He leaned closer. His breath smelled like onions. “I ordered this for me, but I think you need it more.” He placed a warm shot glass in her hand.

She was about to drop it away when the smell hit her. The exotic flavors. She brought the glass to her lips and swallowed it in one gulp. It was better than any alcohol she’d ever tasted. Even better than the blood she’d drunk earlier.

“What was that?” She licked her lips to collect the last taste.

“O negative. Freshly drained.” The guy smiled. “My name’s Marshal. How about we go back to my place? I got some of this stuff at home, too.”

The seediness of his presence suddenly overwhelmed her. “Ever heard of statutory rape, you pervert?” Della seethed, realizing the guy was older than her dad.

“Need some help?” asked a girl who suddenly stood beside them. Dressed goth, her eyes brightened a gold color. Della tightened her brows to read the girl’s brain pattern, and decided she was most likely a werewolf. The girl grabbed the man.

The man shoved the girl down and grabbed Della. Della lost it and tossed him across the room the way she had Chan, then she took off for another door, but not before looking back and seeing the girl who’d helped her give her the thumbs-up. Della couldn’t help but wonder if Chan was wrong about werewolves.

“Don’t believe everything he tells you. You look like a smart girl. Make up your own mind.” The doctor’s words played in her head, but she didn’t have time to think. She heard the dirty old man spouting out orders to someone to find her and bring her back so he could teach her a lesson.

She’d learned enough lessons for one day, Della thought. She ran faster, knocking over tables and chairs, and occasionally the chairs weren’t empty. “Sorry. Sorry,” she said as she went, moving through the dark, crowded spaces. She smelled beer, and heard the clinking sound of ice swirling in

drinks. The club was like an old house, a lot of cubbyholes and tiny rooms filled with card tables for people to group together. The interior felt as if someone had just kept building on, creating an almost mazelike atmosphere. She moved aimlessly, through one door, then another, or maybe it wasn't so aimlessly.

She followed something. She just didn't know what it was until...until she did know. The smell.

Blood.

She entered another room, and three men lay stretched out on beds, needles in their arms and blood being drained from their bodies.

Her first thought was that they were being forced to give up their life-sustaining substance; her second thought was... Yum. Her stomach grumbled and she licked her lips. Then her last thought sickened her. She took a step back, afraid of the urges vibrating through her body, but then the smell entered her senses and her mouth watered.

"If you're wanting to buy it, you'll have to go to the bar," said one of the men. "We work for Tony and we'll get our ass burned if we start selling by the pints in here. But if you want to take one of our cards, we can talk later."

Della watched as one man got up, pulled a needle out of his own arm, and sealed off the bag with some kind of plastic clamp. But the ripe smell of all those exotic flavors filled the room. She watched as he put the blood on a metal tray.

"Hungry, aren't you?" he asked and he smiled at her. She tightened her eyes and saw he had a pattern similar to the nurse. Was he fae?

She inhaled, the smell again filling her nose. Realizing they offered to sell her the blood later, she concluded that they obviously weren't being forced to give up blood. Somehow that made her desire for it less hideous.

Her heart raced. Her stomach grumbled and she dove over the man, her only goal, her only desire to get her hands on that bag of blood.

She got it. The other men stood up from their beds. The needles were yanked from their arms, blood spilling on the floor, as they stood. She hissed at them, thinking they would attack, but they all backed up, as if she frightened them. She knew she frightened herself. The deep, angry sounds parting her lips were unlike any sound she'd ever made.

Moving backward, she found the doorknob and made it outside the door, but a loud ear-pinching noise filled her head. Alarms. She held the plastic bag of blood close to her chest and ducked between crowded tables. Heads turned

and followed her every move. She realized that perhaps the others were like her and could probably smell the blood. But she still didn't care. She needed this. Had to have it.

Suddenly, she felt someone grab her arm and yank her across the room. She fought, but her attacker's strength matched her own. The alarms kept ringing, she heard people running away from her and some toward her. Whoever had her continued to pull her across the room. She glanced up and didn't see a door, no way to escape. Would she die here because she'd stolen blood? She tried to pull away, but couldn't. And then they crashed through a window, shards of glass fell around her, and in seconds they were flying.

"That was so stupid," Chan said. "You so could have gotten us killed."

She closed her eyes tight, preventing her weakness from showing, but on the inside, where it counted the most, the tears fell. What was happening to her? What kind of monster had she become?

In a matter of minutes, she and Chan stood outside her house. Normally, he landed on the roof and they crawled in her bedroom window. Not this time. She clutched the blood to her chest as if it were a precious stone.

"If you want it, you'd better drink now," he said, his frustration evident from his posture to his tone. "Your parents are up and pissed."

The bag of blood in her hand was still warm. Somehow its scent leaked out of the plastic and filled her nose. Della looked back at her house. "How do you know they're up?"

"Focus. Your sensitive hearing should already be working."

She looked up at her bedroom window. "I can't hear..." And suddenly she could. Her mom cried and her dad muttered about how he planned to find a good drug rehab. She stared back at Chan. "I'm not using drugs?"

"Yeah, but you're doing things you've never done, so they just assume. My parents did the same thing." He sighed. "But it doesn't matter what they think."

"It does to me," Della snapped back.

He shook his head. "Can't you see how impossible living here will be? It's not like you can keep your blood supply in the fridge. You're not going to fit into their lifestyle now."

She shook her head. "I can't... I can't walk away from... Lee. I can't leave my sister. She needs me." And whether she wanted to admit it or not, she loved her parents, too.

"Hardheaded Della," he muttered. "I should have known you'd have to

find it out for yourself. So go...walk in there with your blood and see if you can explain it." He threw up his hands as if exasperated. "I'm leaving. Going back to Utah. How are you going to get blood tomorrow or the next day? You can't live with humans anymore. You can't."

"They're my family," she said.

"Not anymore. I'm your family. Other vampires are your family. You'll see. You don't belong here."

She looked down at the bag of blood. Her hands shook. Her chest hurt with emotion.

"Ah, screw it," Chan said and the fury in his eyes faded. "Give me the blood. I'll bring it to you later. Go deal with your parents. But I'm telling you, I can't hang around here to supply you with blood forever. Sooner or later, you're going to have to leave them. You'll see. I don't care how hardheaded you are, sooner or later, you're going to have to accept my help."

* * *

Della refused to cry. No matter how harsh, how bitter her father's words were. She sat there on the sofa, her chin held high, taking the insults. Each one hurt a little bit more. But damn it to hell and back. She wouldn't cry. Her father continued, telling her how *she was a disappointment to him and his family legacy. How she'd brought shame down on her family name. How he would never be able to stand proud in public again.*

"Go to your room and think about what you have done!" he finally demanded.

She left. She couldn't get away from him, or her mom, fast enough. Her mom had stood stone-faced and let him say those horrible things. All of it a lie. She wasn't taking drugs, or selling her body to different men to feed her obsession. She'd given her body to one, Lee, whom she loved, who loved her. When she got to her room and slammed the door, she tried to swallow the shame, the anger, the fury that filled her throat.

Then the sweet smell of roses filled her nose. Her gaze shot to the arrangement. Suddenly, all she could think about was Lee. She needed him to hold her, to tell her it would all be okay. Rushing to the window, she flung it open and stared down at the grass two stories below. She stood on the edge for several seconds, unsure how she did this, but desperation made her jump.

Landing on her feet without feeling any of the impact of the jump, she took a deep breath and started to run. At first, it was slow, then faster and

faster still. Soon she wasn't even sure her feet touched the ground. As the wind whipped her hair around her face, Della formed a new plan.

She didn't have to go live with Chan in Utah; she and Lee could get their own place. They had talked about it already. They would work part time and go to school. They could do this.

In less than five minutes, she stood in front of Lee's house. She saw his window, it was dark. Of course it was dark, it was two in the morning, but she didn't care. She leapt up, grabbing hold of his ledge, and then she forced the window up. Thankfully, it wasn't locked.

When she climbed inside, Lee sat up. He blinked, stared at her with his dark brown eyes, and then he ran a hand through his hair. "Della?"

She moved closer. "I... I had to see you. I missed you."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You mom said the doctors didn't know what was wrong with you."

"They didn't, but I'm well now and I've been thinking... I want to be with you. I want to get our own apartment like we talked about."

He stared at her, his hair mussed. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and he looked good. Sexy. She moved to the edge of the bed.

"How did you...get inside?" He looked back at the window.

"It was unlocked."

"But it's the second-story window." He scratched his head.

She sat down beside him. "I love you, Lee. I want to be with you, always." She reached out to touch him. His skin was so hot, felt so good. She just wanted to lie down beside him, have him hold her.

He flinched and pulled away. "You're cold. *Really* cold."

His words brought back something Chan had said when she'd been half out of it. Something about her body temperature changing, about how she couldn't let her parents take her temperature anymore.

"What's wrong with you?" he said, scooting away. "You must still be sick."

"No," Della said. "I'm fine, I'm just... I mean..." What did she mean? Was she going to tell Lee the truth? "I'm not contagious," she said.

"What did you have?" He eased away, when all she wanted to do was to get closer. She wanted him to hold her, to kiss her and make her forget everything that happened these last few days. He raked a hand through his black hair. "You should probably go. If you get caught here, you know how it

will look.”

“It will look as if we’re sleeping together. Which we are. And I don’t care if people know anymore.”

She put her hand on his shoulder.

“But I do care,” he said. “Don’t touch me.” He pushed her hand away. “I... I’m sorry, but I don’t like how you feel right now. Something feels...off about you. It’s hard to explain, but you just seem really weird right now. I think you should go home and talk to your parents, get the help you need.”

It hit her then. Hit her like an eighteen-wheeler without brakes. Lee would never like how she felt. If he was afraid of some kind of flu, how would he feel about her being Vampire? About her drinking blood?

Tears filled her throat, but like the daughter her father had raised her to be, she didn’t let a single tear fill her eyes. “I see.” She stood up.

“See what?” he asked.

She moved to the window and swore she wouldn’t look back, but she couldn’t help it. She turned and met his eyes. For some reason, she suddenly saw something in Lee that she hadn’t seen before. She saw her father. And yet... “I love you. I will always love you.” And with that she jumped out of his upstairs window. She heard him call her name, and pull back the covers.

But she was gone before his feet touched the floor.

* * *

When she got back to her room, she sat on the edge of her bed. Her stomach growled, her mouth watered, and she knew she needed...blood. Where was Chan? Had he taken her O negative pint for himself? Had he abandoned her? She jumped up and went to the mirror and stared at herself. Her eyes were no longer dark brown, but golden. Bright hot yellow as if something inside her burned. And yet she was cold. Too cold for Lee? She noticed her two canines were...sharp.

Her pulse raced and she heard Chan’s words bounce around her head. “*You can’t live with humans anymore. You don’t belong here.*”

Her chest ached and this time she did cry. Tears crawled down her cheeks. Accepting what she had to do, she grabbed her suitcase and tossed in a few things. When Chan got here, she would be ready. Then, realizing she couldn’t leave without...without at least seeing her family one more time, she tiptoed out of her room and headed down the stairs. Her parents’ door was closed, but she eased it open just a bit. Just enough to see them one last time.

Her mother was asleep on her father's chest. Her mother might not like her father's pride, but she still loved him. She loved him because down deep she knew that her father had forsaken his pride to marry a white woman. In truth, he loved her mom more than his pride.

Her throat tightened as she silently closed the door. Then she moved back up the stairs, but instead of moving toward her room, she went to Joy's room. The door wasn't closed. She stepped inside and moved to the edge of the bed. Her sister rolled over and opened her eyes.

"You feeling better?" she asked.

"Yeah." Della tried to keep her voice from shaking.

Joy smiled that sleepy smile of hers that made her look younger than ten. "I told Mom you wouldn't die, because you wouldn't leave me. You'd never leave me." She dropped down on her pillow and drifted back to sleep.

Tears filled Della's eyes and the pain of knowing she'd never see her sister again made her heart break. She got up and walked out of the room. She closed the door and saw her packed bag. She'd left the window open, hoping Chan would see it and come back. A breeze entered. It felt...colder. Unnaturally cold. Chills tiptoed up her spine.

Something fluttering across the wood floor caught Della's eye. She looked down at the card. She picked it up and saw the name *Holiday Brandon* scribbled across the card. Below the name was a telephone number and the words SHADOWS FALLS CAMP.

Vaguely, she remembered the doctor and nurse telling her she could call someone, someone who could help her decide the right thing to do. But she couldn't call a stranger and ask for help. Or could she?

Her thoughts went to her sister and Della reached for her phone and dialed.

"Shadow Falls Camp," a woman answered. Della couldn't speak. "Is someone there?" asked the sleepy voice. "Who is this?"

Another stream of tears silently slipped down Della's cheek. "My name is Della Tsang and I need help."

Saved at Sunrise

c. c. hunter

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Chapter One

“Do not put yourselves in any jeopardy. Your job is to infiltrate the gang by showing interest in joining, find out if they’re using murder as a rite of initiation, and then get out. Alive.”

“That’s my plan, too.” Della Tsang answered with sass looking up at Burnett James, one of the Shadow Falls Academy owners who also just so happened to work for the FRU—Fallen Research Unit—which was basically the FBI of the supernatural world.

“We don’t want you to bring anyone in. We don’t want you to take care of the bad guys.” Burnett continued staring right at her.

Afternoon sun poured into the window of the Shadow Falls office behind him. The crystals sitting on shelves caught the light and cast rainbow-colored mirages on the wall. They danced and shifted as if magical. And maybe they were. Crap like that happened all the time here.

“Actually, Burnett said, drawing Della’s attention back to him, “we don’t think this is the group, but if it is, with your testimony, we’ll have enough proof to get a search warrant and we’re pretty damn positive we should find all the evidence we need to convict.”

Burnett, six feet plus, with dark hair and eyes, was a hard-ass who worried way too much, but being a vampire like herself, Della respected him and his hardassness.

She just wished the respect was mutual. Seriously, didn’t he trust her? Didn’t he know she could friggin’ take care of herself? Did he really have to go over this *again*?

“I understand, sir.” Steve, the brown-haired, brown-eyed, great-bodied

guy sitting next to her spoke up when she didn't. For the first time, Della noticed his voice held a hint of a Southern accent that wasn't just Texan.

Della glanced over. Steve gave Burnett his complete attention. What an ass-kisser.

Steve was evidence that Burnett didn't trust her. Why else would Burnett insist Steve go with her? She didn't need the shape-shifter. He was just going to slow her down.

"Wait," Burnett said, pacing across the office again. "Let me rephrase that. I don't want you to just get out alive. I want you to get out just the way you went in. Not wounded, not bruised, and for God's sake, don't leave any dead bodies behind. You got that?"

"Now you're taking all the fun out of it," Della smarted off.

Burnett growled. "I'm not joking and if you can't take this seriously then get your vampire butt out of here, because I'm not playing around."

Della slumped back in her chair, knowing when to shut her mouth. She really wanted to do this assignment for the FRU. Wanted to win Burnett's respect. Everyone needed someone to impress. And since impressing her parents wasn't an option anymore, she'd settle for Burnett.

Not that impressing anyone was the only reason she wanted to go. Even before she'd been turned into a vampire, she'd considered a career in criminal justice—something that allowed her to kick butt. Of course, her parents had frowned on that. They had her earmarked to be a doctor. They had her earmarked to be a lot of things.

But not a vampire.

Not that they knew what she was. The way Della figured it, if they went bat-shit crazy just because she'd stopping eating rice—which after being turned tasted like curdled toe jam—how the hell were they going to accept that she was a blood-drinking vampire? The answer was obvious. They wouldn't, couldn't accept it.

Lucky for her, she'd been accepted into Shadow Falls—a boarding school

for supernaturals—and didn't have to worry what her parents thought about her choice of careers, or whether she ate her rice or not. And yet ... now Della couldn't help but question if they ever thought or worried about her at all. Did they sit down to eat dinner and notice her chair was empty? Did her mom ever forget and set an extra plate at the table?

She doubted it.

Yes, they came to the parents' day visitations, but they were always the first to leave, and eager to do it. Especially her father, the man Della had spent her entire life trying to impress.

A daddy's girl, her mom used to call her.

Not anymore.

No doubt her sister had taken over that role.

Turning vampire hadn't been Della's choice. It was one of those things life slapped on your ass and you just had to accept it. Which meant she'd had to accept that her family would never be able to accept her. Not that it really bothered her. Not anymore.

She was so over it.

"Am I making myself clear?" Burnett asked, yanking her back to reality.

"One hundred percent," Della said, working hard to keep her attitude from spilling over.

"Yes, sir." Steve nodded.

Yup, an ass-kisser.

"Okay, you got your orders?" Burnett said. "You know where to go and what your cover is? They expect you to meet them at four in the morning. Don't be late, don't be too early. Don't let them lure you back to their compound. The policy, if they follow their own policy, is that three of the members will meet with you to talk. You get the information about joining, you get out."

"Got it." Della held up the brown envelope. *And you've gone over this ten times.*

“Then go get your things.” Burnett eyed Della. “And please, don’t make me regret sending you on this.”

“You won’t,” Della said.

Della and Steve stood to leave.

“Steve,” Burnett said. “Give me a few minutes.”

Della looked from Steve to Burnett. What the hell did he need to talk with Steve about that couldn’t be said in front of her?

Burnett shifted his gaze to Della and then cut his eyes to the door.

Frowning, Della shot up from the chair and left. She stopped about fifty feet from the porch, holding her breath and not moving a muscle. Hoping Burnett wasn’t still listening, she tuned her own vampire hearing and waited to discover what the hell was up. The afternoon sun spilled over the trees, casting shadows on the ground as she stood frozen in one spot.

“I’m trusting you to keep Della safe,” Burnett said.

Della inwardly growled at Burnett’s chauvinistic approach and fought the need to rush back in there and give him some lip. *I’m the one who’s gonna have to protect his butt!*

“I do not believe this is the gang we’re looking for.” Burnett’s voice carried well. *“Or I wouldn’t be sending you two. This is just a clearance check. But that doesn’t mean this group isn’t dangerous.”*

“Don’t worry,” Steve’s deep voice answered. *“I’ll keep her in my sight at all times.”*

Like hell you will. She already had a plan of doing a little side trip, and she didn’t need Steve tagging along.

* * *

At six that evening they arrived at the cabin the FRU had rented them right outside the vampire compound. To call the place a dump would have been like calling one of those roach-coach vans fine dining.

Of course, she and Steve were supposed to look like a couple of

supernatural teen runaways. She supposed it would have looked suspicious if they'd rented anything with even part of a star attached to its reputation. But damn, this was supposed to have been a fun trip.

She wasn't a prima donna, but sleeping on a mattress that was more dust mites than filling, with sheets that looked as if they hadn't been changed in a year or so wasn't her idea of fun. The bed's covers were half on and half off the mattress, and the pillow sported an indented greasy spot in the center as if someone with not-so-clean hair had slept there.

Or maybe died there.

As disgusting as that thought was, one even worse hit. Someone had probably done the humpty dance on that bed.

Yuck.

She could probably get a disease sleeping on it.

Walking back into the tiny living area, she found Steve staring at the sofa with about as much distaste as she had while gaping at the bed.

"Come to think about it, I'll take the sofa," she said. "And I don't want to hear any shit. There ain't no one going to get past me."

They had flown here. Not on a jet. Him as a Peregrine falcon—which meant he was fast—and her as a, well, a vampire—which meant she was faster. Vamps and shape-shifters being the only two species who could really fly. Well, an occasional witch, but Miranda, her Wiccan roommate, swore they really didn't travel around on brooms.

However, Steve and Della's mode of transportation also meant they really hadn't spoken since they'd left Shadow Falls, with the exception of when they'd first walked into the cabin and he'd insisted she take the bed. And why? Because if someone came through the door he would stop them.

That downright pissed her off. She almost called him on being a complete chauvinistic pig, but then realized that if she wanted to sneak out later, she wouldn't want him traipsing into the living room before morning and finding her gone.

Since he came across as the type with manners, and morals and stuff, who wouldn't come into a girl's bedroom—at least not without an invitation—she'd kept her mouth shut.

Face it, she'd take the odds of him finding her gone to the odds of those mattress germs finding her body, hands down.

Steve cut his soft brown eyes to her and a knowing smile spread his lips. He ran a hand through his brown hair, which he wore a tad longer than most guys. The strands fell right back into place, looking instantly styled. She doubted he went to some professional salon to get that look, but it almost appeared like he did.

His smile widened and he tucked one hand into his jeans pocket. The stance made the muscles in that arm bulge. “So what you're saying is that the bed is worse than the sofa?”

“I didn't say that.” She tried not to laugh, but something close to it slipped out of her mouth. She tried not to stare at his crooked smile and what it did to his lips and eyes. Or how his muscled arms looked like a safe place to fall. She'd give anything, even half a bra size to make him ... ugly. And unlike her two roommates at Shadow Falls, she didn't have much bra size to offer.

She continued to stare at him. She could have dealt with an ugly guy much better than one who looked like he'd just walked off of some men's soap advertisement. And hell, she thought, breathing in his aroma, you'd think after spending the last two hours as a bird, he wouldn't smell like he used some spicy-smelling men's soap, but he did.

He smelled ... awesome, and that ticked her off, too.

If she were a witch like her bigger-boobed roommate, Miranda, she'd change him into a repulsive fowl/foul-smelling guy. And she'd also make him less ... nice. She didn't like nice.

The only nice person Della had grown fond of was Kylie. And she was so nice, even Della couldn't hate her. Well, right now, Della did hate her. Hated

her for leaving. And if she didn't get her butt back to Shadow Falls soon, Della was going to drag her friend back kicking and screaming. Sure, Kylie had gone to meet her newly discovered grandfather and learn more about her species, but plain and simple, she belonged at Shadow Falls. Someone had to keep Della and Miranda from killing each other. And no one was better at that than Kylie.

"We could both sleep on the sofa," Steve said, and damn if he didn't sound serious.

"Not even in your dreams, bird boy!" she snapped.

"Ouch," he said and chuckled. "I only meant your head at one end and mine at the other. Only our feet would be touching."

"So you've got a foot fetish, do you?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Humor brightened his eyes. With him positioned right in front of the bare window, and the last rays of the setting sun beaming in, she got a good look at those eyes. Were those flecks of amber and green in his brown pools?

His gaze lowered to her Nike-covered size sixes. "I don't know, I haven't seen your naked feet."

Hearing him say the word *naked* with what sounded like a deep Southern accent, deeper than Texas, made her stomach flutter like she was twelve again and had never been kissed. Good Lord, what was wrong with her? Since when did she find a Southern accent seductive?

She stuck one foot behind the other. "And you won't see them naked," she snapped, not liking that they'd been here less than five minutes and they were already ... flirting. At least it felt like flirting.

And Della Tsang didn't flirt.

Not anymore.

His gaze rose from her feet. "We'll see about that," he said.

They stood there staring at each other for a second. Then he spoke up. "You want to go grab a bite to eat?"

She frowned. “I brought a couple pints of AB positive with me in my bag.” Which she needed to put in the fridge. While most vamps preferred their blood warm, Della liked it better cold. When your core temperature was 92 degrees, you appreciated things colder than yourself.

“Yeah, but I need food. Something hot and greasy. Nutrients for whatever the hell is gonna go down tomorrow morning.”

Steve had been set up to play as her shape-shifter boyfriend, a guy she’d met after running away from home. They didn’t allow anyone but vampires into the gang, but if she got accepted, and he could prove his worth to them, he would be brought in as an “extra.” Basically someone they sent out to do their dirty work. Which was part of the reason it pissed her off that Burnett insisted he come. Extras were considered expendable.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you,” she said.

“That just warms my heart.” He put a hand over his wide chest. “Come on, go with me to grab a burger.”

He made it sound like a date or something. Frowning, she was about to call him on it when she remembered seeing a Walmart not far from there and close to some fast-food joints. She could pick up a set of sheets, a blanket, and some extra-strength Lysol spray and maybe be able to sleep on the bed. That meant she could skip out on the foot-loving, Southern-speaking Steve. She wouldn’t be gone long. She only needed a peek. A peek at the life she’d been cheated out of.

“Fine.” She lit out of the room.

He lit out with her, and within seconds had transformed into a hauling-ass Peregrine falcon. She wasn’t certain, but she thought she’d heard this was one of the fastest birds that existed. It wasn’t a half-bad-looking animal, either. Its feathers were a blend of browns, tans, and black. Its eyes were striking, round, with large black pupils that seemed to take everything in. And when it stretched out its wings, it almost looked like it had leopard spots.

Della didn’t know a whole lot about shape-shifters, but she’d heard once

that one sign of their power was they could shift quickly. He'd shifted into a bird pretty damn quickly. Not that she was impressed or anything.

Sort of like flirting, Della Tsang didn't get impressed. Not about guys.

Not anymore.

Not since she'd turned vampire, turned cold, and had her heart shattered into tiny little bitty pieces by the guy who was supposed to love her forever.

* * *

Della landed with a thud on the pavement in the back of Walmart. Steve, still a bird, landed elegantly beside her. His wings stretched out wide.

Immediately, he started turning back into human form, and as always when a shifter turned, sparkly bubbles began floating around. One of his transformation bubbles lingering in the evening air popped on her arm and sent a tiny electric current up her elbow, zinging like she'd walked on carpet and then touched something metal.

"What are we doing here?" Steve asked, looking confused.

"Bedding and disinfectant." She brushed off her elbow then looked up. The sky was darkening, and the stars hadn't yet come out to play. Lifting her nose in the air, her vampire sense of smell caught the hint of werewolf under the strong scent of motor oil.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked.

"A few werewolves, but not too close."

He frowned. "Damn, let's grab what you need, snag me a burger, and get the hell back."

She smirked. "You scared of a couple of werewolves?"

"Scared, no. But we don't need any trouble right now." He started walking.

She moved with him. "Sometimes trouble is fun."

"Yeah, but let's save our energy for any trouble that finds us tomorrow."

"Anyone ever accuse you of being boring?" she snipped.

“No, but I’ll admit, I’m more of a lover than a fighter.”

She kept an eye on the dark shadows, making sure something didn’t lurk there. “Please, that’s so lame.”

“Lame, but true.” Humor sounded in his voice.

“I’ll stick with lame,” she muttered.

She imagined him smiling again, but afraid she’d be pulled into his smile, she didn’t chance looking at him. Hearing the laughter in his voice gave her stomach flutters. Or was she just hungry and needing some blood?

Entering the store, they made fast work of buying two flat sheets, a couple of pillowcases, two blankets, and some disinfectant. And Steve tossed in a bag of chips. At the fast-food place next door he got his burger to go, but he wolfed it down as they left the joint to find a desolate spot for him to transform so they could head back.

He’d finished the burger when they started down a dark alley behind the strip center. She noticed he stuffed the sandwich wrapper in his pocket. The guy didn’t even litter, never mind the alley was covered in trash. They only got about ten feet down when they heard a scream.

A life-or-death-sounding scream.

Chapter Two

Della stopped, her gaze zipping around to locate the screamer. Steve jerked her into the dark shadows. A woman suddenly appeared at the other side of the alley running like the devil was chasing her. And he might've been, because someone slapped the pavement right on her heels.

A male someone.

“What are they?” Steve whispered, standing so close she could feel his words against her cheek.

They were too far away to note the pattern in their foreheads which marked a person's species—something all supernaturals could see—but Steve obviously trusted her sense of smell. She inhaled and tried to find the scents in the air besides the spicy male soap that filled her nose. “Humans.”

“Good.” He took off down the alley.

The girl screamed again as the attacker tackled her. Della, plastic bag in tow, beat Steve to the scuffle. The man on top of the female shifted back and forth, using the woman as a punching bag. Della snagged the creep off the obvious victim and tossed him a good five feet in the air. Not enough to kill him, but hopefully enough to hurt when he came down.

Blood oozed from the woman's nose and mouth. “You okay?” Della asked and crouched beside her. When the scent of blood filled her nose, Della had to work at not letting her eyes start to glow from hunger.

“Yeah.” The woman sobbed out the word. “He's my husband, but he's drunk.” She wiped blood from her lip. “He gets mean when he drinks.”

But he wasn't the only one drinking. Della could smell booze on the woman's breath.

“This wasn’t your problem,” a deep voice seethed from behind Della. If she hadn’t been so intent on the woman, she’d have heard him coming.

Della glanced up. Looming over them stood the drunk husband, who she obviously hadn’t thrown nearly hard enough. Of course, that could be fixed.

He reached for Della, fury in his eyes and alcohol on his breath. “But you made it your problem now, bitch!”

Before she could shoot up, Steve caught the man by the arm and swung him around.

Fists started flying. Della heard what sounded like a few punches hitting bone. She could swear the jerk got a punch in on Steve. Bolting to her feet with plans to end the fight, Steve ended it first. He threw a hard right. The woman’s dear old husband took that right directly to the face and fell over cold.

It would have been nice to savor the moment of success, but a pair of flashing blue police lights appeared at the end of the alley. Steve turned to Della. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

Della grabbed her bag and they took off at a sprint. In the distance she heard the cops yelling for everyone to stop. They didn’t. They couldn’t.

Burnett hadn’t been specific about them not getting arrested, but she had a feeling he’d frown upon it.

“Police! I said stop,” the policeman yelled again. Footsteps echoed behind them, making their way down the alley.

They cut the corner into a side alley, and Della didn’t know if they had time to get the hell out without the officers seeing their escape.

* * *

The refrigerator at the cabin didn’t have an ice machine. She supposed she should be glad it had one ice tray with five pieces of ice in it. She emptied the five tiny cubes into a new pillowcase and handed it to Steve. His eye was almost swollen shut. “Hold it against your eye,” she said.

They'd gotten away from the police, but barely. She stared at Steve's injury.

"Why didn't you change into something and maul his ass?" she bit out.

"You don't transform in front of humans," Steve said. "That's the number one shape-shifting rule."

"I'd think the number one rule would be to protect yourself."

"You'd think wrong," Steve said.

She shook her head. "They were both drunk, who would've believed them?"

He cut his eyes up to her. "What about when the cops showed up?"

She frowned, seeing his point, but still not liking it. "Put the ice on your eye." After a second she said, "So you're supposed to let them use you as a punching bag?"

Steve dropped the ice from his face. "He got one punch in, and who was the one on the ground when we left?"

Della groaned. "You should have let me handle him."

Steve ignored her and reached up to touch his eye. "Hey ... this will look good for tomorrow. I'm a badass shape-shifter, not afraid to fight."

Della rolled her eyes at him the way Miranda rolled hers at everyone. "But you just broke one of Burnett's rules. You're gonna come back bruised."

Steve grinned. "I'll tell him you did it."

Della plopped down on the old pine chest that served as a coffee table. "He'd know that wasn't true, even if he couldn't hear your heart lie. If you pissed me off, I wouldn't have stopped at a black eye. You'd be black-and-blue all over."

"Now that's just an outright lie. I don't think you'd hurt me." His Southern accent came out again.

"And you'd be wrong." She paused. "Where are you from?"

"Where do you think I'm from?" He smiled as if her question pleased

him.

And she knew why. She'd shown some personal interest in him. She shouldn't have done that because he might think she actually liked him or something.

"I think you're from somewhere where they talk funny," she smarted off, and shot up to get her blood from the refrigerator. She found a cup, rinsed it out—twice—poured her dinner into it, and sat down at the kitchen table.

He dropped into the second chair at the table. "I'm from Alabama. My parents dragged me to Dallas two years ago."

"You don't like Texas?" she asked and frowned when she realized she'd done it again, shown a personal interest. Then again, maybe she should give herself a break, they were on a mission together, and she was pretending to be his girlfriend. If someone asked something, she should be able to answer it.

"Since I went to camp this last summer, I do. Before that ... not really. The school in Dallas was some fancy prep school—not even for supernaturals. That school fit my parents' way of thinking and life, but I don't do fancy schools very well."

She couldn't see him in one, either. Not that he didn't seem smart, he did. But he was just easier going than someone who wanted to put on airs.

A few more questions popped into her mind, but she hesitated to ask. She turned her cup in her hands.

The silence must have felt awkward to him as well, because he continued. "My dad's a CEO for an oil company, Mom's a doctor. And I'm an only child who's not supposed to care what I want but to just grow up, become what they want me to be, and make them look good in the human world."

"They're shifters, too, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, but you'd hardly know it. I don't think my mom has shifted in a couple of years. Dad does it just to relieve stress, but they like living in the human world."

“And you don’t?” Della asked, thinking about how often she wished she could go back to the human world and be one of them. Sure, she appreciated the powers, loved knowing she could kick ass. But she wished that gaining these powers hadn’t meant losing so much of her life. Or rather the people who were in her life.

“I don’t want to run off and join a damn compound or anything, but I’m proud of what I am. I can abide by the rules, not exposing myself in front of humans. I don’t have a problem with rules, but I don’t want to hide from this part of myself.”

“I don’t blame you.” She didn’t think she could hide, either. Not now.

“I’m not really complaining about them,” he said. “I mean, as long as we don’t have to see each other very often we forget that we’re all disappointed in each other.”

She knew all about the feeling of disappointing your parents. Exhaling, she looked at the pillowcase, which was bunched up at the end and held the five pieces of ice. He’d brought it with him to the table, but wasn’t using it. “You should use that. That’s all the ice we have.”

He put it against his eye and stared at her with the other. “What’s your story?”

“No story here,” she lied.

He leaned his chair back on two legs. With half his face hidden behind the hanging pillowcase, he looked accusingly at her with his uninjured eye. “Liar.”

She swallowed and stood, picking up her cup.

It didn’t stop him from talking though. “You think I don’t see you on parents’ day? You look completely miserable when you see them come in.” He dropped the ice from his eye. “The only time you look more miserable is when you watch them leave.”

She frowned, not liking that her feelings about her parents had been so visible. “You’re not fae, you can’t read my emotions. So stop trying.” She

took two steps and then looked back. “I’m calling it a night.”

He dropped his chair down. “It’s still early.” Their gazes met. “I’m sorry I said what I did. I just thought ... I told you about my parents and ... We don’t have to talk about that. Choose a subject and we’ll talk about whatever.”

Ignoring the soft pleading in his voice, she went to the Walmart bag she’d dropped on the sofa. She pulled out one sheet, one blanket, and snagged the other pillowcase. “We have to be up at three thirty. Don’t bother me.”

* * *

She sprayed the bed three times with disinfectant, made it, and then used the old bedding to make it look like she was under the blanket. If he peeked in, he’d hopefully assume she was out cold—pun intended.

It was, Della thought, the thing she hated most about being a vamp. Drinking blood she could handle, but when someone accidentally brushed up against her and flinched at her body temperature, she felt ... like a monster.

She knew why, too. It had been the thing that kept Lee from touching her after she’d been turned. *You just don’t feel right*, he told her. *You’re cold. I think you’re still sick.*

A crazy thought came. Would Steve not like how she felt? She pushed the thought away, because seriously, it didn’t belong in her mind. Tilting her head to the side, she listened for the shape-shifter. When she’d been making her bed, she’d heard him doing the same to the sofa. He must be sleeping now, because she could only hear the very subtle sound of someone breathing.

The conversation they’d had earlier about his parents floated through her head and whispered across her heart with a tug of emotion. He almost sounded resigned to the bad relationship with his parents. Or was he just pretending—like she so often did?

Realizing she’d let Steve consume her thoughts, she blew out a deep

whoosh of air. Then moving to the window, she quietly raised it. She stood there just a second, listening to the night's song, before she climbed out. She perched on the ledge a long second before she took off.

The dark, September air felt cool, cooler than her skin. Her hair whipped around her head and scattered across her face, occasionally obscuring her vision. A sound, a slight wisp of air came from her left. Was something following her? She raised her head to catch any scents. She didn't sense any other creature, but with so much wind coming at her, she wasn't sure if her sense of smell was accurate.

Without slowing down, she glanced back. Nothing but the night chased her.

She considered how close she was to the vampire compound and the rogue gang. Fear danced on her skin, but she pushed it aside. If it was them, she already had a cover for being there. Surely they would ask questions before they attacked. She hoped.

In a few minutes, she spotted the lake that ran by her parents' house and started descending. Her heart shifted from fear to something even more uncomfortable. Grief.

She came down a block from her house at the neighborhood park. Her black jeans and black tank top helped her blend into the darkness.

Moving in the shadows so no one would spot her, she saw lights on in her parents' dining room. Either her family was eating late, or they were playing board games. Her mom loved board games.

Easing between the bushes and the house, the neighbor's dog, the crotch-smelling canine, Champ, barked from the neighbor's backyard. Then Della heard laughter.

Her father's laugh.

Her heart gripped and her throat tightened. She hadn't even seen him smile since she'd left for Shadow Falls. Easing in ever so carefully, she looked into the window.

The scene looked like something from a movie on the Family Channel, a family spending time together. A family she really didn't belong to anymore.

Tears prickled her eyes when she saw them. Her mom, her sister, and her dad playing Scrabble. They looked so happy, so ... complete. Didn't they miss her, even a little bit?

A twig snapped behind her, and her heart rose to her throat. Della swung around. Champ, the mix of Lab and German shepherd, stared at her, or was he staring in the window? His tail slowly started thumping.

"How did you get out?" she whispered to the dog as she felt a tear slip down her cheek. He lowered his head, whimpered, and rubbed his snout against her knee. "What? No crotch smelling tonight? I'm hurt."

The canine looked up at her as if he actually missed her. How could that be, a neighbor's dog missed her when her own family didn't?

Moving out from behind the bushes, Della gave the dog another scratching behind his ears. She brushed a lingering tear from her eye and took off.

In less than five minutes, she landed at Lee's house. When the garage door opened, she flashed to the side of the house. As the car pulled out, she saw Lee in the driver's seat.

Where was he going? On a date? Her heart knew it. Her heart also said that she should just go back to the cabin. She didn't need to see it.

But she did.

Kylie had told Della a thousand times that she needed to move past Lee. Maybe this was the answer. Maybe if she saw Lee with someone else, she could let go. She could stop hoping that he'd come to his senses and would run back to her, begging for a second chance.

She followed him to a house on the other side of the subdivision. She waited for a few minutes in the shadows, still hoping maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe this was just one of his friends.

When he walked out with a girl, an Asian girl, at his side, the knot in

Della's chest came back. This was the fiancée. The one he'd told Della his parents had pushed him into marrying. Seeing this should have been enough. Seeing how she clung to his arm. She should have left right then, but no. When they got in the car, she followed them to the restaurant.

The Red Dragon. It was a restaurant owned by some friends of Lee's parents. His mother had tried to get Della and Lee to go there several times. But Lee always said he didn't want to eat Chinese food. He had enough of that at home.

Why did he want Chinese food now?

She landed in front of the restaurant while Lee parked the car. She hid behind the tall dragon statue waiting to see them walk past. A hungry-looking kitten came slinking around the building. "Don't have anything. But there's a Dumpster in the back, I can smell it from here," she whispered and then she heard footsteps.

They were holding hands and the girl, Lee's fiancée, wore a big smile, her eyes bright with laughter. As they walked in the door, Della caught a whiff of Lee's cologne.

Anger surged in her chest. She'd bought that cologne for him last Christmas. Didn't he remember? Did he even care? How could he wear it for this new girl when Della had given it to him?

She waited a good ten minutes, telling herself to leave. Telling herself it was over. But when she tried to fly away, instead she swung around and headed inside.

She told the hostess she was looking for someone and walked past her into the spicy, sesame-scented air. She walked past a large fish tank with colorful fish swimming in circles as if looking for a way out. She continued past a couple and noticed the sound of plastic crinkling as they opened their fortune cookies. Perhaps she should snag one to see her own future.

Because God only knew what she planned to do when she found Lee. Part of her wanted to rip his heart out for using the cologne she'd given him to

impress another girl. The other part wanted to drop to her knees and beg him to at least tell her he missed her.

All this time she'd believed Lee was engaged because his parents forced him into it. Now she didn't know what to believe. This didn't look forced. He actually looked ... happy.

Leave. Leave. Leave. The voice of reason screamed in her head. But then she saw them at the back table. Candlelit table. Romantic table. She heard them talking. Not in English, but in Mandarin.

Della spoke Mandarin. Her father had made sure of it. But Lee had never spoken to her in that language. Right then Della knew for certain, she wasn't tossed aside because she'd turned into a vampire. She'd been tossed aside because she was half white.

She heard the girl talking about names. Names they would give their first child. Lee leaned in and kissed her. A romantic kiss that kicked Della right in the gut. From the happiness she heard in Lee's voice, and the way he kissed the girl, Della suspected this choice had been as much his own preference as his parents'.

A waiter must have dropped a tray of food because a loud clatter sounded right behind Della. She knew she should turn and flash away at the sound of the crash, but it was too late. She watched in horror as Lee pulled his hand away from his fiancée's and looked up. She saw his eyes widen at the sight of her. Was it a good widen or an "oh shit" widen? She didn't know.

Leave! Don't stand here and look pathetic. But her feet felt concreted to the restaurant floor and pathetic was all she could feel. Her gaze locked on his as he stood up and started moving toward her. Right toward her. And she knew she looked even worse than pathetic.

She looked pitiful.

Sad.

She looked alone and heartbroken.

Embarrassment and shame washed over her. But she didn't have time to

let it engulf her. Someone grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close. Shocked, she looked up at ... at Steve. He smiled down at her.

“I missed you already,” he said and then he kissed her. Not a simple sweet first kiss, but one that involved tongue and ... lots of desire.

Chapter Three

Della felt the embarrassment seep out of her as something else seeped into her. And it wasn't just Steve's tongue. It was ... passion. It was the feeling of being alive. It was hope that her sad little life wasn't over. Since being a vampire, since she'd lost Lee, she'd thought she couldn't feel this anymore. Or maybe she just thought she wouldn't feel it anymore.

Someone cleared their throat. Realizing the familiar disapproving sound came from Lee, she put a hand on Steve's chest and reluctantly pulled back.

She met Steve's eyes briefly. She knew he'd kissed her to save her ass, but she also knew he'd enjoyed it as much as she had. The evidence was there in his warm brown eyes. Even with one of those eyes bruised, she saw the just-been-kissed heat in his gaze.

She turned to Lee. Only to realize she still didn't have a clue what to say to him. "Uh, hey. I..."

"What are you doing here?" Lee asked. "Besides making out in the middle of a restaurant?"

Hadn't he just been kissing his date?

As crazy as it was, Della saw something in Lee she hadn't seen before. Her dad. Or at least his disapproving attitude. Had Lee always been that way and she just now noticed? Or had he changed?

"What's wrong? Can't you talk?" he asked.

His words ran amok around her head and she couldn't decide how they made her feel or how to respond. And if she did decide she wasn't sure her tongue could take speaking orders, it was still in shock at having just had company—Steve's tongue.

“We were having dinner,” Steve answered for her. “Actually, we’re celebrating our three-month anniversary.” His gaze went to Della.

“Three months?” Lee asked as if annoyed she’d started dating so soon. But hell, the guy was engaged. Where did he get off thinking ... She opened her mouth to say something again but Steve jumped in first.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. “I didn’t introduce myself. You must be an old friend of Della’s. I’m Steve...?”

Lee ignored Steve and looked at Della. “I thought you were at that school.”

That school? Could he not even remember what school she’d been attending? “I am.” She finally got two words out. “We ... just slipped out.”

“So you met him at school?” Lee asked and damn if he didn’t sound upset. Anger started to spark inside her again. He had no right to be upset. None!

Steve spoke up again. “Love at first sight.” He glanced at her and ran his warm hand around the curve of her waist and pulled her a little closer. His gaze shot back to Lee. “Still don’t know how I got so damn lucky.” If so much honesty didn’t resonate from his voice, it might have sounded false. For a second she wished she had listened to his heartbeat—another little vampire talent. Had Steve been interested in her at first sight?

Lee’s fiancée rose from her chair behind them and stopped at his side. Della couldn’t help but notice how pretty she was—pretty in a very traditional Asian way. Her hair was longer, sleeker, and blacker than Della’s. Her facial features were doll-like. Beautiful and perfect—a tiny nose, a bow-like mouth, and slanted black eyes that sparkled with intelligence. No doubt, Lee’s parents had chosen well.

Or had Lee chosen her? Had he planned to break up with Della all along? He’d seemed pretty happy sitting next to her until Della showed up.

Not that he looked too happy now. He frowned when the girl slipped her arm through his, but he did the right thing and introduced them. “Mei, this is

Della, and her ... friend.” The word *friend* came out sounding like a four-letter word. “Her friend who obviously likes to fight, if his black eye is any indication.”

Della tensed, ready to tell him that Steve got that black eye standing up for her. Something she suddenly realized that Lee had never done. Not even with his parents.

“Actually,” Steve spoke up again, “we were just wrestling around in bed and Della got me in the eye with her elbow.”

Lee’s shoulders tightened and all Della could think was, *Go Steve*.

Mei looked up at Lee and seemed to see his reaction. A tightness pulled at the girl’s brow as she glanced back at Della. Della recognized that tightness as plain ol’ jealousy. She’d felt it tug at her own brow every time she thought of Lee with someone else. Oddly, now Della felt ... What did she feel? Angry. Hurt. Sad. But she didn’t feel jealous. That meant something, Della knew that, but now wasn’t the time to contemplate it.

“We should...” Her words got hung up when she met Lee’s eyes again. The sad feeling swelled in her chest and she realized a better name for that emotion. Grief. She had loved Lee. Loved him with everything she had. And she’d given him her all—her heart, her body, her mind. Now she’d lost him. And now she grieved for what used to be.

“Go. We should go,” Steve finished for her. “I already took care of the bill.” Steve let go of her waist and held out his hand to Lee. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Lee didn’t take it. Which was super-awkward and not like Lee. He normally wasn’t rude. Or was he? Had she missed that about him, too? Della nodded at the couple and when Steve’s arm found its way back around her she let him guide her away.

They left the restaurant and it took a few seconds of the cold fall air hitting her face to realize she was still holding onto Steve. Holding onto him as if the ship of her life had been capsized. As if he was the only thing

floating in the stormy waters to cling to.

The sense of weakness, feelings she could easily drown in, washed over her and sparked another flicker of anger. A big one this time.

She pulled away. Confusion bounced around her gut. The grief clung to her heart as tightly as she'd clung to Steve just a few minutes ago, but then the anger she'd experienced earlier returned. She opened herself up to that emotion. Anger she could handle, anger she could run with. So she let it roll around her, washing away the other emotions that made her feel weak and vulnerable.

She looked at Steve, who appeared happy, just the opposite of how she felt. "You followed me," she accused him.

The slight smile in his eyes dimmed. "I was obeying orders," he said. "We were told to stay together at all times."

"Damn it! I don't give a shit about orders. I don't like to be followed." A heaviness filled her chest and she recognized it as guilt. Guilt for ...

"Then don't run away again," he said matter-of-factly and started walking to the back of the restaurant.

Damn it. Guilt for acting like an idiot with the person who'd just saved her.

She caught up with him. "I'm not finished talking!" she seethed.

He came to a quick halt and swung around. "But I'm finished listening. You can get mad all you want. I was trying to help." He took off again.

"I said I wasn't finished!" She flashed forward and shot in front of him, putting a hand out to stop him. When her hand met his warm chest, it reminded her just how cold she was and she pulled it away. She glanced up at him, he looked about ready to give her hell, but she spoke first.

"Thank you!" she growled.

His mouth opened as if to say something, but nothing came out. No doubt he was shocked at her declaration. And damn it, but she knew how he felt. She hadn't meant to say that—not that he didn't deserve to hear it, he did,

but ...

“Wow.” He finally spoke. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone express gratitude in such a pissed off, angry tone.”

“That’s because I am angry. I’m furious. You followed me. Then you ... you kissed me, with tongue, in front of everyone.”

His brown eyes lit up with a smile again. He leaned in a little closer. His warm breath stirred against her forehead. “And it was really good, wasn’t it?”

She glared at him and took a step back.

“Okay, if it’s not for the kiss, what are you thanking me for?” he asked, sounding puzzled and yet interested.

Once again she shared his feeling, the puzzled one, that is. “I don’t know,” she seethed. But then instantly the answer dawned on her. He’d saved her from looking pathetic, from looking like a heartbroken ex-girlfriend.

“You are a real piece of work, Della Tsang.” He reached out as if to brush a strand of hair from her cheek.

She didn’t know if that was a compliment or an insult, but she slapped his hand just in case.

He laughed. “It really wasn’t bad for a first kiss, you know. Usually they’re kind of awkward. But that ... that wasn’t awkward. It was hot.”

She thought about the kiss, the warmth of his mouth, the feel of his tongue. How he had tasted. “I’m glad you liked it, because it was your last,” she snapped.

She turned to fly off. Her feet weren’t all the way off the ground when she heard his reply.

“We’ll have to see about that.”

She gritted her teeth, continued toward the cabin, and fought the fear that if she wasn’t really careful, he might be right.

And that would be wrong.

Wouldn’t it?

* * *

Three thirty couldn't have come any slower. The new sheet, pillowcase, blanket, and Lysol helped, but she kept waking up every few minutes. With the cabin out in the woods, the only noises were a few animals. It should have been a fine place to get a good night's sleep. However, being a vampire and basically nocturnal, she never slept well at night.

Last night she'd blamed most of the tossing and turning on the thought of bedbugs. Funny how the idea of bedbugs kept shifting to Steve's kiss. Then Steve's kiss led her to think about her mixed-up, crazy feelings about Lee.

Was she over him? If so, why did it still hurt? But if she still loved him, why wasn't she jealous of Mei? Then Della's thoughts went to her mom and dad and sister playing board games without her. For some reason thinking about Lee and her parents helped block out the thoughts of the kiss.

Still in bed and staring at the stained ceiling, Della heard water running, which meant Steve was taking a shower. Before she'd gone to bed she'd given the shower a good spray of Lysol, and took a quick stand beneath the spewing water herself.

When she'd left the shower, Steve had been sitting on the sofa, staring at the bathroom door. Staring as if he hoped she'd be wearing something sexy.

Poor guy had been disappointed. Or she had thought he'd been for about two seconds, until his gaze had lowered and then traveled up again as a slow sexy grin appeared in his eyes.

"You were right," he'd said. "And you were wrong."

She liked the part about being right, but...? "Wrong about what?"

That seductive smile shifted to his lips as his gaze lowered again, and stopped on her bare feet. "Right that I have a foot fetish. Wrong about me never seeing your naked feet."

She used those naked feet to run off to the bedroom. The second after she slammed the door, he'd called out that they needed to talk about the mission. She called back that they could do it in the morning. Then she'd dropped into bed.

Even five hours later, remembering the way he'd looked at her—at her feet for God's sake—made her feel all fluttery inside. Now, as the sound of water from the shower filled her head, so did images. Her mind went to him standing under a steamy spray of water. And she had the oddest desire to see his naked feet. And other things.

She groaned and pressed her palms into her eyes. Why couldn't he be ugly?

Taking a deep breath of resolve, she told herself to get over it. Besides, today was a new day. Slipping out of bed, she brushed her hair, and adjusted her bra. Feeling a tiny bit more in control, she went into the living room to wait her turn in the bathroom. She needed to brush her teeth, and they had to go over the plans for their mission. Then they needed to go do what they had to do. Catch themselves some bad vampires.

She didn't have time to think about how hot Steve was, or how his kiss had melted her insides like butter on a steaming ear of corn. It was time to think about kicking rogue vampire butt, not Steve's cute butt.

Drumming her fingers on the top of her knees, she saw the file they had to go over with their instructions sitting on the sofa. She really didn't need to review it. She'd read it a dozen times and memorized it. Because vamps could read a lie in a person's heartbeat, they'd come up with a form of the truth that hopefully wouldn't read as a lie. She, Della Tsang, had been turned vampire and was sent to a special boarding school. She wasn't big on the school's rules, so she and her friend Steve the shape-shifter had run off. But due to the known difficulties of obtaining blood for her, they had decided to join a gang.

The bathroom door squeaked open, and Steve walked out. He was ... he was half naked, and bam, she was back to thinking about his cute butt. And ... her gaze lowered. He had socks on.

For some odd reason, she recalled that someone had told her that Steve was already eighteen. He looked eighteen, probably a year older than Della.

Muscles rippled over his chest and arms. She knew he worked out, but most of what he had appeared natural.

Her breath caught in her throat for a second. She'd seen him swimming and without a shirt, but something about seeing all that bare skin and him being freshly showered brought back the flutters. Brought back the memory of his kiss and of how his warm hands had felt in the curve of her waist.

He met her gaze and smiled as if somehow reading her mind. Moving to the chair, he slipped on a dark green T-shirt. *Thank goodness.*

"You ready to go over everything?" he asked.

"Need to brush my teeth." *Need to find my self-control and I'm pretty sure it's in the toilet.* She popped up and ran to the bathroom. When she came back three minutes later, she'd taken her frustration out on her teeth. There wasn't a speck of plaque on her pearly whites. And while she didn't find her self-control in the potty, she'd given herself a good talking-to about not acting like some hormone-crazed teen.

Sure she was a teen, and probably hormone crazed, but she didn't need to act like it.

Steve had the open file in his lap when she moved to the living room. She sat down on the opposite side of the sofa and he started going over the info.

She didn't tell him she already knew it because he might need to hear it. Five minutes later, he closed the file. "Okay, the thing to remember is if they insist I leave, I'll shift and hang around. I won't leave you."

Della cut her eyes to him. "Heartwarming, but if they insist you leave, I'll be fine. I can take care of myself. Besides, they know you're a shifter, Steve. Don't do anything that will ruin this."

"I won't do anything to ruin it. But I'm not leaving you." His tone came out determined, protective. "I'll be careful. They won't realize it's me."

"Yes they will. What about them knowing you're a shifter don't you get?"

He stared at her a long second before speaking. "So they're smarter than you, huh?"

She tightened her eyes at him. “What’s that mean?”

“You didn’t know I was there last night. You saw me twice.”

She studied him, feeling puzzled. “I don’t...”

“I was your neighbor’s dog and then I was the kitten. If a shifter is careful what they become, we blend into the environment and are never suspected. Why do you think we’re one of the most powerful of the supernaturals?”

First, they really weren’t one of the most powerful supernaturals, vampires were, not that this was a competition. Then all of a sudden her chest tightened and her face heated remembering her short interaction with the neighbor’s dog. Hadn’t she said something about him *not* smelling her crotch?

“Don’t do that to me anymore.” She stood up, went to the door, and glanced back over her shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

* * *

Della and Steve landed in the designated spot of the state park five minutes later. A clearing, secluded from any road or human life, and surrounded by trees. A place where anything could happen and there’d be no witnesses. Della scanned the area, seeing only tall pines mixed with a few oaks and tons of thorny underbrush.

She didn’t like it.

From just looking, one would think the area was abandoned. Only a few stars lit up the night sky. But one good nose of air told her the truth. They were here.

Hidden.

Waiting.

But for what?

To attack?

And while her nose couldn’t count, she sensed there were more than three of them.

Did the gang somehow know Della and Steve were assisting the FRU? Or was this just the way the gang welcomed all potential new members?

A sense of danger brushed over her skin. As exciting as it was, fear crowded her chest. She remembered the pictures of those who had died at the hands of suspected vampire gangs. A mother and a child. An elderly woman. If this was the gang advocating murder for initiation, who had taken innocent lives, they needed to be stopped and the risk was worth it. Sure, Burnett didn't believe this was the gang, but he had to have doubts or he wouldn't have sent them on this mission.

"They're here," Steve whispered.

"I know," Della said.

A stirring of underbrush sounded to their right and then one to the left. And then behind them. Della spotted another vamp coming out from the trees right at them.

Friggin' great.

They were surrounded.

Chapter Four

“What a warm welcome,” Della said, refusing to acknowledge her fear.

“She’s sassy,” said someone behind her.

“We can beat that out of her,” said the vamp walking toward her as he eyed her up and down.

“I wouldn’t try,” Della said.

“I second that,” Steve added, his voice deep and filled with warning.

The rogue tightened his gaze to check their patterns. “So you brought your pet with you, huh?”

Della heard Steve inhale and she reached over and touched his arm. Surely, he knew to let her deal with this.

“He’s not my pet,” she growled, offended for him more than she realized.

“Ah, I see,” the lead rogue said, a filthy twinkle in his eyes. “So you’re giving it up to this joker?”

“We’ve swapped bodily fluids if that’s what you’re asking,” she countered, confident, and suddenly grateful they’d exchanged spit last night during that hot kiss.

The vamp grinned. “I like your spunk. Maybe you and I can swap some bodily fluid sometime.”

Steve tensed beside her. “I wouldn’t count on it,” he said.

“And I’ll second that,” Della said.

The vamp frowned as if disappointed he couldn’t intimidate them. “You do realize first you will have to prove yourself worthy. If you are accepted, then your shifter here will have to prove himself, and even then he will only be considered an extra. Extras ... don’t last very long.”

The rogue's insinuation struck a punch to Della's nerves, but she focused on what was important. The whole "prove yourself worthy" comment.

Was it going to be this easy? Was he just going to tell her right now what she had to do and they could leave? A tiny part of her hoped it wouldn't be so simple. She already disliked this guy and wouldn't mind teaching him a lesson.

"Exactly how do we prove ourselves?"

"Do you know how to fight?"

Hell, yes. "I can hold my own," Della said.

His gaze shifted to Steve. "Looks like shifter-boy likes to fight," he said, obviously referring to Steve's black eye.

"I can hold my own, too," Steve said.

"How strong of a shifter are you?" The rogue studied him as if assessing him.

"Strong enough," Steve answered.

The rogue laughed. "Then why did you stay human to fight? You're obviously not as strong as you'd like to believe."

"Don't let a little bruise fool you," Steve said, tilting back on his heels.

Della heard the confidence in Steve's voice, and while she'd assessed his ability to transform quickly, she honestly didn't know his strength. Yet somehow she sensed that like her, he was holding his cards close to his chest. Not cowering down to them, but not letting them know exactly what they were up against if they picked a fight.

The rogue laughed as if he didn't believe Steve. "Well, follow us. We have a little game going and we'll see how well you two do."

"What kind of game?" Della asked and cut her eyes around, taking in all the rogues circling them.

"A little hand-to-hand combat. If you do okay, we'll see about your pet. You game?"

"Now?" Della asked, remembering in detail how Burnett told them not to

be lured anywhere. Already the vamps had proven they weren't good to their word because they'd stated only three of the gang members would meet them for a nonconfrontational interview.

"Now," the rogue said, pulling a knife from a side holster and wiping the blade on his dirty jeans. The guys to her left and right pulled out their knives as well.

Della heard a low growl, and although she didn't know shape-shifters growled, she knew it came from Steve.

She also knew that refusing the rogue's invitation wasn't an option. It was go, or have some hand-to-blade combat right now.

"Let's go, then," Della said, hoping whatever came next would provide a better escape.

Steve glanced at her and in his gaze she read his mind. *I don't like this.*

Well, neither did she, but she didn't see any other choice. She'd done a quick head count and there were twelve of them. She could probably take on five or six, but she couldn't take on twelve. Not with knives.

* * *

They were led to an old abandoned warehouse. Steve transformed into a black crow and moved slower. The rogues muttered curses that they had to slow down.

Della couldn't help but wonder if his choice of form hadn't been on purpose. Did shifting into a faster bird require more energy? And was he preserving it? Or was his ability to shift into certain kinds of animals a sign of power, and he was downplaying his abilities to the rogues? It occurred to Della that if she was going to work for the FRU, she needed to educate herself on all species.

It would have been helpful to know exactly what Steve was up to.

When they landed, she also noted Steve took several minutes to change. A hell of a lot slower than before. That's when she knew for sure he was

downplaying his power to the rogues.

One of the vamps stepped close and said something about wringing the crow's neck. Della moved between him and Steve.

With Steve now in human form, they walked inside a dark building. Della could smell old blood and vampire sweat. While she couldn't see for shit, she could also smell the bloodthirsty crowd. No longer just twelve rogues to deal with, but more than fifty. Her chest clutched with fear and the realization that maybe she should have taken her chances back at the park.

The lights suddenly flashed on and the crowd hiding in the shadows appeared. In the middle of the room was a boxing ring. Steve looked at her, concern tightening his gaze.

The crowd cheered and Della looked back up. A girl was pushed into the ring. She looked scared, but also determined. Della tightened her brows and saw she was half werewolf, half vampire. Were being her dominant species. She was obviously an extra. And from her stance, Della also assessed she was a willing victim.

"And here I thought I was just going to get to kill a human or two," Della said, praying her voice didn't shake.

"Oh, we do that, too. But we change it up to keep it interesting."

Bingo, Della thought. They could leave now. Unfortunately, she didn't see that happening.

The girl turned and looked at Della with something akin to hatred. Della knew this was the girl she was supposed to fight.

The smell of dried blood in the air warned Della just how far this fight was supposed to go.

She looked at the leader of the rogues who had met them. "It's hard to fight someone I have nothing against."

"When she takes her first punch, you'll have something against her. She's not nearly as weak as she looks. Sort of like you, I'll bet." He pulled out his knife again. "Go fight her, Miss Sass, and let's see how good you really are."

Della swallowed a knot of fear, but she forced herself to ask. “Where does this end?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, but his smirk told her he knew exactly what she meant.

“I knock her out, it’s over, right?” She was hoping.

His eyes brightened with plain ol’ evilness. “What fun would that be?” He brought the knife up and stared at the blade. “It ends when one of you stops breathing and becomes a willing blood donor, that’s when it’s over. So the question is, will we be drinking your blood at sunrise or hers?”

“Hmm,” Della said, and worked at keeping the horror from showing on her face. She glanced at Steve. He cut his eyes up to the ceiling. She didn’t know what the hell the message was, but she hoped it meant he had a plan. Because, God help her, she couldn’t think of one right now. And she was either about to kill someone, or be killed.

Chapter Five

Della got into the ring thinking there would be a bell, thinking she'd come up with a way out of this crap, but nope—on both counts. Before she had a chance to catch her breath, the girl attacked.

Della still didn't have a clue what to do. But when she took a fist to the cheek and it hurt like hell, she decided letting this girl beat the crap out of her wasn't a good plan, either.

Della ducked the girl's second punch. The crowd booed.

The were came at her again and Della grabbed the girl by the arm and unceremoniously tossed her across the ring. She landed hard, but was back on her feet in seconds. As the girl danced around throwing punches like some boxing queen, Della briefly found Steve in the crowd. He glared right at her and then cut his eyes upward again.

The second of lost focus cost Della dearly, for the girl struck again, this time kicking Della right in the ribs. Air whooshed out of her lungs as pain caused her to stumble back. That's when her gaze caught the slight opening in the ceiling, where an air vent had once been.

Okay, now she knew Steve's plan, but didn't he realize that these other vamps could fly, too?

Another foot came at Della's face. She grabbed the leg by the ankle and slung the girl outside the ring. Yelps and cries for blood echoed from the crowd. The girl landed in a group of vamps, but she must have been made of rubber, because she bounced back up and charged again.

She leapt into the ring. Her eyes glowed the notable orange color of a pissed-off were. She kicked up her foot, Della went to block it. A bad

mistake, because she didn't see what the B with an itch had in her hands until it was too late.

The knife came right at Della's heart. Her only defense was to block it with her arm. The blade sliced into her forearm and it felt like a burn, hot, yet cold at the same time. The smell of blood filled her nose.

Her own blood.

She heard the hungry cries from the audience.

The girl took a step back, but only to charge again. The knife was aimed right at Della's chest. A roar, not from the crowd, but from some exotic feline animal, rang in Della's ears.

Fury, hot red rage, filled Della's heart at the same time the knife sank into her chest, right below her collarbone. Amazingly, she felt more anger than pain. Grabbing the girl by the shoulders, she slung her. It looked like slow motion. Felt like slow motion, as the knife sliced its way out of Della's chest. Breath held in pain, she watched as the girl flew away, the knife, still in her hands, dripping blood from the tip of the blade.

Then Della saw the supersized lion, AKA Steve, charging toward the ring mauling anyone who dared get in his way. Go Steve! She pointed up and then with everything she had, she leapt straight into the air, barely fitting through the tight little exit. And right behind her, hauling ass, was a Peregrine falcon.

She continued upward knowing the vamps, at least the ones who could fit through the tight opening, would be behind them. She ignored the burning sensation in her shoulder. Suddenly aware she didn't hear the flap of a bird's wings, she glanced back. Steve had returned to the roof, transformed into a dragon, and was in the process of breathing fire into the hole in the old building. Damn, but the guy made a nice-looking dragon.

Obviously, the building had some sort of insulation that wasn't fire resistant, because smoke started billowing out of the roof almost immediately.

In seconds, sparkles started popping off around the dragon and Steve was

back to being a Peregrine. They flew off hard and fast. She kept looking back, praying the rogues weren't there. Thankfully, only the darkness chased them.

Suddenly, Steve started down.

"No," she screamed at him. "We need to keep going. They'll come after us!"

He didn't listen, but continued down and landed in a dark alley much like the one they'd been in last night. Six-foot-high wooden fences lined the pathway, as if to keep riffraff out. The overflowing garbage cans that smelled like spoiled fruit seemed to hold up the fences, some of which looked rotted. By the time she landed, Steve was already human.

"Shit," he said, grabbing her arm. The sweet smell of her own blood chased away the smell of garbage and filled Della's senses.

"You know," she said, flinching at the pain both in her arm and her upper chest, "you did good."

"You are not going to die!" he seethed.

"Who said anything about dying?" She found it hard to focus on him and she blinked a couple of times.

"You just complimented me," he said in a low growl. "That tells me how seriously hurt you are."

She grinned and she couldn't hold the gesture in place. "I'm not that bad, am I?"

"No, you're not that bad. Just stubborn..." he met her gaze, "and perfect," he said, but his voice sounded distant. "I need to get you to a hospital."

"No," she said, feeling her knees weaken. "I need blood and I'll heal. She didn't hit any major organs, or I'd be dead. Just get me blood, Steve. That's all I need. Vampires heal really quickly."

He frowned and pulled his phone out. "Don't you dare call Burnett!" she seethed, but her knees folded and she dropped to the ground. "Please," she begged, feeling tears fill her eyes. "I want to impress him. I can't let him

down.” She batted at her tears and saw Steve looking down at her with compassion.

Relief fluttered inside her when she saw him put his phone back into his pocket. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you,” she repeated, but she’d no more gotten that last word out when she smelled the dirty scent that hinted at rotten meat. They had company. Not the rogue vamps.

Weres.

Oh, shit! She really didn’t want to die today.

She stood up, her whole body trembled. She prayed she looked a lot more menacing than she felt. There were three of them, big mean-looking dudes. Hair so dirty she couldn’t distinguish the color, and clothes that looked just as unclean.

They’d obviously smelled her blood and came looking for a bite to eat.

“Leave,” Steve growled at them. “Or I’ll kill you.” Sparkles started popping off around him. A loud roar filled the dark alley. The lion had returned, only this time it was even larger, the size of a small van.

Two of the weres backed up, but one, obviously the most stupid, started running at Steve, his canines extended, his eyes glowing orange. Steve swatted one paw and knocked the were across the alley. He hit the fence with a loud thud. The two smarter weres ran like hell was on fire and chasing them.

It took Della a second to realize she hadn’t done anything. She hadn’t even growled at the intruders to help Steve stand against them. But how could she when it took everything she had to stand?

With the echo of the fading footsteps running down the alley, she watched the lion charge at her. But what she didn’t understand was why everything was spinning. *Round and round the world goes, where it lands nobody knows.* Her mind created the singsong words in her head to go with the light-headed feeling washing over her. Just when she was about to get used to the light-headedness, black spots started popping off like firecrackers in her

vision.

The last thing Della remembered was falling against the big beast and thinking that even as a lion, Steve smelled like some spicy male soap.

* * *

Della felt someone lift her head up.

Then she heard a male voice with a Southern accent as sexy as the voice was deep. “You either wake up and drink this or I’m going to have to call Burnett. You hear me? Wake up, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? Della lifted her eyelids and looked up at the dark-haired, soft brown-eyed guy sitting next to her on the huge bed. He had one hand behind her head and the other holding a cup up to her mouth. It took her a second to realize who he was. It took another one for her to remember everything.

The mission.

The vampires.

The weres.

Steve’s kiss.

Oh, yeah, she remembered Steve’s kiss.

“Thank heavens,” he muttered when he saw her looking at him. “Can you drink?” He pressed the cup to her lips. “Just a couple of sips.”

The sweet smell of blood filled her nose and she opened her mouth and sipped. It tasted so good, she took another sip.

Steve lowered her head on the pillow that was so soft it practically swallowed her head. She glanced up at his smile.

“I think you need to drink more, but we’ll give you a few minutes,” he said.

The silky feel of the sheets against her bare back and the soft pillow surrounding her head told her two things. One, they weren’t back at the cabin, and two, she was practically naked.

She moved her gaze around and took in what appeared to be a fancy hotel

room. Then she reached down to the sheet that covered her chest and lifted it up an inch to check for clothes.

Yup, naked. Well, practically naked. She still had on her red silk panties. And a bandage over her wound.

She dropped the sheet down against her chest and frowned up at him.

“Where are my clothes?”

“I threw them in the bathtub and rinsed them just in case any weres or other vamps were around. Didn’t want them to smell you.”

How could she argue with that? She couldn’t. Well, she could, not every argument had to be based in logic, but face it, she was too tired to argue a logical point much less an illogical one.

“Ready for some more blood?” He held the cup out.

She wanted to say no, but she knew the blood was the only thing that would help her. Leaning up on her elbow, or trying to, she slipped back into the pillow. She looked up into his soft, concerned eyes and felt ... she felt naked, weak, and vulnerable. This was so not her best day.

He reached down and helped her sit up. She felt the sheet slip down and she barely managed to catch it before it exposed her breasts. He held the cup to her lips and she sipped.

When he pulled the cup away, he smiled at her again—all sweet like. He wasn’t even looking at her like she was naked under the sheet like most boys would. He was smiling at her like ... like she was someone he cared about.

Definitely not her best day.

She didn’t want him to start caring. Because then she might start caring about him. That was dangerous.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back and in few minutes she felt sleep claim her.

Chapter Six

Della felt a tickle against her temple and went to wipe it away. Then the tickle hit the back of her hand.

Her eyes popped open with a start. The tickle was someone's breath, easy in and easy out, wisps of air.

And that someone was Steve.

Steve, asleep in bed with her. Steve, on his side, sharing her pillow.

Steve, not even the least bit ugly, with dark long lashes resting against his upper cheek. His equally dark brown hair lay scattered across his brow.

Asleep, he looked younger, except for his five o'clock shadow. She tried to remember if she'd felt any of that stubble when he'd kissed her last night at the restaurant. She hadn't. But she wanted to run her fingers across his chin now.

Her gaze shifted downward to her chest, to her not-so-big boobs. The sheet had slipped down around her waist.

Frowning, she snatched the sheet up and wondered if Steve had been privy to the view before he'd fallen asleep. Of course he had, she realized, he'd been the one to remove her bra and play doctor when he dressed her wound. A depressing thought hit. Had he been disappointed that she wasn't bigger?

She stared at the two slight mounds now pushing against the sheet—finding a bit of hope that they were a little bigger than they used to be. In the last few months, she'd actually started to fill out a B cup. Not that she aspired to get to a C cup like Miranda and Kylie. But a full B or B+ would be nice.

She glanced to her left side and lowered the sheet just a bit to see her

bandage. It didn't look like a half-assed job. Shifting her shoulder, she realized it must have healed, because there wasn't even the slightest amount of pain. Then she looked at her arm where another bandage was.

She vaguely remembered Steve waking her up and making her drink blood two or three times. She also recalled him telling her yesterday that his mom was a doctor. Was he considering becoming a doctor himself? He should. The boy had what it took.

Reaching up, she loosened the bandage below her shoulder blade to see the wound. The cut still showed, but it was close to being healed.

"It looks good," a deep, sleepy voice said beside her.

She cut her eyes to the guy sharing the mattress with her and glared. "Get out of my bed."

He grinned. "Technically, it's my bed. I rented the room."

She frowned. "It's too early to be logical!"

He chuckled. "Actually, it's not early, either."

She sat up a little, holding the sheet to her chest, and vaguely recalled not being able to sit up earlier. "What time is it?"

He rolled over and looked at the clock on the bedside table. "Six."

"That's early," she said.

"In the afternoon." He ran a hand through his sleep-mussed hair and looked adorable doing it.

"Wait. It's six in the afternoon? Shit!" She sat up straighter. "I slept all freaking day? Burnett's probably livid. I was supposed to check in."

"I did."

She frowned. "You told him I was hurt!"

"No, well I did, but I downplayed it—a lot. I had to tell him you had to fight because the whole burning warehouse and sightings of giant lions made the news."

She recalled him turning into a lion both at the warehouse with the rogues and to fight off the weres. "You were spotted?"

“A drunk in the alley, so it’s not too bad.”

“Sorry,” she said, remembering he was a stickler about following the rules and not shifting in a public place. And yet he’d shifted because ... because she couldn’t protect them.

“It’s okay.” His gaze went soft again, like he cared or something. “We got out alive. And we completed our mission. Now the FRU can go in and make some arrests in the gang.”

She nodded. “I’m surprised Burnett hasn’t been calling every fifteen minutes.”

“I think he would have but he’s got another problem on his hands.”

“What?” Della asked.

“Supposedly Helen was attacked.”

“Helen? Our Helen?” Helen was a bashful half-fae who Della couldn’t believe anyone would hurt. “Is she okay? Who did that?”

“Burnett’s been at the hospital with her. He said she was okay. I asked who did it, and he said they didn’t know. But you know Burnett, he’ll get them and when he does they’ll get hell.”

“Yeah, and I’d like to help him dish out that hell. Thank God she’s okay.” Della’s stomach grumbled, embarrassingly loud, too.

Steve chuckled. “I think you’re hungry.” He bounced out of bed. “I’ll get it for you.”

Sitting up, she leaned against the bed’s headboard and held the sheet to her chest. She watched him go to the small fridge and pull out a plastic bag with blood. But it wasn’t the same blood she’d brought with her on this trip. That blood she’d left at the cabin.

Questions started floating around her head. “That’s not my blood. Where did you—”

“My mom worked at this town’s ER for a couple of weeks when we first moved from Alabama. There’s a blood bank right down the street, that’s why I chose this hotel.”

His words bounced around her head. “You stole blood from a blood bank?” She shook her head. “You’re never supposed to do that!”

“I didn’t. Well, not technically.” He moved to stand by the bed and handed her a cup.

She took the cup and stared down at it. The wonderful aroma filled her nose. “Is this O negative?” she asked, recalling how good it had tasted when she’d been semicomatose.

“Only the best for you.” He sent her a crooked smile.

“I guess you can’t take it back, can you? And if you try I might have to kill you.” She took a big sip.

He grinned. “Drink up, and besides, I didn’t exactly steal it.”

She glanced at him from the cup’s lip. He continued to stand there just looking at her. “What do you mean?”

“I went in to donate a pint and just left with it.”

She licked the last drop of blood from her lips. “You’re O negative?” No wonder he always smelled so good to her.

He nodded. With his grin now spreading to his eyes, he said, “You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t say thank you.”

“Yeah, but your appreciation was in your eyes.”

She frowned, hoping to mask her appreciation. Then sitting up a little more, she drained the cup and set it on the bedside table. “Where are my clothes?”

“In the bathroom. They should be almost dry. I washed them out really good. But before you get dressed I need to put some more ointment on your cuts. One last time.”

“I think I’m fine.”

“Oh, you’re fine,” he said and smiled, “but your cut still needs one more dose of ointment.” He moved back to the dresser and picked up a tube of something along with some other supplies.

He sat down on the edge of the mattress, put his supplies on the nightstand, and carefully removed the bandage from her arm. He squirted some medicine on a cotton swab and dabbed it on the cut. She studied the cut on her arm, and like the one on her chest, it appeared almost healed.

Then he reached up and nudged the sheet down. Not low enough to see anything, but low enough to hint at the breast below and to get to her bandaged wound. Gently, he pulled back the dressing and patted the medicine on the cut.

When she glanced up at him through her lashes he was staring at her. "You're beautiful, by the way."

She felt her face heat up. Okay, now he stared at her like a normal boy, thinking about how naked she was beneath the sheet. Yet, instead of being repulsed, she was ... She was relieved to know he didn't find her unattractive. And he'd obviously seen almost all of her, too.

"If you tell anyone you saw me naked, I'll kick your ass."

He dropped the cotton swab on the nightstand and then reached over and tilted her chin up with his index finger. "I wouldn't tell anyone." His voice came out a little deep, and he sounded completely sincere.

He ran his finger over her lips.

"You aren't going to kiss me," she said.

"We'll see about that," he said and then he did it. He kissed her.

* * *

How it went from a simple kiss to him stretched out beside her, the sheet down at her feet and his shirt off, was a mystery. A delicious one.

His mouth moved from her lips to her neck and then lower. She moaned, lost in how good it felt. But when his hand softly, seductively slid down below her waist, she grabbed it, and swallowed a big dose of reality.

"I'm sorry," she muttered and sat up. "I can't ... We can't."

She heard him inhale and she knew he was filled with want and desire

just as she was. But supposedly it was even worse on a guy. It had always been hard on Lee before ... before she let things go all the way.

The thought of Lee had her breath catching again.

Tears filled her eyes and all she could think was how she'd gone down this road already. She'd given herself to Lee and look where that'd led her.

"Go take a cold shower." She gave him her back and pulled the sheet over herself.

He took several deep breaths of air, and after a few long seconds he said, "I didn't mean ... I was just going to kiss you. Shit," he said, his voice filled with self-loathing. "I never meant to take advantage of the fact that—"

"You didn't." She closed her eyes. "Didn't take advantage. I went there with you. But ... we shouldn't have ... gone there."

"To soon?" he asked.

"Too everything," she answered. *Too good. Too real. Too much like it meant something really special. Too much to have to deal with losing later on.* "If you're not going to shower, I am. We need to get back to Shadow Falls."

She hated the anger in her tone and hoped he understood it wasn't because of him. It was because of her. She simply couldn't let herself go down this road again.

* * *

In the shower she heard a phone ring and listened as Steve told Burnett they would be back in a couple of hours. He took a shower after her, and thirty minutes later, they got into a hotel elevator, one she had no memory of coming up in.

Had he carried her? She hated not knowing something. Hated knowing she'd been that vulnerable.

Once they arrived in the crowded lobby, he led her into the hotel's restaurant.

A complaint rested on her lips, but she remembered she'd eaten today and he hadn't. So she shut up and followed the hostess when Steve told her they needed a table for two.

He ordered a steak and baked potato and some sweet tea. She ordered French onion soup, about the one thing she could actually enjoy, and a Diet Coke.

When the waitress left with their order, Steve looked at her, still wearing an apology in his eyes. Yup, he felt guilty for things getting out of hand. But she didn't put all the blame on him. She could have stopped it. Should have stopped it.

"How's the shoulder?" he asked.

She reached up and touched where she'd been stabbed. "Completely healed," she said. Then she remembered something they'd talked about earlier. "Did you learn medicine from your mom?"

He nodded. "Sometimes she'd volunteer at different free clinics. I used to go with her on weekends. I'm a fast learner on some things."

She suspected he was a fast learner in all things. She hadn't seen it at first, but intelligence lingered in those big brown eyes. "And you don't want to be a doctor?"

"I didn't say I don't want to be a doctor."

"But you said ... I mean I got the feeling when you talked about your parents that you didn't want to do what they wanted you to do."

"She wants me to go into medicine for humans because that's where the money is. I want to train to treat supernaturals. That's where my skills will be the most useful."

She nodded. "I see." The waitress dropped off their drinks. Della twirled a straw around her glass and watched the bubbles rise to the top. "My parents wanted me to be a doctor, too."

"And you don't want that?" he asked.

"Hell, no. I want to go into criminal justice."

“A lawyer?”

“No. I don’t want to defend the law. I want to enforce it. Before I was turned, I was thinking FBI or CIA. Now I’m thinking FRU. Which is why I didn’t want Burnett to know I’d screwed up.”

He shook his head. “You didn’t screw up.”

“I got stabbed. That’s pretty screwed up.” She jabbed her straw into her drink.

“We were up against a whole gang of rogue vampires. The fact that we got out of there alive is a freaking miracle.”

She gave the straw another race around her glass. “But you’re the one who saved us. The one who came up with a plan, and then again with the werewolves.”

“Yeah, but you were a little busy trying not to let that rogue were/vampire kill you in the ring. And when the weres showed up you were already stabbed and bleeding like crazy, but you still stood up.”

“I didn’t do shit when they came,” she muttered, ashamed of herself.

“You stood up and faced them and let them know you weren’t ready to be their dinner.”

He looked down at his own glass for a second. “Honestly, I was totally impressed with you. The whole time, I’m freaking out inside. Hell, my knees were shaking and you were like this epitome of calm. I kept looking at you and thinking if you could do this, I could, too.”

She let go of a deep breath. “I wasn’t calm. I was freaking out, too.”

He smiled. “Well, that’s why you’re so good at this, Della. You didn’t seem scared. Not once. You can do this. I personally don’t like the thought of you putting yourself in danger, but don’t ever think you screwed up. You kicked ass in that ring.”

His compliment felt like a big hug. And as she constantly told Kylie and Miranda, she wasn’t much of a hugger.

Looking down at her drink again, the realization hit. She used to be a

hugger, but now when anyone wrapped their warm arms around her it reminded her of how cold she was.

Suddenly, she realized when Steve had kissed her and touched her she'd forgotten she was cold. For the first time since she'd been turned, she'd felt normal again—felt ... human. Damn that felt good.

“Thanks.” She looked up briefly and hoped he understood how much she meant it, because she didn't want to have to express it any more than just offering the word.

The waitress dropped off their food. Della spooned the French onion soup into her mouth, bypassing the cheese. But as the warm, tasty broth danced on her tongue, she couldn't help but think how good Steve's blood tasted. How good his kisses were. How it felt to be touched and not think about being cold.

When she'd showered, she'd noticed a hickey between her shoulder and left breast. She was glad he'd left his mark on her. But she was equally glad it wasn't permanent. It would fade in a few days. And that's the way it should be. Because once they were back at Shadow Falls this was over.

Done.

She simply couldn't put her heart on the chopping block again. Lee, along with her parents, had taught her how hard it was to love someone. How easy it was for them to disappoint you.

She didn't love Steve, not yet, but these last thirty-six hours had taught her how easy it would be to let herself go there. When someone was genuinely nice your heart welcomed them inside. Add the whole good-looking thing and him being such an awesome kisser to the scenario, and her heart had a welcome mat ready to toss down, a marching band, and banners with flashy letters reading, COME ON IN.

And that was unacceptable. She couldn't fall in love with Steve. Nope. No way. As soon as they returned to Shadow Falls, she was back to being the old Della. Solo. She had Miranda, and she had Kylie. As soon as Kylie

returned.

Della didn't need a guy making her feel special, making her feel beautiful, making her feel ... human.

Steve picked up his knife and cut a piece of steak. "Oh, when I spoke with Burnett earlier this morning he mentioned that he went to see Kylie."

Della's heart swelled. "He knows where she is? Is she coming back?"

"He must know because he said he'd seen her, but he didn't say anything about her coming back. He just said to tell you that she was okay and that she asked about you."

That was Kylie, always worried about others before she worried about herself. The girl was an idiot. Well, not an idiot. She was just one of those really caring people. Sort of like the damn shape-shifter Della was having lunch with.

Della dipped her spoon into the onion soup. "Well, if he knows where she is, then I can just go and bring her back."

"Kidnap her?" he asked.

"If I have to, yeah. She belongs at Shadow Falls with Miranda and me."

Steve chuckled. "You're not serious," he said.

"The hell I'm not," Della snapped. "Kylie's coming home and that's all there is to it."

* * *

Home. Della felt it as she landed outside the fence at Shadow Falls about thirty minutes later. Funny, how the place had started to feel that way. Of course, maybe that was to be expected when she no longer belonged with her parents.

Steve landed and transformed. "We should go to the front."

"No." She pulled out her phone. "I'm calling Burnett and telling him I'm here, then I'm jumping the fence. I just want to go to my cabin and relax ... I don't want to be interrogated right now."

She wanted to have time to regroup in her head.

Burnett answered on the second ring. “Where are you?”

“We’re here. Right outside the fence on the east side of the property.”

“Good. We’re having dinner now. Why don’t you come over? There’s a surprise.”

“I’m tired. Not in the mood for surprises. I just want to take a shower and relax. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“Are you okay?” His tone grew dark, concerned.

“I’m fine,” she growled.

When she hung up, Steve started walking over to her. She watched the way he moved, like a lion, lithe and with purpose. He stopped right in front of her and brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. “You know, I kind of don’t want to go back. I liked it just being you and me.”

She’d liked it, too. Too much.

She caught his hand and lowered it from her face.

Swallowing a lump of regret, she forced herself to say it. Part of her had hoped she wouldn’t have to spell it out for him. But that was the coward’s way out. And Della Tsang wasn’t a coward. Plus, Steve deserved to know up front that it wasn’t him. It was her.

“Look, I ... I enjoyed this. Everything. I really did, but ... it’s over now.”

He shook his head. “Why? It doesn’t have to be.”

“Yeah it does.” Her heart suddenly grew heavy. Too heavy for her chest. “I don’t ... I’m not ... I’m not ready for this.” She waved a hand between them.

That look of apology filled his eyes again. “I told you I didn’t mean for that to happen. I’m not going to pressure you to take it there. It’ll happen when it’s supposed to happen. I’ll be patient.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mean just that.”

Concern tightened his brows. “Then what do you mean?”

“I mean us ... period. Us being an item, us being an ‘us.’ I’m not up for

that.”

He shook his head. “Why? I thought we got along great.”

“Why isn’t important. It’s just the way it is. I’m not going there. I’m completely happy the way things are, happy with me ... not being a couple.” It was such a huge mistruth she could hear her swollen heart doing all sorts of erratic thumps, each one hitting against her sternum and calling her a lying bitch.

“No,” he said, “I can’t accept that.”

“You’re going to have to accept it. Because that’s just the way it is, Steve. We went on a mission and we did great. We did what we were sent to do and thanks to both of us the world might be a little safer. But what happened between us needs to end. I’m not right for you.”

He studied her. “Who are you right for?” he asked, sounding jealous.

“I’m not right for anyone,” she said and her heart didn’t race or mark that as a lie. She had loved already. Loved and lost. “It’s over, Steve. Just accept it.”

She started running and right before she leapt over the fence she heard him.

“We’ll see about that.” His words rang in her ears. A promise or a threat, she didn’t know. But the idea of it being a promise chased away the biggest part of the pain she carried in her heart.

As she walked inside her cabin, she breathed in the scents of home—the smell of Miranda’s fruity shampoo, and her scented candles. Della could even pick up the scent of Kylie’s favorite lotion.

Standing in the living room, Della let herself feel the tiniest bit of pride that she’d completed the mission. The feeling reconfirmed that she wanted to pursue a career in catching bad guys.

Walking into her bedroom, she opened her bottom drawer and pulled out the pictures. Images of her and her family, and others of her and Lee. All captured moments with emotion. Memories that now hurt to think about.

She started to rip them all up, but then on second thought, she dropped the pictures of her family back into the drawer. Some things she couldn't give up on. But others ...

She tore the snapshots of her and Lee into little pieces and let the tiny specks of paper rain down into the garbage. Then she went to her bed and flopped down on her back and stared at the ceiling.

We'll see about that. Steve's words echoed in her head like the lyrics of a song—a good song, one that crawled into your head and replayed itself over and over.

She closed her eyes. Life might have thrown her some punches this last year, but Della Tsang didn't go down easy. She was just going to punch back.

**Stay tuned for an all-new series about Shadow Falls' favorite
vampire, Della Tsang!**

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About the Author

C. C. HUNTER lives in Spring, Texas, where she's at work on her next Shadow Falls novel. To learn more, visit her on the Web at www.cchunterbooks.com

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“The Shadow Falls series belongs to my favorite YA series. It has everything I wish for in a YA paranormal series. A thrilling tale that moves with a great pace, where layers of secrets are revealed in a way that we are never bored. It continues a gripping story about self-discoveries, finding a place in the world, friendship, and love. So if you didn’t start this series yet, I can only encourage you to do so.”

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