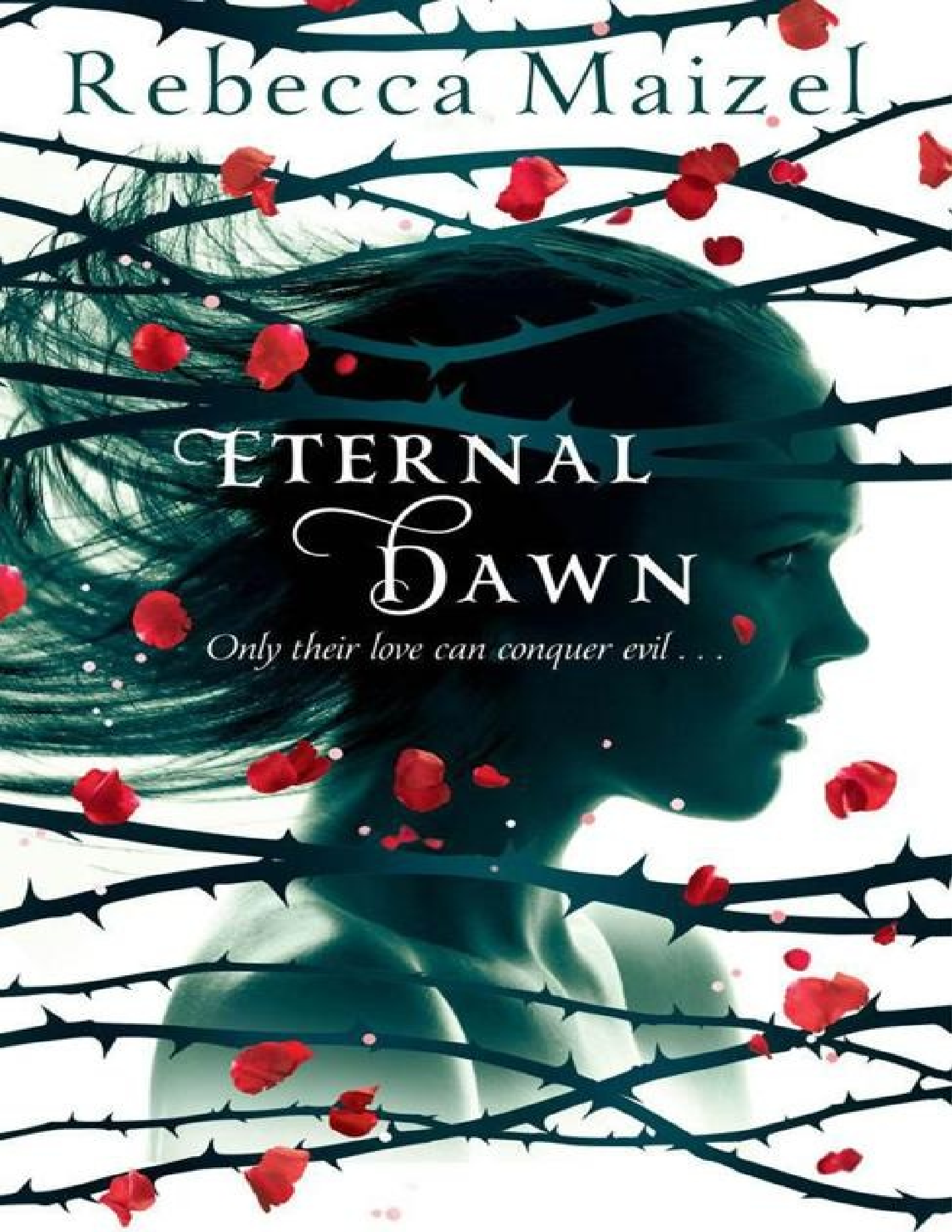
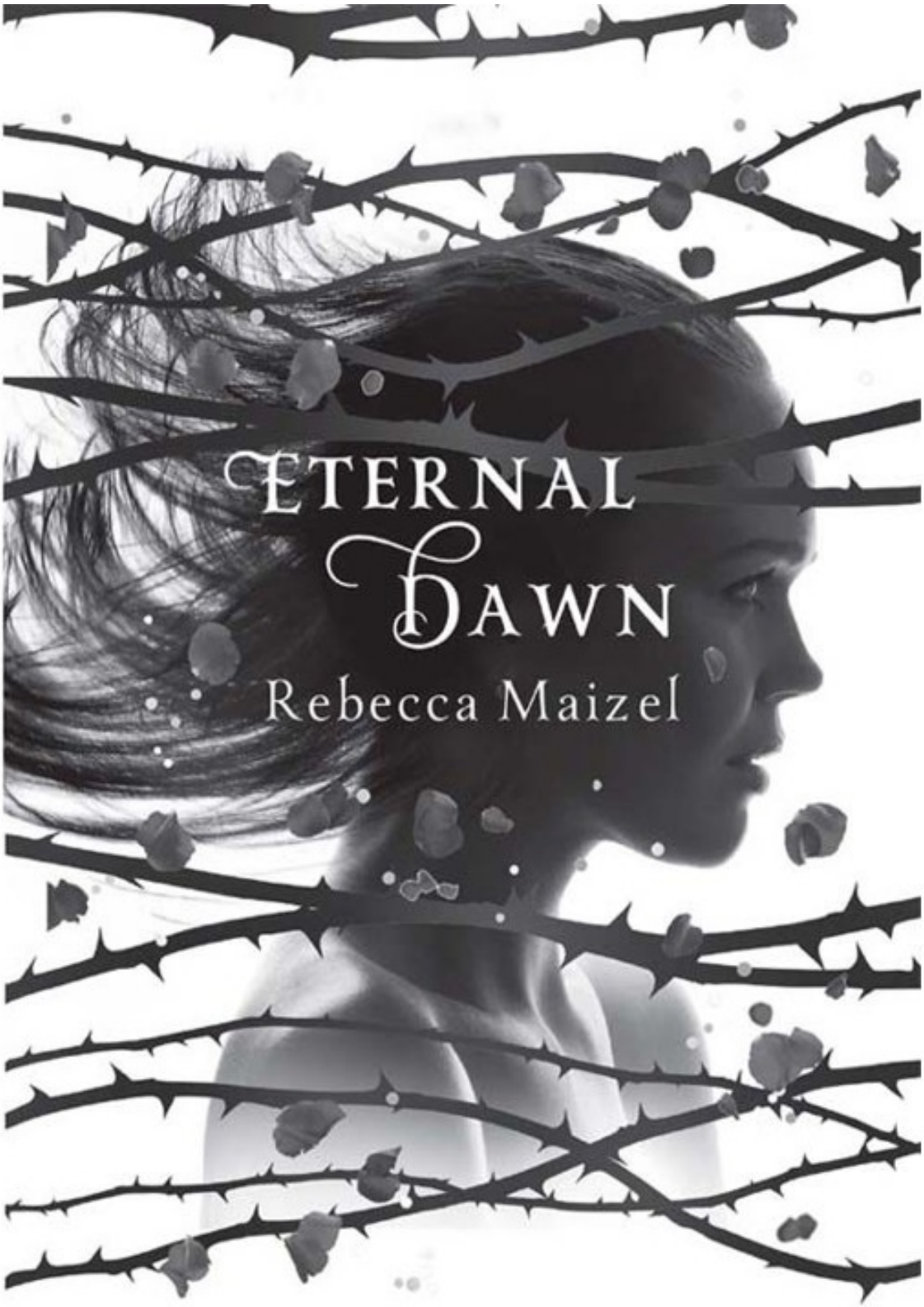

Rebecca Maizel
ETERNAL DAWN
Only their love can conquer evil . . .



MACMILLAN

For Jonah and Ellie – the littlest but brightest lights in the whole world

And to the Cheese Sandwiches of The Wheeler School Class of 2019, my very first 7th grade class; I promised I would dedicate a book to you. May you live up to your class name and write fiction that soars!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dear Girl in Red,

I dreamed of you again today. You stood in a field of lavender that stretched all the way to the horizon. The sky was orange and burning. Where are these worlds that I cannot touch? Why are you always there? You stood in the centre of this field wearing a red gown. When I reached you, you vanished, leaving nothing behind but a crimson feather. Is this a symbol? What are you trying to tell me?

Today is a three-year anniversary. Three years since Justin Enos went missing from this school. They say he vanished, taken from his room in the middle of the night. No sign of foul play. No fingerprints left behind. Just a room with no one in it. They found lacrosse sticks leaning against walls, tipped-over coffee mugs and unfinished English papers.

You have something to do with this, don't you? Girl in red, come to me. Come to me and tell me your name. Are you real?

I must be near you. I know this. You know it too. The truth is in your eyes.

Rhode

Chapter 1

1418, Hampstead, England – the Heath

‘Genevieve Beaudonte! We must practise your letters . . . *tonight*.’ I called to an adjacent row in the orchard. Where had she run off to?

I picked up the last basket of apples just as a crack of thunder prickled the hairs on the back of my neck. Grey clouds travelled across the sky in a continuous dance, unfurling and folding in on themselves. I inhaled the scent of the soil and of the apples that hung from the trees above me. My three-year-old sister, wearing a filthy frock, jumped out before me. Her short curly hair stuck out from her head at crazy angles.

‘Thunder! Did you hear it, Lenah? My favourite!’ Genevieve cried.

I held on to her hand as we made our way out of my father’s orchard and towards the house.

‘Perfect weather to study your letters,’ I said.

‘But why? It is *hard*,’ Genevieve complained with a drop of her head.

‘You will need it someday,’ I said, and lightly pushed her so she would move faster.

An image overwhelmed me: *I playfully push my best friend Tony and he trips over his feet. He turns to me, open mouthed and laughing*. The images came like bullets: *concrete sidewalks; steam rising from coffee mugs; a school with a stone tower. Friends.*

Even the smallest movement could bring back the memories of my favourite place in the modern world: Wickham Boarding School.

‘Why?’ Genevieve asked. Her voice rooted me to the present conversation. ‘Why will I need to learn to read?’

‘I told you – when you are older I will explain. But for now . . .’ I pulled her gently by the back of her dress to stop her from walking. I bent down to look in her eyes; they were exactly the same colour as mine, a stormy blue. She had the longest eyelashes of anyone in my family.

‘For now we must keep it a secret. Not even Mama and Papa can know,’ I said.

‘Tell me the story again tonight. The one about the maiden and her true love,’ she whispered. She meant my story of the Vampire Queen. The one I told her in darkness. The one of Rhode . . . and me.

‘Our secret?’ I said.

She nuzzled my nose and I took that as a yes.

I stood up and we headed towards the house in the distance. The smoke from the chimney swirled into the sky. Genevieve tossed an apple into the air, and just as it bounced off of her open palm the thud of *knowing* punched me in the stomach.

I straightened up and took a step backwards, letting Genevieve chase the rolling apple.

Something was coming.

We should run.

But would we make it? The hair on my arms stood on end. When an otherworldly creature enters into a human world, the energy shifts and the air crackles.

My hands trembled, so I balled them into fists and we continued on towards the house. Row by row, I expected something or *someone* to materialize between the gaps in the trees. A hand could curl around the bark followed by a body, and that person, whoever he was, might want to hurt us. Even kill us.

Genevieve continued to skip along the path.

‘Darling,’ I said. ‘Get to the house. Tell Mama I will be there anon.’ There was a quiver in my voice that I hoped she did not notice.

‘No. I want you to walk with me,’ she said, and continued to toss the apple up and down, up and down. She dropped it, chased after it, picked it up and threw it into the air again.

My fingertips tingled. I placed the basket of apples softly to the ground. If this supernatural being wanted to hurt Genevieve or me, I would need both hands free.

‘Go along,’ I said to Genevieve. ‘I forgot someone – I mean, *something,*’ I corrected.

‘All right,’ she groaned. The back of her dress bounced as she skipped to the house. By a sliver of luck, she did not turn around. The latch closed and I stared at the wooden door of the house, waiting to see if she would step back outside.

I closed my eyes again and inhaled the smell of rich soil, the oppressive humidity and the impending rain. I attempted to calm myself by drawing a deep breath. Goose bumps erupted over my arms and the hum grew louder making little pops of sound in the air.

It was behind me.

‘Three years,’ I said to the unknown entity. ‘Three years and I finally stopped –’ I paused, turning behind me – ‘looking over my shoulder.’ But the word shoulder was cut off. I gasped. There was a blast of red light, a sharp crack, and the sky opened up. I clutched at my chest as a body fell from the tops of the trees.

Suleen hit the ground with a hard smack. I ran to him and fell to my knees at his side. His white robes were tattered, hanging in shreds. Bite wounds spread over his neck and arms. They came from an attack. It was unmistakable; dozens of circular puncture wounds spread over his body.

Vampire wounds.

What kind of vampire drains another? And why? For blood? I had never heard of that before. Vampire blood is of no use to another vampire. The blood must be drawn from the living. It is the death of the human that is the magical sacrifice; the blood keeps the mind alive in a dead body.

I helped Suleen on to his back. The oldest and most powerful vampire in the world rested his head in my lap.

‘Justin is . . .’ Suleen’s voice failed.

Justin?

I placed my hands on Suleen’s shoulders and they were immediately covered with his blood. ‘Justin is what? Is he –’ I had to draw a deep breath to get it out. ‘Is he dead?’

Suleen squinted. ‘The sunlight. It’s too much.’

I raised myself on to my knees to shield him from the sky above. I hoped to make a large enough shadow.

‘There is a revolution. Walk into the sunrise and go back. Stop him.’

‘A revolution? Suleen, stop who? Who do I stop?’

Suleen’s eyes widened with panic; he seemed desperate for me to understand. A line of red dripped from the corner of his mouth.

‘He is still a vampire,’ he growled.

‘*Justin?*’ My voice shook as I spoke. ‘Suleen, that’s impossible. Fire said it herself – if I came back here to the medieval world, that history would be changed. My past would be erased.’

‘He has made them from your blood,’ he said.

‘Made *who*? Suleen, look at me.’ This made no sense. I needed more time.

He was bleeding out too fast. I stuck out my arm, offering my wrist. If Suleen fed from me, his wounds would heal instantly. He was far too damaged at this point for accelerated vampire healing to save his life.

Suleen needed my help and he needed my blood.

‘Feed from me. Do it,’ I commanded. His feeble fingers pushed my hand

away.

‘You must go back.’ He grasped my dress in a clench of his fist. ‘Justin made . . .’ He had to stop to gather the strength to speak. ‘He made them from . . . your . . .’

He gurgled something I couldn’t make out. His eyes widened even more as the blood oozed out of the bite marks all over his body.

‘Kill Justin,’ he begged.

‘Suleen, please.’ I stuck my wrist directly under his nose.

He did not feed.

A roll of light ran over the tops of the apple trees, down to the orchard floor and on to us. Suleen lifted his chin to the sun breaking through the clouds. I could not block his whole body; the beams of sunlight were too wide. He smiled, just faintly. The sides of his mouth curled upward just enough that I was positive he was *basking* in the light.

And then . . .

The oldest vampire to ever exist turned to ash.

Suleen was still whole but seemed to be a statue made of ivory-coloured cinders.

‘No,’ I whispered. *He’s going to blink those powdery lids and look out at me with his brown eyes. He’s fine. Just be patient.*

The statue of cinders didn’t move.

My fingers trembled as they reached out. At my touch, his form dissolved into a pile of powder. I gasped and sat back on my heels.

How could someone so indestructible turn to ash in my hands?

I stood up and looked around. How had Suleen travelled to 1418? Last time I had seen him, I was living in modern times. Suleen, despite his enormous power as a vampire, couldn’t manipulate time.

I searched through the grey shadows falling over the orchard.

Fire could. Fire could travel through time.

She was a member of the Aeris, one of the four elements of the world: earth, wind, and water being the others. She had enabled me to change my vampire past and return to my family and the medieval era. What had happened in my absence?

Justin’s broad shoulders and brilliant smile sifted through my mind. He wasn’t supposed to remain a vampire. I didn’t want to think of his blond hair and casual cadence. Because if he was a vampire, he would now be hardened and robotic.

‘How?’ I asked aloud in the empty orchard. When I had last seen Justin, Odette had made him a vampire, but that was supposed to change when I came back to the medieval world. Hadn’t I said that already to Suleen – that reality

was meant to be erased when I came back?

I rubbed my fingers and frowned at Suleen's remains.

As a human, Justin was a daredevil adrenaline junkie, but he had never been violent. There was no way. Not Justin. If he had attacked Suleen, someone had to be influencing him, no, *encouraging* him to be so dangerous. What had Suleen said?

Your blood . . . He made them. Suleen's voice resonated in my head.

What did Justin make from my blood? No – more specifically, how could he *get* my blood if the Aeris changed history?

A crack of thunder shot through me and I jumped just as the first globule of rain fell on the tip of my nose. Another crack!

And the sky opened.

'No!' I cried, and clawed at the earth before it melted to mud. I couldn't let Suleen's ashes wash away; they had to be buried, with respect. The rain came hard, pelting the orchard.

'Lenah!' Genevieve called for me from the open window of the house.

Oh no . . . not now!

I scraped the ground, making a hole so the ashes could be buried deep below the surface. My knuckles knocked against roots and rocks.

I dug into the soil with one hand, and moved the ash with the other. I continued scooping the earth and pushing in the silvery white remains. I withdrew my hands from the ground with an ache. My knuckles bled, making pink watery lines over my fingers. Orchard dirt had collected under my fingernails, but I didn't care. Suleen's ashes were safely buried underneath the wet earth and that's all that mattered to me. My hair stuck in long strands to my skin, sending cool trickles of water down my back.

He did not deserve to die. His ancient blood had dripped from his mouth and body on to my clothes. It stained and blotted my work dress. 'Go for—' I tried to say the familiar vampire phrase aloud. I wanted to wish his soul peace. Why should it be so hard to just say goodbye? After all, Suleen had taught the saying to me long ago.

My back seemed heavy and I bent over, placing my palm on the wet ground. *This can't be real. He's not gone; this is a trick.*

But the rain continued to fall.

I grabbed the hem of my dress and ripped away a thin stretch of wet fabric. The strip of cloth dangled in my hand and I tied it around my wrist like a bracelet. Suleen's blood was on my skin, and even though it would dry, I would wear this fabric around my wrist until it broke apart. Until that happened, I would mourn Suleen and the life he had sacrificed.

‘Go forth’ I said the phrase, finally. ‘In darkness and in light.’

I pulled a small knife out of my dress pocket and walked to the end of the orchard row. I grabbed an apple out of the nearby basket and came back to where I had buried Suleen’s ashes.

The apple sat in my hand and lines of rain ran down its skin. I sliced it across its midsection to reveal a pentacle. The severed core and the seeds created a perfect five-pointed star, a symbol of life, the symbol of the four elements – the Aeris. We stood together, that star and me, in the rain, above the ashes of my dead mentor.

Fire must have sent Suleen to me; it would be the only way he could time travel. I would leave her this symbol so she would know that I received her message. This pentacle faced towards the heavens, where I hoped Suleen’s spirit would go – if there was such a place. He deserved silence, peace and a place without bloodlust.

I wiped the rain out of my eyes with the back of my hand, turned to the small mound of wet earth and shook my head. *It can’t be*, I thought again, but it was true. I knew *this* kind of violent death all too well.

Vampire Queen, a voice in my mind whispered and I swore it sounded malicious, like a taunt. I am not a vampire. Not any more.

When I opened the door of the house Genevieve grasped both arms around me. ‘There you are!’ she cried. I drew her to me and relished the grip of her gentle fingers.

As I closed the door behind me, I threw one more glance at the orchard, at the burial spot – the apple was already gone.

Genevieve’s frame was curled into a ball beneath the blanket. All of it, every strand of the wool, was hers tonight. Instead of fighting me for a scrap of fabric, all that poked out beneath the wool were two dirty bare feet. The medieval world did not allow the comfort of many bedrooms, at least not for my family, a farming family living on the orchard of a monastery.

I kissed Genevieve’s head and she shuffled under the covers.

‘*Je t’aime*,’ I said in French, and turned to the door.

The apple was my beacon; Fire would come soon. She would arrive at sunrise just as Suleen had told me she would.

I tiptoed down the stairs and stopped at the little window that overlooked the orchard. I was not afraid to decipher this mystery. I had been the Vampire Queen, and with Suleen’s death, whatever had happened, it was clearly now up to me to fix it.

My fingers ran against the cool windowsill and I stepped down on to the

ground floor. I lingered at my father's favourite chair and my sister's riding stick. She loved to pretend to ride a horse up and down the orchard rows, her curls bouncing and her laughter echoing through the many lanes. I closed my cloak even tighter to keep in the warmth and glanced back at the stairs. I could go up and sleep, pretend this wasn't happening. Just get up in the morning and go about my business. I shook my head because I would never do that. I couldn't and *wouldn't* leave Rhode, Tracy and the rest of my friends at Wickham Boarding School to torment. The house creaked in the silent summer morning. Soon the floorboards would squeak with my father's familiar footsteps.

The stone mantel of the fireplace was cold, the night's fire long burnt out. My mother's hearth smelled just like her – lavender and rosemary. I detached a sprig of the dried purple flowers from a bushel hanging above the fireplace and placed it in my cloak pocket. I closed my eyes, inhaling my home: fresh air, wood and various herbs. Nowhere, in all of my many travels, smelled as good as this special place.

'I'll come back,' I whispered to the house. 'I promise.'

I headed out the door and set off towards the edge of our property, towards the spot where once, so long ago, Rhode had made me a vampire. Far in the distance, at the horizon, the sunrise hit the land.

I headed for the light.

My feet crushed the soft morning grass. The dew slicked the tree trunks and branches. I passed Suleen's buried ashes and turned my face away from the place. He was never coming back.

I kept on, and when I turned the corner, there, at the end of the lane, stood Fire. She wore a cloak of red as vibrant as her hair. She held a hand out to me and I hurried forward. Once I reached her, she gestured to the dirt lane that ran along one end of the orchard rows.

'I follow that path to Wickham?' I asked. She nodded and led the way. We did not need pleasantries. We did not need to say our hellos. Fire's cloak trailed over the ground as she walked. It swayed back and forth and seemed to bleed its colour, transforming my path to a bright, tangerine light. The trees were covered in a blaze of yellows and red. Everything, even the trunks and leaves, was saturated. As I walked, the colours mellowed into browns and the natural colours of the Earth. The orchard was behind me and ahead were tall sycamore trees.

A modern brick building with glass windows took shape on the horizon. A *familiar* brick building.

'Keep going,' Fire said.

The ground below me wasn't soft and crunchy any more but hard and black. I kept following Fire as she floated ahead of me. I inhaled freshly cut grass and

the unmistakable smell of gasoline. I tripped over a root or something hard. My body lurched forward and I threw my hands out to break my fall. And I did fall, landing on to the campus of Wickham Boarding School.

Chapter 2

Present day

I shook my wrists; they stung from the impact of hitting the ground. I was on all fours and dug my fingertips into the soil. I had landed just within the boundaries of the Wickham woods. Ahead of me was campus, behind me Main Street.

Lovers Bay, Massachusetts was a town on Cape Cod. The salty smell of the ocean was a pungent odour compared to the earthy scents of home. The sounds of the campus echoed about me. Shrieks of laughter mixed with the beeping of a utility vehicle somewhere nearby.

Utility vehicle. Something that didn't exist in the fifteenth century.

Despite Suleen's death and despite the hollowness in my gut, a smile tugged at the side of my mouth. I was really here, at Wickham – wasn't I? A car roared past behind me and I threw my hands over my ears. I pressed harder as a police car screamed by too. I jumped up, turning to the stone wall that encircled campus. My ears burned as the siren pulled away. The modern age was relentlessly loud.

For the three years that I had been back home in the medieval world, the soundtrack of my life was the chanting of monks and whispers with my sister under the covers.

Her laughter.

I swallowed hard. This world seemed hollow and metallic. I would hear her laughter only in my memory, perhaps for the rest of my days.

I smoothed out my work dress just to do something with my hands, but found myself no longer in my medieval garb. I was wearing what I would have picked out for myself in the modern world: black pants, T-shirt, combat boots.

The clothes of a soldier.

I lifted my wrist. The cloth blotted with Suleen's blood remained fastened safely to me.

Fire hovered by my side.

'We are invisible to those around us,' she said, and handed me the sprig of lavender I had taken from my parents' house; I took it without meeting her

cranberry-coloured eyes.

‘Well . . .’ I said after slipping it into my pocket. ‘Let’s get on with it.’ I crossed my arms over my chest and lifted my chin.

‘You have every right to be angry,’ she said.

‘Suleen is dead.’ I pointed to her when I said, ‘You punished Rhode and me. You said we couldn’t be together, so I went back, Fire. You said it would be safe for those I left behind,’ I snapped.

She said nothing at first. Fine. Rhode and I wouldn’t be together. I would do what Suleen and Fire wanted of me and then try to get back to the medieval world. I was here again regardless of what I had tried to do before.

‘Things are different than the Aeris expected,’ Fire said.

Dare I sense hesitation in her voice?

‘After what has transpired here in the modern world, you and Rhode are free to do what you choose,’ Fire said. ‘But it’s not simple. As you asked of me, the Aeris gave him his life back; he does not carry the scars of his former vampire life. He has no memory of his past.’

‘He was nineteen when he was made a vampire. Won’t he look older to the students? I asked.

‘He will not age as a human until he turns nineteen. He has a whole host of memories from Lovers Bay, *human* memories.’

‘He needs to know what happened to Suleen, Fire. Give him back his memory.’

‘I can’t. What I have done with you and Rhode is—’ She stopped herself and her scarlet eyes locked on me with such intensity a flicker of fear rushed through me. I wanted to take a step backwards, but fought the desire. ‘Don’t you see what we’ve done?’ she continued, ‘Justin poses an insurmountable problem.’

‘*We?* What I’d really like is for someone to tell me what the hell has happened since I’ve been gone.’

Fire dropped her head. She was not human, but this was such a human admission of failure I couldn’t help but be taken aback. Fire could not meddle in the affairs of vampires. The Aeris were only responsible for the four elements and keeping the balance of all living things. She would never be human no matter how she behaved.

‘If you do not kill Justin,’ she said quietly, ‘someone will take my place who does not care for you as I do. Someone who will reverse this decree and keep you and Rhode apart again,’ she explained.

I drew a sharp breath at the frightening hierarchy of the universe. Fire was *in trouble* because what we had set out to do had failed.

‘You can be replaced?’ I asked quietly.

She did not answer but instead placed a warm, feather-light hand on my shoulder.

'Wait. Wait,' I said while working it out in my head. She had said someone would take her place who would keep Rhode and me *apart*. That would mean Rhode and I would have to be together first.

'Rhode and I . . . we don't have to stay away from one another any more?!'

She nodded once.

I wanted to jump up and down. I wanted to run through campus at that very instant and find him immediately. I also wanted to hold on to the nearest tree because my breath was short. I exhaled heavily to steady myself.

Fire hesitated before she spoke, and I caught a glimpse of pity in her eyes as she said the next words.

'I would not be so excited. I do not think he will ever remember his past,' Fire said. Her words were sobering. *Think like a soldier, Lenah.* I touched the bloody fabric on my wrist.

'Rhode's going to need protection,' I said. 'From Justin.'

It sounded weird even saying it aloud.

'What do we know?' I added, getting to business.

'Justin is the king of the vampire world. He has made an allegiance with the Hollow Ones.'

I straightened my back. If I felt tight and strong, I could understand this. I could work out a plan. I couldn't imagine any scenario in which Justin was more powerful than Suleen. Or one in which he was in cahoots with the Hollow Ones – vampires who had given up their ability to love in return for power and knowledge, becoming mutants of the supernatural world. Demons.

'Why is he still a vampire? I know you can't meddle in the affairs of vampires, Fire, but you promised me the world would change.'

'Some circumstances are beyond even the Aeris's control.'

Anger shot through me yet again.

'You're an all-powerful being. You can manipulate *time*.' I stopped myself and shook my head. 'Forget it. Forget it. Yelling about it won't change anything. Just tell me what I need to do.'

Fire reached up to her neck and removed a necklace. It was simple, a gold chain with a red teardrop-shaped pendant. It floated through the air towards me and dropped into my palm. I curled my fingers around the smooth jewel. It had an unnatural heat as though a tiny fire burned within the gem.

'What is this?' I asked.

'The only power I have left to give you: the power of flame. You may use this only once. Cast this necklace at your opponent and it will become a

conflagration so monstrous that it will tear down those who wish to harm you. It is fire. Nothing more, nothing less.' She punctuated every word and warned, 'Use it only when you need it most.'

The little orb glinted. It seemed to be echoing Fire's declaration.

'You'll find your life at Wickham ready for you. To those here, you are a new student entering the school in your senior year.'

I closed my hand around the warm jewel.

'What would have happened if I had refused this task?'

Fire paused and finally said, 'I would fear for the natural order of the world.'

I shivered. Whatever had happened to leave Justin a vampire had unsettled the natural balance of the world. It must have been catastrophic indeed for Fire and Suleen to bring me back.

'Tell me first,' I said. 'My friends – they won't remember me?'

'It won't take them long this time. The soul can always recall who it has loved.' Her light faded from bright red to orange.

The necklace in my palm swirled and sparked. I wanted to ask her why we had failed the first time, but all I could think to say was, 'What if I need you?'

But Fire's orange light had dimmed to yellow before I finished speaking and in a blink, she was gone.

I fastened the necklace, but when I reached up to make sure it lay correctly – the clasp had disappeared.

I turned around to face campus. Just a few steps and I would be on a Wickham pathway. I didn't know what lay ahead, but I knew I had to leave these woods to begin this journey.

With his death Suleen had said it all in the orchard. He had summoned me back to Wickham to complete a task that he could not.

To kill Justin.

I dared to step to the edge of the woods. People talked on their cell phones and moved boxes into their dorms. Parents idled by large luxury cars, hauled comforters and mini fridges. Fire had sent me back to Wickham Boarding School on student move-in day so I could begin school with the rest of the student body. Security walked up the paths and a large food truck pulled to a stop before the union.

Food! Oh my goodness. Food. Glorious, succulent, thousands of different kinds of food that I could buy in *tons.* No more making it myself, no more *dreaming* of coffee. Here they had coffee that brewed in seconds. Oh, modern world, I missed you so.

Nothing seemed any different to three years ago. At least, not on the outside

anyway. The sight and sound of the latest cell phones briefly amused me.

A girl passed through the gates with tight jeans and boots that went over her knees. If only my mother could see her, I thought. She would think the girl a devil, unsure how she got cowhide a different colour. And what of the unnatural tan of her skin?

I stepped away from the woods and on to grass that stretched from the library to the main quad.

Wickham Boarding School.

How those three words had slung through my mind the last three years. Like a sonnet. Or a name of someone I loved dearly.

I reached up to my neck to the hanging gem.

Only when you need it most.

I had to find Rhode.

The need to see him pulsed through my body coupled with a tinge of fear. This was a world with no decree from the Aeris, but this was also a world in which Rhode had no memory of me.

Focus, Lenah. OK. What to do first? Beyond, near the union, a welcome table was set up with purple and gold balloons – the Wickham school colours. Perfect. I could find my dorm room assignment and class schedule.

Class schedule. Preposterous. I would have to go though, wouldn't I? Especially if I was posing as a Wickham student. I scoffed and took a step towards the path as a boy nearly barrelled into me. He wore a backwards baseball cap and looked up at me from a collection of drawings in his hands.

'Whoa, sorry,' he said. 'Didn't see you there.'

I froze.

Almond eyes, high cheekbones.

Beautiful face.

I backed away, bringing my hand to my chest.

Tony Sasaki's eyes widened.

'Are you OK?' he asked.

Joyshockhappinessjoyhappiness – shock.

Tony was alive! He was actually living and breathing! I took a step towards him and pressed a hand on to his chest. His body stiffened at my touch.

He was *warm.*

'What are you . . . ?' he said.

A laugh escaped and I took a step back, dropping my hand. I slid my palm over my mouth and gulped back the sting of tears.

'You look like you're gonna puke,' Tony said.

'You,' I whispered.

‘Me . . . ?’ he said.

I threw myself at Tony, hugging him. I couldn’t seem to grasp his stocky frame hard enough. He patted me on my back a couple of times.

‘Hello, Crazy . . .’ he said.

I squeezed him one more time. He was here. He was alive.

I pulled away from him. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Easily the weirdest hello I’ve ever had,’ he said.

He paused, his face falling serious for one moment. ‘So I have amnesia and forgot we know one another, right?’ Tony said. ‘Have we met?’

‘No. No we don’t know one another. I mean, not yet. I’m Lenah,’ I replied awkwardly.

‘Oh!’ Tony said. Recognition passed over his face, which startled me. He pointed at me with the hand holding the papers. ‘You’re the new girl.’

‘New girl?’

‘My friend said the new exchange student was gonna be living with her. I’ll help you with your stuff,’ he said, and he seemed to be relieved to be busy. ‘Wow, this is heavy.’

I spun. What was heavy?

A red trunk sat near my feet. It hadn’t been there before. I wondered how many more ‘red’ things might show up.

‘So you’re Tony,’ I said.

‘Why am I not surprised you know my name, mystery girl?’ he asked.

Tony handed his drawings to me and lifted my trunk.

‘These are really good,’ I said. I had expected to see portraits, which is what he used to paint. These though were depictions of the night sky in all kinds of mediums: acrylic, pastel, watercolours. They showed incredible constellations: Ursa Major, Cassiopeia and Pegasus. That was my favourite. He had depicted the sky in dark blue, and thick white brush marks were picked out the constellation of the horse. ‘I love these,’ I said, adding, ‘You’re talented.’

‘Oh, go on,’ he said, feigning modesty.

Tony pointed out all of the places I had to go to get my Wickham paperwork completed. Of course this meant we eventually had to stop at Hopper building to get my room key. As we approached the familiar building, I purposefully did not look to the great stone tower where, in a different life, Tony had met his death. I kept my eyes on him instead and at the sun shining down on his face.

‘So . . . do you always hug and jump on people when you meet them for the first time?’ he asked.

I laughed. ‘Just you, I think,’ I said as I opened the door.

Amazed at the sight of our reflection, I kept my eyes on the glass door. Tony

and I walked inside.

Chapter 3

Tony had left my trunk near the union entrance so I could get an incredibly delicious mocha latte. Once I got my keys and welcome packet, we headed outside. While I sipped on my drink, I pretended to read an official Wickham Residence Hall orientation sheet. Really, I was making up questions I already knew the answer to so I could keep looking at Tony.

We approached a bulletin board erected next to the path near the union; on it were two posters. Each had a photo of a missing student. One was Justin's. It was his student photo so he wore a nicer dress shirt, a blue button-down, but in the poster it was muted grey. Justin's handsome face was the same – the slim nose and pouting mouth – but in that picture I saw his love of life, his positive outlook, and his need to live at the fastest speed possible.

'That's Jackie Simms,' Tony said, nodding to the second missing-student photo. He placed my trunk on the ground and wiped some sweat from his forehead. 'She went missing in March.' No doubt her disappearance was connected to Justin. Tony's eyes lingered a moment too long on Justin's poster.

'And?' I gestured to Justin's picture just to see what would happen.

'He was my friend,' he said with a short clip to his words. 'Been gone two years. This will be the third.'

Tony's voice filled with silence and I regretted asking him about Justin.

'I'm sorry,' I said, and we kept walking.

Tony led me to my dorm across the quad, past students and teachers organizing for the first day of school that would begin tomorrow. I wanted to ask him to go to the union again, to walk the beach, to get my books, as we once had, but I had to keep my excitement under control. He wouldn't remember that life; to Tony, it never happened.

'And I'm living in . . .' I checked the orientation sheet again. 'I'm living in Turner?' I said. Oh right, he wouldn't remember that I had never lived in Turner as most of the senior girls did. 'I'm not in Seeker dorm?'

'You want to live in Seeker? Teachers live there. And the debate team. You don't want to live with the debate team.'

‘I don’t?’

‘Turner connects to Quartz, the guys’ dorm, through a hallway. So we can come back and forth.’

‘But you just met me,’ I said, cocking my head. I had to squint because of the sun. ‘You want to visit my room already?’

‘Well, you basically cried when you met me. That means I’m awesome, so obviously we’re gonna go up and down the hallway.’

Awesome. Gonna go. Clipped syllables. Yes, I was back in the modern world.

‘True . . .’ I said. ‘That sounds great.’

Tony led me into Turner and down the hallway. My nose was overwhelmed: perfumes, detergent and cleaning products. The list went on and on. The many smells and the sounds of music made my head buzz. I was not fascinated by it as I had been years before when I first came to Wickham. It was like coming home, just a bit louder than I was used to.

Turner dorm was almost all windows on the right side. I had a perfect view of the woods and Wickham beach beyond. The sun’s beams fell at long golden angles through the trees. The slant of the light meant it was ten in the morning. My mother and father were already halfway through their workday. I wondered if Fire had constructed it so they would not miss me or worry over my disappearance. I touched my pocket where my mother’s lavender remained tucked away.

‘So this is room 102. Classes start tomorrow. But your roommate will be able to explain everything. You know, it’s lucky I was walking back from town. Maybe we wouldn’t have seen one another.’

‘I have to do this one more time,’ I said and hugged Tony again. This time he didn’t just pat me; he squeezed me back.

He dragged my trunk into my room, next to the empty remaining bed.

‘OK, *now* I am going back to my room,’ he said.

I handed him his artwork, but I couldn’t resist watching him as he walked away. I had a dozen reasons to call him back. We could get coffee, gossip about the school or he could show me his art space in the tower.

No. I had to enter this world again on my own and earn his friendship.

I also had to find Rhode as soon as I could.

My dorm room was fairly large with a twin bed on each side. There was also a massive bookcase, a bay window with a seat and, through another door, a bathroom. A blonde girl walked out of it holding a toothbrush.

Well, I’ll be damned.

Tracy Sutton.

‘Hi,’ she said, smiling at me. She wiped a wet hand on her pink pyjama

bottoms. ‘You’re Lenah? Am I saying it right? I’m Tracy.’

We shook hands and this time I fought the impulse to throw myself around her. Tracy had once tried to fight Odette, a vicious vampire; she was willing to go to bat against a whole *room* of vampires for Rhode, Vicken and me.

‘I took the left side; I hope that’s OK?’ Tracy asked.

I nodded. Tracy could have anything.

‘Yes, that’s great,’ I said aloud. I couldn’t be the weird and mute roommate.

A dark blue comforter with seashells decorated her bed. She had tacked up black-and-white posters of kissing couples and many pictures of her friends – my breath caught in my chest. Justin was in some of those pictures.

I approached the mirror above her bureau. Tracy and Justin posed for a picture at a winter dance. Fake silver snowflakes dangled over a cheap blue fabric background. Tracy’s cheeks were fuller in these photos. I guessed she was a freshman when they were taken.

‘Is this . . .’ I asked, pointing at the picture. *Hide it, Lenah. Be smarter than this.* ‘. . . your boyfriend?’

Her smile fell immediately. *Not smooth, Lenah. Not smooth.*

‘Well, yes. I mean, we broke up before he – not any more.’

‘Before . . . ?’

‘He’s missing. ’Has been for almost three years. You’ll see his picture around campus.’

She momentarily turned her back to me and placed her toothbrush down on her bureau.

‘So you’re British?’ She spun back to me with a huge plastered-on false smile.

‘Oh, um, yes,’ I said. *Get it together.* I had business to attend to. Fire left me the trunk for a reason. I opened it.

‘Like Rhode Lewin,’ she said. ‘He’s the other Brit on campus.’

The mention of his name tugged on my gut.

‘Exchange student?’ I asked, playing dumb. I moved a couple of sweaters out of the way and the sunlight caught the handle of a very ornate dagger. There were at least four more daggers in there, so I slammed the trunk closed and sat down on top of it.

‘Yeah. Every single girl on campus is in love with him. But maybe you’ll get lucky since you have something in common. You know, being from England.’ Tracy had changed clothes and picked up a pink cardigan. ‘I wish I could stay, but I have –’ She stopped and dipped her head a little. Her cheeks reddened. ‘I have chorus try outs.’

‘Chorus?’ I couldn’t help the crack of excitement in my voice.

‘Yeah, I *sing* . . .’ She actually sang the word sing, and it was rather good.

‘You *do*?’

She shook her head and her honey-coloured hair fell in a sheet around her angular face. When she smiled I was impressed by the whiteness of her teeth. Gleaming teeth the colour of porcelain were a mark of the modern world. It was something my own mother noticed about me when I first returned, and it took weeks for me to make a proper toothbrush. The medieval world did not have toothbrushes. And it most certainly did not have fluoride.

Tracy shook her hair out of her eyes.

‘I figure if I don’t audition now, it’s never happening.’ She shrugged.

She was trying to pretend it didn’t matter but it clearly did.

‘Well, I have absolutely no musical talent whatsoever, so I’m impressed,’ I replied.

‘Good, well, I know I’ll have a friendly face in the audience.’

She lifted her backpack over her shoulder.

‘Should I come?’ I asked.

‘No, no. Believe me – two hours of awkward solos? If you’re looking for something to do, there’s the union – they have TVs in there – or the beach, but the sailing team will be doing some demos. Oh, they just built a huge farm this summer, if you’re into that. You know, sustainable living or whatever.’

What living?

‘It’s near the barn in the back of the lacrosse field. Just at the edge of the campus. And when I come back, we can have lunch? I should be here around twelve.’

‘The farm,’ I replied. ‘Perfect.’

Truthfully, I only grasped half of what she was talking about.

Though a farm was precisely what I needed. It would be comforting to be near the smells of home.

Once Tracy left, I immediately dropped to my knees and searched Fire’s trunk.

Clothes.

A tin with plenty of money.

I moved the sweaters over to the side. Beneath them was a dagger. I held it gently in the palm of my hand. My fingers wrapped tightly around the blood-red hilt and it *warmed* to my touch. I turned the blade over and the oxblood, reds, pinks and garnets reflected on to the floor, making blood-red dances of light. The hilt was made of rubies.

There was also a longsword. This was not Rhode’s weapon from his days with the Order of the Garter. That was a life that no longer existed. When I took the sword from its sheath, the silver flickered crimson as though a flash of Fire’s hair sped by the blade. I searched for her in the blade.

‘Fire?’

I waited, hopeful that her face might appear and begin speaking to me, but the metal remained silver.

I replaced the weapons, clicked the lock and dropped the trunk key in my boot. I checked the clock.

Rhode.

His name came through my mind like a prayer. Fire’s words came too.

I don’t think he will ever remember his past.

Time to find him.

Chapter 4

Tracy was right. A barn now stood at the back of the main lacrosse field. Running parallel to it were plots of land sectioned off by a wooden fence. The sheer familiarity of growing greens, and the unmistakable fluffy mint plant made me smile, just for a brief moment. It could have been home – well, if it wasn't for the little motorized tractor waiting at the end of the farm. Oh, and electricity. I stopped next to the barn, crossed my arms and relished the green vines of the tomato plants and small pumpkins growing in bunches. My parents would have run from plant to plant overjoyed by the selection. I touched the pendant around my neck; it had warmed in the morning sunlight.

Someone is coming closer to me. No, they are jumping at me. I'm being attacked! Bring your hands up! Protect your face! My body tried to catch up with my thoughts.

Male. Black T-shirt, black hair.

There was a shove to my chest, and I flew backward. My head smacked the ground and pops of light burst before my eyes. I barely had time to raise my hands against my attacker.

I inhaled a scent like amber resin and nights by dripping candle wax.

Rhode.

Anywhere you will go, I will go.

Those words Rhode had once spoken to me echoed in my mind. He stood above me and radiated the same protective aura I had loved for so long. He spoke to me but was investigating the wall of the barn,

'You could have been hurt. They're getting more and more reckless.' He paused. 'Archers,' he added with a growl.

My ears perked up. I had dreamt of Rhode's voice, of the way it would sound if I ever heard it again. It was so familiar and deep, and yet the dips and emphasis on certain syllables were different to the way they had been before. I had to remind myself this was the Rhode of the modern world, with no memory of his life as a vampire.

From my spot on the ground, I followed the length of his outstretched arm.

An arrow with a red fletching, or tail as it were, stuck out of the wood of the barn. But I couldn't concentrate on the arrow. Rhode's beauty left me speechless. His hair was cropped, in a *modern* style. He moved so easily. I must have just sat there staring, but I didn't care.

Rhode leaned closer, investigating the wooden shaft of the arrow. Blood pulsed through his veins and hair grew on his arms. For hundreds of years Rhode was forced to stay out of the sunlight. And now . . . he was *tanned*. I followed the bronze skin of his arm to the tips of his fingers now pulling at the end of the arrow.

With my heart nearly exploding, I remained on the ground, waiting for him to look at me. I nearly passed out from the anticipation. His blue eyes focused intently on the arrow and I gulped. It stuck out of the wall right where my head had been.

'Wait . . .' he said, and snatched the arrow out. 'This isn't a Wickham arrow,' he mumbled. 'Who would use a razor-head tip? Lunatics.'

He looked down at me. His jaw dropped and he backed away.

'*You*,' he said. He dropped his voice. 'The girl in red.'

Excitement shot through me.

'Me?'

His lips parted as he studied me. He shook his head and resumed speaking as if he hadn't just stopped mid-sentence to call me 'the girl in red' – whatever that meant.

'I mean, are you . . . are you all right?' he stuttered. He reached down and his hand gripped mine. After he had helped me up, our hands lingered in one another's.

'I think so,' I said. His grasp was strong, comforting.

Rhode focused on the ground. 'I'm glad.'

'How did you see it fly through the air so fast?' We were still holding hands. 'You pushed me out of the way, didn't you?'

'I'm an archer,' he said and dropped my hand.

I wanted to study the arrow to see if I could identify its origin. My old life had prepared me. I could shoot a perfect bullseye from two hundred feet away when I had my vampire sight.

Rhode held the arrow at a strange angle, almost as if he was trying to hide it behind his back. He kept it there when meeting my eyes again. The familiar blue pinned me in the middle of my chest. I had searched for that blue in every medieval sky, in the flowers that grew on the Heath, but never, not once, did I find it. Not until now.

Three years. Three long years since I had felt their gaze.

‘Your accent. You’re not from the south of England,’ he said.

‘I lived in Derbyshire for most of my . . .’

Oh boy. What should I call those 592 years? Life? For lack of a better expression, I went with it.

‘I lived in Derbyshire for most of my life. A small village called Hathersage.’ I waited to see if the name would prompt a reaction.

Rhode opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. I couldn’t read him. Without another word he set off in the direction of the main campus.

‘Wait,’ I called. Rhode twisted to look back at me, but he shook his head in disbelief. Something about me was unsettling him. ‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I would have been killed. Big lawsuit for the school archery team.’ I chuckled. When he didn’t laugh I cleared my throat. ‘I’m Lenah.’

‘Rhode,’ he replied. I couldn’t ignore the hesitation in his voice again. Before I could say anything else he turned his back to me again and walked away.

I wanted to follow after him. I even took a step, but a ripple of cold air fluttered the leaves and plants. The branches waved *against* the direction of the wind. The natural world always hinted when someone magical was near. Someone who was *not* human. *Look for the clues*, Rhode had taught me. *And you will see when a vampire is near.*

But where?

I scanned the long width of the Wickham farm. Running parallel to it were the woods, followed by the bay beach. The tomato plants were in full bloom and the round red tomatoes reminded me of the apples hanging in the orchard at home. I inhaled deeply bringing the scent of mint and soil.

I could almost relax. Almost . . .

I rubbed at the cloth wrapped around my wrist and held the delicate fabric between my thumb and index finger.

Beyond the farm, in the woods, a pair of dark eyes stared at me from beneath a proud brow. *Vampire* eyes. They were like glass. Although he was far away from me, I knew the vampire was not Justin but a young man I did not recognize.

He stalked out of the woods and the sunlight passed over him. I stuttered something. I even threw my hands to grab him. I wanted to throw him out of the sunny rays, but he kept straight ahead, and stopped within a foot of me.

‘How can you be in the sunlight?’ I asked once he reached me. ‘How old are you?’

‘Lenah Beaudonte,’ he said in response. His voice was thick with an Italian accent. At the base of his neck was a pendant: a silver R inside a circle. ‘I have waited for this.’

Someone who remembered me?

‘You must arm yourself,’ he said. It must have been a trick of the light because even though I blinked a few times, the colour of his eyes was so strange. Were they *silver*?

‘Lenah!’ Tony called from behind me. He walked from the direction of the union. The vampire’s head whipped to Tony. The vampire turned and hopped the fence to the farm. He moved with grace and ease. There was little gravity for him – he jumped to the other side in one leap and within a few paces was in the woods, in the shadows.

‘Wait!’ I cried, following after, but the fence prevented me from catching up. ‘Arm myself against who?!’ I yelled, but there was no answer.

Damn it.

The smell of the sea wafted on to campus in a warm breeze.

Whoever he was, this vampire was gone.

‘Must be on cross-country,’ Tony said. He stepped next to me.

‘Did you recognize that –’ I chose my word very carefully – ‘guy?’ I asked Tony.

‘No. He was fast though. What were you guys talking about?’ He plucked a tomato and rubbed it on his shirt like an apple. He took a bite and wiped the juice from his cheek with the back of his hand.

‘He didn’t say anything to me. He was so strange.’

‘Forget about him – there’s chilli for lunch, and the first of the year is always the best.’

As Tony and I walked, Suleen’s last words came back to me: *There is a revolution. Walk into the sunrise and go back*. I glanced back at the spot where the vampire had stood. Was it possible the revolution Suleen had mentioned was a *vampire* revolution?

‘You’re awfully quiet,’ Tony said as he opened the door to the union.

‘First-day jitters,’ I lied. I wished Vicken were here.

Vicken. The thought of him nearly made me stop walking but I didn’t want to draw any more unnecessary attention to myself in front of Tony. Vicken was my Scottish friend. Vicken had once been a member of my coven. The Aeris had changed that fate and he was able to live out his life in the 1840s as he was meant to, without his soul falling into the world of vampires. I hoped he died an old man. He wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

I would honour Vicken the moment I had the chance. I would do an old vampire ritual, one of respect. *Oh, it’s just an arrow*, he would have said. But it wasn’t *just* an arrow. I’d nearly been hit!

Rhode had pushed me out of the way! This meant that he had been watching

me. He might not have recognized me until he got close, but maybe Rhode had been intrigued by me. Perhaps he thought I seemed familiar. I couldn't afford to get swept away by my feelings about Rhode.

I hadn't even been back on campus twelve hours and already someone had shot an arrow at me and a vampire I didn't recognize had told me to arm myself. Great.

We entered the union and I was overwhelmed again by how familiar it was. But I was more overjoyed by the *food.* Oh my. Pizza. Chinese food. Soup. Salads. *Soda*.

'Lenah! Tony!' Tracy called to us from across the union. She waved and once we had picked out something to eat, Tony and I crossed the union to her table. As we approached, I gripped my tray. There they were, Claudia and Kate – *alive*. Sun had bronzed their skin and the summer had lightened Claudia's hair with almost white streaks.

No one had been murdered. No gruesome death. Claudia and Kate scooted apart to make room for me.

I scanned the seats for Rhode, hoping he'd be eating in the union like a normal Wickham student. I didn't see him anywhere, though there were dozens of crowded tables.

Tony sat down across from me and shovelled in turkey chilli so fast that it rolled down his chin. He ran the tortilla chip along his skin to scoop up the remnants.

'That's disgusting,' Claudia said with a laugh.

'What?' he asked with a shrug.

My love for Tony swelled.

'So this is Claudia, and Kate. And I can see you met our really classy friend, Tony,' Tracy said.

'That must be really good chilli,' I joked.

'It is,' Tony said and more spilled out of his mouth.

'Ooh, I love your accent. We have a British guy here,' Kate said.

'The infamous Rhode,' Tracy said with a roll of her eyes.

'So,' I asked Tracy, 'did you get in?'

'Of course she did,' Claudia said. 'Senior project she'll be singing for the whole upper school.'

I was about to ask what senior project was when a girl passed outside the window. As she did so, she threw a sidelong glance at me. My breath caught. She had blonde cascading ringlets, just like Odette. *No. Odette is dead. That life never happened. It was reversed.* The light reflected off something silver around her neck. A necklace! Perhaps it was the same as the one the vampire at the farm

had been wearing! The girl kept walking. I forced myself to draw a deep breath. *Act normal*. *Don't jump to conclusions.* Both Claudia and Tracy wore silver necklaces with a pendant. I hadn't seen the blonde girl's properly. I was overreacting.

Claudia was laughing so hard at something one of the others had said that she cried. She wiped her cheeks and pointed at Tracy.

'You were the one who made us sing karaoke!' she cried. She held her stomach from laughing so hard.

I tried to concentrate on the conversation but I wondered if Claudia was still interested in portraits as she had been before. In this world, Tony and the Three Piece were friends, as they had not been before.

Fire had said that she didn't think I should tell anyone about my past, but I would do what I *had* to do. Besides, I didn't want people getting involved accidentally. They might get hurt. The last time I purposely left Tony out of my life it got him killed.

Tony burped loudly and scooped more turkey chilli into his mouth.

'Gross!' Kate and Claudia said in unison.

My ally would be a messy Japanese artist who had died for me once a long time ago. But this time I would not let him die. This time I would tell him the truth straight off so he did not have to seek it out behind my back.

I needed Tony on my side.

Chapter 5

That night, an hour after curfew, I tucked the ruby-hilted dagger into my belt and snuck out the window in the laundry room at the end of the corridor. I walked the length of Turner Building to Quartz, the boys' dorm. My intention was first to honour Vicken out on the beach with a simple ritual and then knock on Tony's window. When I turned the corner to head down to the beach, Tony was standing there with a telescope pointed at the sky.

Just as I took a step, a security guard approached him. I pressed my back against the brick wall of the building to stay in the shadows. The guard looked through Tony's telescope and patted him on the shoulder before leaving.

I checked the perimeter again. When there was no sign of the guard, I stepped out and on to the green. I made sure to step loudly so as not to startle Tony.

'Oh, hey there, rule-breaker,' he said. 'You just missed Lenny the night guard. I bet he would have loved to see you. You actually would have given him something to do.'

'It's after curfew for you too,' I replied. I pointed at the sky; I didn't need the telescope. 'That's Ursa Major,' I said.

He dug in his pocket. 'I know that already. I'm studying the stars. I have special approval.'

He held out a curfew extension form stating that Tony Sasaki could be out until midnight.

He adjusted the telescope again. 'You saw my celestial themes. I can't get the whites right.'

'They looked good to me.'

He peered into the telescope's viewfinder. 'Usually the closer I am to the bay, the brighter the stars,' he said. 'The ocean reflects them, gives the white a salty kind of glow. Damn lampposts and emergency call boxes drown out the light. Hey! Want to walk to town beach?' he suggested. 'I need a road buddy. The bay isn't doing the night sky justice tonight.'

I raised my eyebrows at his nerve. 'I don't think your pass will work there.' He laughed loudly, throwing his head back. Man, I had missed that.

‘You’re funny,’ he said.

‘I try,’ I replied, but I was the opposite of funny.

Security cameras had been installed on campus since Justin’s disappearance from Wickham. Tony pointed them out to me.

Town beach was an absolute no for me anyway. It was way too open. Anyone could attack me there. If I wanted to have a private conversation with Tony, it would have to be right here on campus where there were people.

‘Be a rebel,’ Tony said, sensing my hesitation. ‘If I get this right it will kill Claudia in studio. I’d give anything to see her stupid face when Professor Joseph says *I’m* a visionary. She thinks Claudia’s self-portraits are visionary. I’m the one with the talent, Lenah. *Me*.’

His enthusiasm was contagious and I was desperate for him to like me as he had once before.

‘You want to crush poor Claudia Hawthorne?’ I asked.

He dropped his chin to his chest. ‘She’s just so freakin’ good.’

I could speak to Tony on Main Street, and if we went in the direction of town, the restaurants and pub might still be open. Cars drove by often enough. Tony could run back on to campus, or away from me – whatever worked for him, depending on his reaction to the truth. You know, when I told him that I was once a Vampire Queen and killed thousands.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Take me off campus and get me expelled.’

‘Perfect, Len!’

I gasped, but tried not to seem too excited. Tony had called me by my nickname. I loved it and hoped he would use it all the time as he once had.

The quickest way off campus was to walk parallel to the greenhouse and creep through a short stretch of woods to Main Street. I followed behind Tony though I hesitated at the end of Turner and checked the shadows for anyone lurking.

‘What?’ Tony said. ‘Oh . . .’ He nodded. ‘I see what’s happening here.’ He kept nodding like he held all the secrets in the universe and I was the dumbest human alive. ‘Is this your first time sneaking off campus?’

‘Um . . .’

Not the most brilliant of answers, I admit. I stalled and continued searching the woods, not for Justin but for someone who might want to impale me with an arrow. Maybe the mystery archer figured I’d never be so foolish as to leave campus. But with Tony in the moonlight smiling at me, there was no way I could say no to him.

‘So is it?’ he asked again. ‘Is it your first time going AWOL? Did you go to a boarding school before this? Claudia said she heard a rumour you went to a British—’

‘This is my first boarding school,’ I said stopping him before he used more acronyms and expressions I didn’t understand. ‘Don’t need to get kicked out my first week.’

‘Oh, you won’t. We get caught all the time. It’s part of the unofficial Wickham initiation.’

We snuck over the path, kept our backs to the greenhouse and hesitated at the end of the building. The Main Street lamps filtered a pearly glow through the full branches of the Wickham woods. We were close to the stone wall that surrounded campus. I touched the dagger tucked in my belt.

A smile lingered on Tony’s mouth as he tiptoed towards the stone wall ahead. I fell behind to cover him, spinning to check if anyone was tailing us, though the woods truly seemed empty and the wind was light. I wished for my vampire sight, which allowed me to see in infinitesimal detail. The edge of the constellation Pegasus peeked through the breaks in the leaves above. Pegasus always showed me the safest way whether I was a vampire or a human.

I climbed over the six-foot wall and dropped on to Main Street next to Tony. We were pretty close to Lovers Bay Cemetery, which was halfway down Main Street. I inhaled the salty ocean air.

‘Congrats! You’re officially a Wickham student. I’d drink a beer with you on the town beach, but all I brought is my pencil.’

‘I hate beer. And actually,’ I said, tucking my hair behind my ears, ‘I came out tonight to talk to you.’

We were about a hundred and fifty feet from the Wickham gates. If we needed to, we could probably make it back to campus without having to climb the wall a second time.

‘Will you chill? If I had thought you would be this nervous, I wouldn’t have taken you off campus. Note to self: Lenah Beaudonte is a crappy road buddy.’

I checked the length of the stone wall for anyone else that might be lurking about.

‘Are you OK?’

‘I need to tell you something.’

‘You need to talk to me?’ Tony said. ‘In the middle of the night? Oh . . .’ He shuffled his feet on the sidewalk. ‘Because I’m with . . . kind of, I mean it’s not official or anything, but I’m with Tracy.’

‘No, you dimwit, I don’t want to date you.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Come on, road buddy,’ I said, and led him away from the beach and back towards the Wickham gates. He stopped me by touching my shoulder.

‘Beach is the other way,’ he said.

Damn it. Being close to Wickham was more important than going near that beach. I was just going to have to get straight to the point. Tony believed in the supernatural. He told me so when we first met. But that was a lifetime ago.

'So . . . are you ever gonna talk or are you just gonna look like you're working out a calculus problem?'

I threw him my 'Tony, you're an idiot' look, but he didn't recognize it. I hadn't been able to give him that look in *so* long.

'All right. Here goes. This might seem weird,' I said, 'but do you ever feel that perhaps there's more to the world? Like ghosts or werewolves?' I started with the simplest question I could muster.

Tony leaned a hand against the stone wall. 'Is this because I'm studying the stars? Because I don't really believe in astrology.'

An unnaturally cool wind rustled the branches above us, shaking some of the leaves to the ground.

As usual, Tony's hat was on backwards. He must have seen how serious I was because he frowned and said, 'What do you mean? Ghosts or werewolves? Be specific.'

'Well, both actually. Perhaps there are, um . . .' I fished for something viable, a gateway to the conversation I really wanted to have. 'Ghosts, shape-shifters, *vampires*, you know, things like that. Supernatural creatures.'

'Yeah, I guess. I haven't really thought about it.'

'But you think it's possible.'

'Sure,' he said, frowning again. 'Is this really what you wanted to talk about?'

The wind whipped again, icier this time. Oh no. A sudden chill or drop in temperature was usually a sign that very powerful magic was being performed close by. We were in the middle of Lovers Bay Main Street. Down the opposite end, away from the shops and cafe, the beach met a small parking lot.

The wind blew again and a branch snapped. I pulled Tony towards me just in time; the bough fell directly where he had been standing. Wide trees lined each side of Main Street and their great branches made a tunnel of leaves. We would have to stay in the centre of the road. I glanced back at the Lovers Bay pub and the small figures standing outside. I could barely make out their silhouettes.

We were alone.

'What the hell?' Tony said, looking up at the tree in disbelief. 'Good reflexes, Lenah.'

Something moved down near the beach. I squinted. Was it . . . fog? I gasped. I hated being right.

'What?' Tony asked.

Liquorice-coloured clouds unfurled over the ground. The clouds slithered with

purpose. As they moved, the light from one street lamp was extinguished.

And then another.

Each light clicked off as the cloud crawled over the ground towards Tony and me.

I grabbed the front of Tony's shirt. 'Climb over the stone wall,' I said. 'Go. Now.'

'What?'

'I said, go!' Tony didn't budge.

'What is that?' he asked, squinting down the dark street. My hand was still gripping his shirt.

'Run,' I pulled Tony hard. 'Run!' I cried.

The clouds swirled over and over like a wave rolling backwards. It was protecting something, shielding an object at its centre.

That strange black cloud grew even bigger until in seconds it was the size of a modern car. It was ushering someone forward, someone who hovered deep within those midnight fibres of cloud.

'Yeah . . .' Tony said. He finally registered just how serious this had become. 'Yeah, let's run.'

He grabbed my hand and we ran. We needed to get to people. To crowds.

We only made it a few feet before we had to stop short.

Two male vampires jumped over the stone wall and on to Main Street. They immediately corralled us, blocking our way. Still hand in hand, Tony and I attempted to run around them, but these vampires were quick, trained.

We spun and found ourselves facing the black cloud directly behind us. It rotated in one spot over and over. An icy gust blew my hair around my face, and Tony's hat flew off his head. He didn't try to run or chase it. The smoky clouds dissipated like a low-lying fog.

The charcoal-tinted tendrils of the clouds unfurled and evaporated away. Justin stepped out from the centre of the darkness. He spread his fingers wide and held them taut. His hard eyes locked on mine. The last of the black clouds lowered him to the ground and faded away.

'Justin?' Tony said, disbelief in his voice.

I just stood there, blinking stupidly. Justin's porcelain skin was unnaturally smooth and waxy. He cocked his head and even that movement was cat-like, manipulative. 'You're still beautiful,' he purred, his voice trying to lure me in. 'Just as I hoped. The medieval world hasn't ruined your looks completely.'

His features were so symmetrical that it was eerie. His good looks that had intoxicated me as a human seemed surreal now.

'Justin, what happened? Where have you been?' Tony took a step forward.

Justin's head whipped towards him with a robotic snap, his lips parted and his fangs sliding down.

'What *are* you?' Tony asked. The two vampire henchmen grabbed his arms. 'Hey, stop it!' Tony struggled but the vampires were too strong. They forced him to the ground in a headlock.

I had to do something. *Anything.* I whipped out the dagger even though I didn't have the advantage.

'Give me a break,' Justin said.

At a casual wave of his hand, my dagger flew into the air and clattered on the street. I lifted my chin; he wouldn't scare me away just yet.

'Tony Sasaki,' Justin said, but he was looking at me. 'Pathetic that you would find him again. We all know what happened the last time, Lenah.'

I wouldn't let that happen. Not this time. I would die before they hurt Tony, or worse, transformed him into a vampire.

Justin took a step closer to me and I backed away. Fire's necklace seemed to warm at the base of my throat, reminding me of my secret power. I would throw it the second Tony's life was at risk.

'Let me go!' Tony cried. One of Justin's vampires had his boot on Tony's back.

Justin leaned into me, and the hundreds of times he had wrapped his arms around my body were replaced with a tight clutch as his cold fingers gripped my wrist.

'Don't hurt him; he hasn't done anything,' I said. I tried to rip my arm away again, but Justin's fingers were like a vice.

Tony cried out in pain.

'Tell those thugs not to hurt him!' I yelled.

Justin yanked me towards him. I appraised his face and shook my head a little in disbelief. His fangs had retracted, but he did not seem human to me. Justin's eyes had been green, but as a vampire the colour seemed artificial. His skin, that had once been smooth, was frozen and buffed away. The little scar on his chin was gone too. He had got it when his brother threw a fork at him when he was eight. The human history had been polished out when the vampire took over. The freckles were gone. Even the three holes at the tops of his ears were sealed.

'Why are you looking at me like that? Aren't you happy to see me?' he asked, and I pulled back from his new features.

'You killed Suleen,' I said. His blood stained my bracelet and I would *not* forget why I wore that talisman.

'Come on, Lenah. Suleen? That old crazy?' He laughed at the sky.

That old crazy? I pushed my hands against Justin's chest, fighting against his

grasp. I wanted to kick him and bring him to the ground. My arms burned from the strain of pushing away so hard.

'I'm too strong . . .' he said with a hollow chuckle. I stopped fighting. Justin watched me with that eerie pleasure that vampires have once they know they can control you.

'You *destroyed* Suleen. He died in my arms,' I said. The grief was still too close to me.

I couldn't turn my head in time. Justin kissed me, pressing his lips against mine. His mouth tasted metallic and rotten. He had feasted on blood, and recently.

He threw me to the ground and the sting of the fall rattled me from my backside up through my neck. What the hell? Did he want to kiss me or attack me? I refused to cry out. I wouldn't give Justin the satisfaction.

His eyebrows met and he sneered. 'How dare you be disgusted with me? I can read your feelings. What the hell is wrong with you? One bite and we'll be together just as it should have been before Rhode came back. This is what *you* wanted.'

'I never wanted this for you. You're mad.'

Tony half raised himself from the ground, but one of the vampires shoved him back down with his foot.

'How did you stay like this?' I asked.

'I thought you could answer that,' he said, and crossed his arms over his chest. He seemed taller somehow than when he had been human.

'I don't know any better than you do. Fine. I'm here. Summoned from the medieval world just as you planned. Now what do you want from me?' I asked.

Justin's smile fell and he yanked me up from the ground.

'What do I *want* from you? I became this, learned how to manipulate the elements and build a coven, *for you*.'

'But I was sent back, Justin. I was sent back from here. I was never planning to return to the modern day. I was certainly never becoming a vampire again.'

He grabbed my arm and dragged me under the artificial light of the street lamp.

I had once loved the full pout of his lips and the sprinkle of freckles on his nose. There had to be some shred of his personality left inside. Somewhere. He couldn't have become so devoid of emotion so quickly. It usually took years for a vampire to go this mad. The mind waned over time, not immediately.

I tried to reason with him. 'Why did you think that I would want to be a vampire again after what you saw me go through?' I asked. 'Being a vampire nearly destroyed me.'

He took a moment to answer.

‘Because *I* am,’ he said gently.

I didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know the words to choose.

He searched for something in my face. He said very slowly, ‘You . . .’ his words were quiet, ‘don’t *love* me, do you?’

I weighed my options. If I lied, he would be able to tell through his extrasensory perception, just as he had when he kissed me. I closed my eyes.

‘I’ll always love you,’ I said. ‘In some way.’

He dropped me, and my already scabbed knuckles scraped against the asphalt. I met Tony’s eyes; one of the vampires pressed a hand on his face, pushing him against the road. Tony didn’t dare speak a word, but his eyes were wide.

Justin sneered. ‘Do all women lie? Is this some kind of game? You loved me! Odette told me. She said that if I became a vampire, and you were in love with me, then you would be forced to love me forever.’

Suddenly I understood. He had been under the control of that mind rune when Odette had told him that. He didn’t know that I would only love him forever if we were *both* vampires and in love at the same time. I had loved Rhode when Justin was turned, *and* I was human. It would have been impossible.

He didn’t understand this distinct difference because he didn’t understand vampire law.

‘You believed I would come back and be in love with you? No one has bothered to tell you the truth of this vampire law for three years?’

Justin bent down, baring his fangs. I recoiled out of instinct. His fangs were long and thin, very sharp. A hot ache rippled down my hip from where he had dropped me, but I gritted my teeth and didn’t break eye contact.

‘What *vampire law*?’ he said.

He lifted me again, holding me close. His grip was so strong my lungs were constricted.

‘I can’t breathe,’ I coughed out.

‘Let-’er-go,’ Tony grunted, his voice muffled.

‘You won’t distract me with logistics, Lenah. Enough games. Out with it,’ Justin demanded with a shake.

He was desperate to believe that I loved him. He couldn’t accept that he had constructed these plans, perhaps even murdered Suleen to get me to come back, and it was all for nothing. I did not love him. Justin squeezed me to him again. I could only draw in little puffs of air.

‘Tell me!’ he screamed, shaking me. ‘Tell me you love me!’

‘I can’t,’ I barely choked out.

He stopped shaking me and in his eyes were a thousand phrases I understood:

I’m sorry. I’m not done loving you. I’m frightened of this power. Oh yes, I understood this torture. He shook his head and took a few steps back as he released me. I stepped away, catching my breath. Vampire love was the respite from a sunny day that one cannot enjoy. It silenced the tick of the clock.

Love.

Love.

Love.

That was the freedom. And he could not have it from me. A vampire loves the one that has reached his heart unconditionally. He cannot stop it. It is forever. Love was a vampire’s one respite. The pain and grief can be overwhelming. If a vampire falls in love, that love will last until the end of time. It is the only freedom from the bloodlust, the only way to silence the endless tick of the clock.

And it had happened to Justin Enos.

He looked me over, head to toe. Suleen was right; Justin had to be controlled. He had extraordinary power and now his bitterness would know no limit. I didn’t know how to stop him, let alone kill him as Suleen and Fire had expressly told me to do. He closed in on me again, and I backed away, almost to the stone wall.

‘Enough of this,’ he said.

Justin grabbed me again. His bared fangs were razor sharp, as dangerous as mine had ever been.

‘Don’t,’ I whispered with a shudder. His nostrils flared, he drew back his shoulders . . . I knew what was coming. Vampires are made through a bite, followed by the sacrifice of life. The ritual under the moonlight was the final and most importance piece. Justin would bite me. He would attempt to drain me completely. Only in my death would the transformation begin.

He gripped my bicep so viciously that I winced. His rancid breath oozed on to the nape of my neck and his fangs grazed the skin. This was it. He brought his head back in preparation. His whole head jerked forward as he tried to bite, but Justin stumbled back, as though someone had pushed him on the forehead and away from me.

‘What the . . .’ Justin said.

I held my breath, ready for the pinch of his fangs and the puncture of my skin. He tried again and again, each time he boomeranged backward. For some reason, the razor points could not stab me.

‘What are you doing?’ he screamed, and threw me from him. I stumbled back and immediately ran my hand over my neck. There were no holes and no injury. ‘How are you stopping me?’

Justin slapped a hand around my neck and squeezed. Just as the rush of blood swept through my ears, he let me go with a hiss.

Justin stared at his palm.

‘Cold,’ he whispered, looking from my neck to his hand. ‘You’re ice cold.’

The vampire holding Tony walked to Justin’s side. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked him.

‘I’m fine. Get away from me,’ he spat.

Even though he was free, Tony remained immobile.

I touched my neck again. He had been going to bite my neck, not to feed, but to *transform.*

‘Why is she cold?’ Justin asked the vampire. ‘Why?’

The vampire sputtered in response, desperate to help his new leader.

But I knew.

‘He can’t tell you,’ I said. My glands hurt when I spoke; I would have bruises, and soon. ‘He can’t be older than, what, seventeen?’

‘Quiet!’ Justin yelled.

‘You can’t hurt me, Justin,’ I said. I knew I was taunting him, but I needed the upper hand and I wanted him to know it. His eyes snapped up to meet mine. ‘Maybe when you wore Odette’s rune necklace you could hurt me because the powerful rune gave you strength. But even that would have weakened over time. When you’re a vampire you can’t mortally hurt or kill those you love. It’s *law.* It’s why you can’t make me into a vampire. The rules even apply to you, Justin.’

Justin suddenly jerked back and cried out. At first I thought he was reacting to what I had said, until I saw an arrow protruding from his arm.

‘Damn it!’ He ripped it out and tossed it to the ground.

I searched for the archer in the darkness. Another arrow flew through the sky from the direction of Wickham campus. It landed in the chest of the vampire guarding Tony. He cried out, freeing Tony. Whoever shot him had missed the heart, maybe on purpose.

‘Go. Now,’ Justin said to the vampire closest to him.

I helped Tony up. He was trembling.

The vampires didn’t hesitate to obey Justin’s command, and the sound of their heels on the pavement echoed in the silent street.

Faster than any vampire I had ever seen, Justin turned and ran after his men. Odette had used runes and magic to make herself faster than the average vampire. Justin was *quicker* than that.

‘We should get inside,’ I said, picking up the discarded arrow at my feet. Its end was bright red and the tip was coated in Justin’s blood. It was hard to see in the dark, but it looked as if it was made from some sort of black stone. I would need to see in the daylight but it appeared to be . . . onyx? That would be a very foolish stone to use. Strange.

This was a second arrow with a red-feathered tail that I had seen in twelve hours. I ran my finger along the fletching. Arrows, at least when I used to shoot them, were made with real feathers. This was something modern and synthetic. Tony limped as we walked but said nothing. I found his baseball hat lying near my dagger on the sidewalk. He put his hat on backwards and we headed to campus. It took a little longer with Tony's tender ankle, but we climbed over the stone wall and on to school ground undetected. He remained silent as we snuck to our dorms.

As I gripped the arrow, a wound throbbed on my middle finger. I lifted my hand – a jagged cut ran from the nail almost to the wrist. I shook it out and told myself to ignore the throb at my hip too. My knuckles were sore from the fall on Main Street and from burying Suleen the day before.

I couldn't fall apart from flesh wounds. Too many important questions flooded my mind. Who shot that arrow? What did Justin think he was going to accomplish by bringing me back?

Tony kept his gaze to the ground and his mouth set in a firm line. When we met first time around, Tony had been relentless in seeking out the truth about my past. He was not the kind to let something slide once it became interesting. He was dogged to a fault; back then, my coven had killed him by biting him hundreds of times.

This time I owed him the truth from the beginning. This beginning.

I owed him respect.

And I owed him my life.

We walked to the back of Turner, where Tony packed up his telescope. He hobbled to his window and we snuck in as noiselessly as we could. Tony still hadn't said anything when he shut the window behind us. Tonight's answers would be hard for him to hear. Some of the questions he would ask, I wouldn't be able to answer.

I knew only one fact – Justin Enos could not hurt me.

Because he still loved me.

Chapter 6

Vicken Clough had been able to clean wounds with just a pocketknife. He'd been able to redraw maps of entire buildings from memory. If he was here now, he would have helped me fight Justin; he would have helped me make a plan. Instead I sat down on Tony's bed and cleaned my cut with alcohol and antiseptic.

I would have to find another time to perform my goodbye ritual for Vicken.

Tony paced and kept shaking his hands out as if he was prepping for a battle. The salty air licked through the cracked window, wafting away the sterile scent of the antiseptic. 'First, did you know that would happen when we went out on to Main Street tonight?' he asked.

'No, road buddy,' I said, making sure to emphasize the expression.

'Right, yes, excursion was my idea. Moving on.'

'I suspected something might happen, but I thought it worth the risk,' I confessed.

'Worth the risk?'

'To spend time with you. To tell you the truth.'

'About Justin?' Tony asked.

'One thing at a time,' I said gently.

'Do you know . . .' Tony picked his word carefully, '*what* he is?'

After a few minutes, his limp had disappeared, but the scrape on Tony's face still blossomed with fresh blood. He grabbed a paintbrush from his desk and held it in his hand like a dagger. 'You have to tell me what the hell happened to Justin. And why he was so fast. And why he had fangs. People don't have *fangs*.'

'You should put that down,' I said, gesturing to the paintbrush. 'Let me clean the cut on your face.'

'It makes me feel better to hold it,' he said. He touched his fingers to the cut. I placed the arrow down on his desk, intending to wipe it clean and examine its construction when I had the chance. 'Start talking, Lenah,' Tony said. 'Please.'

'I'm not sure where to start,' I said quietly.

'How about you start with what you know?' Tony collapsed on to his bed. 'No

– *how* you know.'

I cast my eyes to the floor, hoping to find the right way to recount this horrible tale. Did I start back in the 1400s when Rhode made me a vampire? Did Tony need to know about Rhode? Did I tell him about the first time I came to Wickham?

'He had fangs,' Tony breathed. 'Like in the movies. Like a . . .' He fished for the word. 'Like a . . . *vampire*.'

'Yes . . .' was all I could say. I was happy that Tony was doing some of the work for me. 'Yes, he is a vampire.'

He put his head in his hands, holding the paintbrush between his fingers.

'There are no such things as vampires. But I saw it. I did see it, didn't I?' Tony said to the floor.

I nodded and began slowly. 'What would you say if I told you that I have been here before? In another time, but like this one. An alternate version of this world.'

Tony's head snapped up.

'What would you say to that?' I pressed.

'Like a parallel universe? I would say, go to the infirmary. But keep talking.'

I told him my story. I told him I was once a powerful and vicious Vampire Queen who lived for more than five hundred years, ruling all vampires and killing thousands of humans. After my time as queen Rhode had given me the greatest gift possible – my life back, *my soul*. I'd been allowed to come to Wickham and live once more as a human.

'Rhode!' Tony cried. 'Rhode too?'

'Rhode can't remember,' I said softly. 'It's complicated.'

I paced while explaining the ritual that Rhode had performed for me. I was vague about telling Tony his original role in the story because I didn't want him to know how he died. He didn't need to know and that violent history had been erased.

I explained the rest: I had gone back to the medieval world because Fire had allowed me to change everything. Justin, who had been turned into a vampire by Odette, was *supposed* to change back into a human too, but for some mysterious reason . . . had not.

'He somehow linked to this new reality from that old one.'

I finished by explaining that I had come back now because Suleen, my greatest protector besides Rhode, was dead.

I held up my wrist and pointed at the rag tied round it.

'This is Suleen's blood. In the vampire world we wear fabric bloodied by our fallen.'

Tony scooted over for me to sit down. He felt the fabric of my bracelet between his fingers.

'Why?'

'Until justice is done. For some vampires, that can be a long time.'

Tony dropped his hand from my bloodied bracelet and exhaled heavily through his nose.

'This Fire woman – she wouldn't tell you why Justin became King Psychopath?' he said after a long silence.

I shook my head. 'There are only a few things of which I am certain. There is a revolution of some sort in the vampire world, whatever Suleen meant by that. Justin is involved, though I'm not sure how. Either way, I have to stop him. Once I do that, I can go home.'

'Home?' Tony pulled back from me.

'Yes.'

'To the Middle Ages?'

I nodded.

Tony had his thinking face on again. He suddenly lifted his paintbrush into the air.

'Lenah, this is a seriously intergalactic, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* kind of weird. You're talking about parallel worlds!'

'I know,' I cried, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. I stood up. 'This afternoon, approximately two hours after I stepped on campus, someone shot an arrow at my head. That man you saw today – the one who ran from me at the farm? – he is also a vampire.'

'OK. So Justin couldn't take you tonight because . . .'

'Once a vampire is in love they are bound to that person, forever,' I said. 'Now that I'm back, Rhode is Justin's number-one target. Second would be you. In fact, if Justin hadn't been shot by that arrow, he probably would have taken you tonight.'

'Me?' Tony's voice cracked.

'You were my best friend once upon a time. Justin remembers that.'

Tony paced again, paintbrush clenched in his fist. 'That explains the hugging when you met me.'

'I know it's a lot to take in,' I replied.

There was a little click as he finally put down the paintbrush on top of his dresser. Maybe he didn't believe me. Maybe he would kick me out and send me back to my room. No. He had seen Justin, and there was no denying what we had experienced on Main Street.

'It also explains why I . . .'

‘What?’

‘Why I feel –’ his cheeks reddened – ‘close to you. Like we’re best friends.’

‘That’s because we are,’ I said. Tony raised his mouth in a little tight-lipped smile.

He cleared his throat. ‘Three years ago Rhode showed up here as a student, I remember because every girl went nuts. That same week, Justin went missing. If there really is a rip in time, which is what you seem to be saying, then the timing here makes sense.’ He nodded to himself. ‘It all fits.’ His tone was sombre, accepting. He sat down next to me on the bed. ‘So what happens now?’

‘I don’t know. Justin killed Suleen to summon me to the modern world. Suleen summoned *me* to take down Justin. I have no idea how to do that.’ I leaned my back against the wall and crossed my legs at the ankles. ‘Now that he knows I’m not in love with him, his plans will change. To what, I do not know.’

‘Who do you think shot the arrow tonight?’ Tony asked.

‘I’m pretty sure it’s the same type of arrow as the one fired at me this morning. Clearly they don’t belong to Justin and his coven. But I don’t think they’re on my side either. Did I mention how close it was to my head?’

‘Oh good. Someone *else* wants you dead.’ He shook his head in disbelief.

‘Will you promise me something?’ I asked.

‘You mean besides not telling anyone of your secret identity or that Justin Enos is *not* missing but is in fact some freak vampire. Oh, and Rhode was a vampire too. Sure thing. What else should we add to the list?’

I nudged him with my shoulder.

‘Seriously,’ he said. ‘What?’

‘Promise me you won’t look for Justin.’

Tony pulled back, surprised.

‘But what if we can—’ he started.

‘No,’ I said sharply, standing up. ‘You stay far away from him until we know the facts. Just trust me. Trust me that I will do whatever I can to find out and I won’t leave you out of any of it. Please? Promise me you won’t seek him out.’

‘I promise. But . . . do you think he can be . . . like you? Turned human again?’

I wanted more than anything to bring Justin back, not kill him as Suleen had asked. But it would be virtually impossible to change him into a human. The ritual that Rhode and I had performed was older than any vampire I had ever known, and incredibly complex. And yet . . .

A thought nibbled at the back of my mind.

‘What? What are you thinking?’ Tony asked. ‘You have a look. Like you’re going to punch something.’

‘Justin wasn’t supposed to stay a vampire. Everything – including him – was supposed to change when I went back to my original life. Maybe there’s a way to make him human again *other* than the ritual or the power of the Aeris. Maybe there is some way to, you know, break the chains of vampirism.’ I slouched and threw my hands up. ‘I don’t know how, or if it’s even possible. I’m just thinking out loud.’

‘I like this. Positive, optimistic. No doom or gloom.’

I hoped I was right. I also hoped it would be enough to keep Tony from searching for Justin so that he’d remain on campus where I could see him.

‘I can keep an eye on Rhode,’ he said. ‘You know, see if Justin is tailing him.’

‘I have to admit that’s exactly what I hoped.’

‘So let’s clarify. You’re sure Justin can’t hurt you?’ Tony checked. I sat down on the floor across from his bed.

‘No. He can’t. Not mortally anyway.’

It was vampire law: Justin could not hurt me because he loved me. But I did not love him, and bitter vampires were unpredictable and angry. They liked to destroy for fun; it eased their agony. My life as a ruler of vampires had educated me on this very fact.

Tony finally cleaned the cut on his face with an antiseptic wipe.

‘Here, let me help you,’ I said. As I dabbed at Tony’s skin, a certainty settled over me. Even though Justin’s love for me protected my person, he would do everything in his power to destroy those I cared for most.

I awoke with the glimmer of dawn, long before the rest of the campus was awake. While under the warmth of the covers in my dorm room, I held my palm out and trailed my fingertips along the calluses that ran over my palm. Working in the orchard had hardened my body. Even though I was travelling between times, my body carried the weight of my choices. *Calluses are good. In case I need to wield those swords sooner than I’d like.*

The memory of Suleen’s dying eyes, wide with fear, came to me. I sighed and got up, walking to the bay window. The campus trees swayed in the breeze, but unlike the trees at home they were not top-heavy with apples. I missed my sister and hoped that Fire was right, that when this was all over she could bring me back to the exact moment I had left. It sent goose bumps over me imagining Genevieve calling my name over and over in an empty orchard lane. *Remember why you are here. You are here to protect your friends. Protect Rhode.* I reached up to the tender spots on my neck where Justin had almost bitten me.

Various memories of Justin as a human boy came to me unbidden.

We stand outside Quartz dorm; the rain pelts the grass.

‘You look really sad,’ he says.

‘Do I?’

Justin lifts his chin up so the rain smacks his face even more directly. ‘Are you?’ he asks, still looking up.

I nod once. ‘A little.’

Justin had cared. He had been so gentle. He wasn’t bothered by the complexity of my vampire life, he had just wanted to get to know me.

‘You’re up early,’ Tracy said, interrupting the memory. She got up from her bed, shook her hair out and swept it back into a long ponytail.

‘Couldn’t sleep,’ I said.

She walked towards the bathroom with her shower kit.

‘No reason to be nervous. It’s just school.’

‘No,’ I said with a small smile. ‘No reason at all.’ Before morning assembly, I walked the long length of the Wickham farm to the barn. I had hidden the arrow from last night in my book bag. I followed the path, past the oversized pumpkins, past the tomatoes, and stopped at the spot where Rhode had pushed me to the ground. I just hoped no one was aiming an arrow at me today.

A maintenance Jeep pulled down to the last plot of the farm but otherwise it was empty. I reached up to the hole yesterday’s arrow had made in the barn. I untucked the arrow from last night and stuck the end into the hole. It fit exactly. Removing it, I examined the black stone tip. It was unmistakable – onyx.

I knew from previous experience that I could bury onyx in the ground but it would curse the place it touched. Onyx was dangerous that way. It sucked in the lifeblood, retained the power of the magic of any blood it touched. All the spells that Justin had ever performed would be stored in this stone now, because his blood had seeped into it. Whoever shot that arrow understood this. This stone would give whoever had it a blueprint of the magic Justin was performing.

I would have to burn the stone; it was the only way to release the spells and negative energy trapped inside. *Later*, I thought. *Not out in the open like this*. I packed it up and headed to the union for coffee. I would ask Rhode in assembly, first thing, about his arrow.

‘You have that look again,’ Tony said, sitting down beside me at assembly.

‘What?’

‘Like you might bite somebody.’

‘Interesting choice of words.’

I made sure to soften my face and tried to smile as the headmistress corralled the teachers together at the front of the auditorium. Yesterday Rhode had distinctly said the arrow wasn’t a Wickham one, which begged the question that

had bothered me all night – who was that damned archer?

Even as a vampire, Justin was smart. He had learned or had found someone to teach him how to manipulate the elements. That was clear by his ease handling those black clouds. Justin's confidence, which had once attracted me, had become exaggerated with his transformation. Charisma comes with a dark side, and in the vampire state that dark side becomes the *only* side.

You . . . don't love me, do you?

I pushed Justin's words out of my head. I didn't want *that* Justin lingering in my mind; I would have to deal with him directly soon enough. Where the *hell* was Rhode?

He did me a favour – and walked in.

He sat in the front row next to some guys in the upper school that I did not recognize. He gestured with his hands and smiled brightly. I settled into my seat. He almost fell out of his chair laughing at someone. Wow. None of the grimacing unhappiness or furrowed eyebrows of old. A carefree young man with his whole future ahead of him.

A future that now was in danger.

'There's Rhode,' Tracy whispered. She had sat down on the other side of me. 'Ridiculous, right?'

'I'm hotter than him,' Tony said, leaning towards me on the other side. Tracy patted him on the hand.

'Sure you are, Paint-Boy.' Catching sight of his face, she did a double take. 'Hey . . .' she said, leaning across me and taking Tony's chin by her fingers. She turned his head from side to side. 'Where did you get that scratch?'

'I fell,' he said with a shrug. 'Holding my portfolio. I tripped.'

Good lie.

Tracy shook her head with a bemused smile. Tony's clumsiness was clearly endearing.

'Typical,' she said.

Headmistress Williams stood behind the podium and began her 'first day of school' speech. Rhode kept his back straight, listening to her words, without once looking around for me. How strange to be living in a universe where my soulmate did not remember me.

Once assembly ended, the mass exodus of students leaving the hall allowed Tony and me to speak privately. Ahead, by the door, a couple of girls talked to Rhode, toying flirtatiously with their hair. I wouldn't have minded ripping it from their heads.

'You're doing the "I wanna bite you" face again,' Tony said. He glanced at

Tracy, who was huddled close to Kate and Claudia. They walked out of assembly and on to the quad.

'I'm here to protect him,' I said. I *really* didn't like those girls talking to Rhode. Especially, the brunette with long legs. She touched Rhode's shoulder, letting her hand linger a bit too long.

'OK, Crazy,' Tony said. 'Whatever you say. But promise me, no more dagger eyes, OK? I'm going to the library.'

'For what?'

'I want to find out more about people who can use the elements. Manipulate water, fire, you know.'

'I really doubt you'll find much in the library here,' I replied, still focused on the brunette who was now trailing her fingers from Rhode's shoulder to his wrist.

'Justin said that Sully guy used the elements.'

'There's a distinction. Suleen was the oldest vampire in existence.'

'You said those Hollow dudes are old too.'

Tony's mention of the Hollow Ones distracted me from my petty jealous fit. It didn't seem natural to hear their name coming out of his mouth. He was involved now, just as I had wished, and with that came the fear that he would be hurt.

We stepped outside the auditorium and I slipped on some sunglasses to shield the harsh sunlight. Tony kept watch on Tracy, who stood further out on the quad with Kate and Claudia.

'There has to be something somewhere about why vampires choose to manipulate the elements,' Tony continued.

'They do it to feel closer to nature. Most learn to do it when they've stood outside the rotation of the world for too long. Imagine the control they experience when they can make the wind bend to their will. It makes them feel that they can be masters of their lives.'

Tony blinked at me. 'OK . . . well, I guess that settles that.' He shook his head, seeming to recharge with enthusiasm. 'Still, a bit of research – it can't hurt, right?' Tony suddenly raised his voice by about thirty decibels. 'And that's when I said, "Hell, no. I will *not* go out with you. I like someone else, *OK*?"'

Tracy stood next to me.

'Yes, well, you turned her down amicably,' I said, going with it.

'Someone asked *you* out?' Tracy asked as we walked on to the pathway.

'Don't act so surprised. It happens all the time,' Tony protested.

We walked across the quad with ten minutes before our first class. I scanned for Rhode. It nearly bowled me over to see him standing beneath the shade of a tree alone. He looked up from his hands and stared at me *hard*. As usual, the

beauty in his blue eyes almost knocked me backwards. He took a step in my direction.

'Um,' was all I could get out.

'Is Rhode coming to talk to you?' Tracy said, and gripped my arm. I flinched from the residual pain of where Justin had wrapped his cold fingers around my flesh the night before. 'We'll give you some space,' Tracy went on, and pulled at Tony's arm.

'Hey!' he said, clearly not wanting to be taken away.

'Morning,' Rhode said to me.

This synthesis of Rhode, the dark, mysterious, always-knowing-more-than-me Rhode, was mixed with this modern boy wearing a collared shirt and jeans. I wanted to scream, 'Don't you know you were once a knight?! Tuck in your shirt!'

'Are you doing OK? After your near-death experience?' he asked.

If only he knew . . .

And *OK*? When did Rhode ever say 'OK'?

He chuckled, trying to make light. I basked in the surprise of seeing him smile at me.

'It's not every day a hunter's arrow is shot at my head,' I managed to get out.

Rhode raised his eyebrows. 'A *hunter's* arrow. Impressive.'

Rhode was flirting with me.

'Well, I don't catch them as they fly through the air – not like some people I know.'

'I hardly caught it in mid-air. It hit the building first,' he said.

I had to stay focused. I needed the details of the arrow. 'Yesterday, you said that the arrow wasn't a Wickham team arrow.'

Rhode stiffened. 'I did?' he said, crossing his arms.

'Yes. You said the—'

'Forget that. Massively stupid comment. Of course it's a Wickham arrow. Someone probably misfired, that's all. What's your first class?' he asked.

'French,' I replied allowing him to change the subject.

'Isn't that something? Me too. What happened to your finger?' he asked, and pointed at my shoddy Band Aid job.

'Not sure. Caught it on something.' *Or hurt it in a fight with a murderous lunatic.*

'Guess I'll have to watch out for you.'

My cheeks warmed and I prayed he wouldn't see me blush. I couldn't be so obvious.

'So if you know so much about archery, do you shoot?' He kept pace with me,

stride for stride.

‘No. Not at all,’ I said. ‘Never shot an arrow in my life.’

‘Want me to teach you? Tomorrow. On the archery field.’

Hathersage, England, at target practice.

Rhode’s hands on mine, my back presses against his stomach as the sunset bleeds over the rolling hills. He holds my hands steady, the bow vibrates, and we’re about to let the arrow go . . .

‘Definitely,’ I said.

We reached French class, but Rhode hesitated at the door.

‘*Après vous*,’ he said.

Chapter 7

When a vampire is made, the countdown begins. A countdown to madness. The mind is all that remains active in the vampire body. The senses go, the ability to feel happiness and joy – those go too. No one knows if the soul remains, deep down and hidden.

The mind wanes slowly.

Like polished silver tarnishing.

Even the most brilliant shine will blacken over time.

12 January, 1725, Hathersage, England – the years of the Vampire Queen

The hour was early – just past sunset. As a vampire queen I spent my nights lying in bed, ruminating over the moments in my life when I had been most happy. Meeting Rhode, falling in love, moments with my family, dancing with Rhode at countless balls. I sat up in bed. Outside the window, flecks of snow whipped past. The house was utterly silent. It was a house of the dead. I listened to this melancholy silence as I tiptoed barefoot down the long darkened hallway.

I stepped out of the back door, immune to the icy stones of the terrace, past the tiny cemetery where a coating of snow lined the tops of the tombstones. I descended the steep hill that abutted my home. I had a very clear destination. The land veered to the right and I followed it. My white sleeping gown skirted over the frozen grass.

I walked until I reached a small river at the foot of another hill. The water swirled and curled though the darkened valleys of Hathersage. The river crept by and the evening cast snowy light on to the rocks and branches. I stepped down the embankment, my feet squished into the mud. The gooey consistency made me sink lower into the ground. I stepped into the running water.

I must remember this date. I wiggled my toes in the current. As I crossed to the middle of the water, it deepened to my ankles, and then to my knees. I stepped through from one side of the river to the other. Back and forth, back and forth. The pebbles and rocks dug at the bottom of my feet, but no, it was most definite:

My sense of touch was gone.

I dropped my gown so the water soaked through the hem. The icicles on the trees hung in sharp, dewy spears. I stopped pacing the river and lay down in that shallow stream. There wasn't really enough water to float, but I arched my back, trying anyway. I submerged myself to the tip of my nose. Flat discs of ice floated past my eyes. Hours . . .

Passed.

The current would never bite at my skin again. The churning of the silt would never circle over my toes, nor would the rushing, splashing or bubbling water.

It was over.

Through the spaces between the branches, the stars dimmed – sunrise approached. I waded out of the water and headed back home up the hill.

The sky had turned a lighter shade of purple. Atop the hill in the distance, my great house came into view. I stopped. Next to me, at the end of the long lane leading to the house, Rhode's longbows sat in a pile.

I'd never shot an arrow before, but now I picked up a bow and loaded one. I found the target in the distance, the black bullseye, and focused. My hair, which was frozen now in thick cords of ice, lifted off my shoulders. I had seen Rhode do this countless times. Raise your right elbow, find your target, shoot, hit, he had said. With a snap, I released the arrow. I did it again and again. *Thump, thump, thump* – the arrows sailed through the air.

It took me two hundred tries to hit the bullseye. After that, every single arrow went home. The stars travelled over the curve of the sky until it lightened from purple to pink. I hadn't been out for the sunrise in so long; it was more dangerous than the sun at midday. Dawn's light could mean death for the inexperienced vampire. I pierced the bullseye again as a yellow light broke over the rolling hills.

'Is this where you've been?' Rhode asked from behind me.

I let an arrow fly. *Whap* – right into the centre.

'Lenah, it will be sunrise in moments.'

I bent over and picked up another arrow. Rhode grabbed my wrist and focused on the tips of my index and middle finger. A thick red indentation slit the skin; blood seeped through.

'Lenah, stop.'

He wrested the arrow from me and I flinched away from him.

'I will not be controlled!' I yelled. 'You will not be the master of my life!'

Rhode's eyes flickered with worry.

No, I did not want to do this to him. Immediately I wrapped my arms around him and held his face to mine. The faintest warmth pooled on the apple of my

cheeks – a small heat rippled again and again, until it dissipated away leaving an icy, familiar chill.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said pulling back with a small shake of my head. ‘I went down to the river. And I could not feel it. I have lost, lost . . .’

‘The sense of touch,’ Rhode finished for me.

I placed the bow on to the ground; my blood had stained the fibre. He took my hand into his.

‘I feared it for so long. And now it has come,’ I said.

‘You will always have me,’ Rhode said, and we started back up for the great stone manor in the distance. ‘I hope that gives you some comfort.’

If I was human, the wound on my fingers would have throbbed and ached for weeks. By the time I assessed the cut, it was healed.

‘Will I ever stop feeling your warmth?’ I asked.

Rhode did not answer.

‘Will I?’ I pressed, knowing that vampires who were in love could still feel the warmth of each other’s touch even when the rest of their body had gone cold.

When we reached the house, Rhode led me into the darkened foyer and answered me with a kiss. A kiss I could not taste but that warmed my chest – a kiss that told me in one gentle gesture what he could not utter aloud: one day I would no longer be able to feel his embrace.

Present Day – Wickham

‘Are you coming?’ Rhode asked. He stood above my desk. ‘You don’t really want to stay in here, do you? Unless, of course, you’d like to draw some more storm clouds.’

I had doodled endless black bulbous clouds instead of taking notes.

I collected my things and followed him to the hallway. He walked close to me as we headed out of class.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘Yes!’ I piped up, shaking away the memory of Hathersage. ‘I have a question though,’ I said. ‘You never told me what part of England you’re from.’ I led with this to see how similar this Rhode was to the Rhode of his past.

‘Devon,’ Rhode replied.

The old Rhode was also from Devon. Hope blossomed inside me. Maybe if he remembered this fact, he would remember some of our past too! We left Hopper and crossed the quad towards Turner, the girls’ dorm.

‘And I heard, I hope you’ll forgive me for asking . . .’ I started to say, until Rhode jumped in before I could finish.

‘That I haven’t got any family. Yes it’s true.’

We showed our IDs to the Turner security guard and entered the dorm.

Some girls stopped mid-conversation as Rhode and I walked down the hallway to my room. It certainly wasn't me they were interested in.

'No family. It's tragic, isn't it?' he said with a wry smile. 'My parents died when I was young. I only have memories of living here in Lovers Bay. I'm OK with it, really.' He leaned his shoulder against the wall just outside my room.

'Hey, Rhode,' a girl I didn't recognize said. He acknowledged her with a small nod.

'So you'll come shoot?' Rhode asked me.

'You're really offering to teach me?'

'Yes, Lenah.' My body electrified at the sound of his voice saying my name and I couldn't drag my gaze away from his face.

'Oh, you two,' Tracy said, appearing down the hall. 'Get a room.' She laughed and went to unlock our door. The keys clanged as they hit the floor, and Tracy screamed so loud the shriek was a needle through my eardrums.

Rhode placed a palm on Tracy's shoulder. 'Don't move,' he commanded.

'What happened?' I asked. Tracy had her palm over her mouth.

Rhode said, in a grave tone, 'Call the resident advisor.'

'Frogs?' Tracy cried through her hand. 'Seriously?'

Frogs? What?

I pushed past her into the room and froze. She was right – frogs. Dozens of dead frogs were scattered around our room. They dangled from the mirror, on top of our beds, even from the light fittings. Some looked as though they could have been sleeping. Others were split down the middle, carcasses – dissected.

'This is so disgusting!' Tracy cried. 'What the hell kind of prank is this?'

She screamed again as she uncovered more frogs in the bathroom.

A memory sprang unbidden to my mind. Justin and me. Before. In biology. *'You can rip a cat open with your bare hands but you couldn't cut the frog?' Justin asked gently.*

'I couldn't cut the frog,' I admitted.

I lingered on the memory. When I was first at Wickham, I couldn't dissect a frog in biology class. I had killed too many humans as Vampire Queen, and once I'd regained my human form, that little frog was just too much. That was also the day my relationship with Justin changed, when I fell for the twenty-first-century boy and left my brutal past behind.

Rhode started collecting the little bodies.

One hopped on to the toe of Rhode's boot. 'There!' I cried. 'That one's still alive!' I wanted to hold it tightly and thank it for surviving. Instead I scooped up its soft body, opened the window and placed it gently on the ground beneath

some leafy branches.

‘What’s all the screaming?’ The voice of our resident advisor, Tina, made me spin around. ‘Wow,’ she said and surveyed the room. ‘This is . . . crazy.’

Rhode was still collecting up bodies. Tracy wrapped her hands around herself.

‘Tina,’ Tracy said in a quiet voice, ‘these were just *here*.’

‘This is one messed-up prank,’ Tina said. ‘Do you guys know who did it?’

Justin, I thought, but did not say anything out loud.

Tina shook her head in disgust and took out her cell phone. ‘Put them down, Rhode, and go wash your hands.’ She waited for someone to pick up on the other end of the line. ‘Hey, Bob? I’m in Turner dorm, double 102.’

Tina asked for a cleaning crew and explained that we would need to leave for a few hours so maintenance could do their work. ‘I’m calling Williams,’ she said.

‘Hey, guys,’ Tony said, stopping in our doorway. He surveyed the room. ‘Holy crap.’

‘Tony, stop right there. All of you guys need to leave,’ Tina said, ushering Rhode, Tracy and me out.

‘Were those . . . frogs?’ Tony asked.

‘About a hundred,’ Rhode replied.

‘What did you guys do?’ Tony asked.

‘Oh sure, it’s our fault,’ Tracy said. ‘You’re the one denying girls when they ask you out. I don’t usually have vendettas against me.’

Rhode carried my comforter and Tony had Tracy’s. He brought the fabric to his nose. ‘It doesn’t smell like frog.’

I swallowed and ignored the impulse to say anything specific. ‘I think this is someone’s idea of a sick joke,’ I said instead.

‘Sick being the operative word,’ Tony replied.

We headed down the hallway towards the laundry with our bedding in our arms. This was, no doubt, the start of Justin’s payback – the change in his plans.

After the wash cycle had started, Rhode, Tracy and Tony sat at a table in the laundry room discussing who might be responsible for this horrendous prank. I leaned against the window frame listening to the rhythmic hum of the washing machines.

The frogs didn’t bother me. What gnawed at my mind was two things: first, Justin’s new plan and that it would only get worse from here. Second on the list was Rhode’s ignorance. Like Tony, Rhode needed to know the truth, for his own protection.

‘So what’s the plan?’ Tony asked.

‘What do you mean?’ Rhode replied.

‘How are you going to figure out who did it? I know you, Rhode. Your logic-loving brain is piecing together some kind of wacky scheme.’

‘Come on,’ Rhode said, dismissing the notion with a smile.

Tony turned to Tracy. ‘Remember the time he thought the junior-dance vote was rigged?’

When Rhode tried to explain himself, they laughed in unison. He really did have a life here. A reputation. A history. I smiled a little despite the situation. Their voices grounded me and the fabric bracelet around my wrist still clung tightly together. For the briefest of moments Suleen’s quest seemed *possible* with them by my side.

Outside, the sun beamed through the trees and made spotlights on the ground. I followed the pattern of light from tree base to tree base until they ended at Wickham beach beyond. The bay glittered through the trees and –

A man stood by the shore. I stood up straighter as recognition prickled over me. I couldn’t tell for sure but he had the same stature as the vampire from the farm. The one who had warned me. His arms were crossed over his chest and he faced the school.

Act casual.

‘We should tell Claudia and Kate. They will definitely get to the bottom of this,’ Tracy was saying. ‘They know everything and everyone.’

‘I thought that was you,’ Tony said.

I squinted, trying to make out who the figure was; damn it, I missed having my vampire sight. He had short black hair cut close to his head, and a silver necklace caught the sunlight.

Yes, it *was* that vampire from the farm! What the hell was he doing standing in the sunlight again?

Plan of action . . . plan of action . . . I needed to get to him, and quickly.

‘Is anyone hungry? Maybe we can get some food. Bring it back here,’ I offered with a little shake in my voice. I had to get everyone out of the laundry room. I met Tony’s eyes and tried to communicate with my expression that I needed his help on this. His mouth made a little ‘o’ shape when he caught on that I was planning something.

‘I wouldn’t leave your laundry unattended, New Girl,’ Tony said standing up. ‘Some jackass will move your wet clothes if you leave them in the washer for more than two seconds after the cycle ends. So you stay here – we’ll bring you sustenance.’

‘Taco for me!’ Tracy said.

Damn. There went my chance to be alone.

‘Come on, Rhode. I need a sandwich. No! A hot dog. Yes! A hot dog,’ Tony

said. ‘You sure you won’t come, Tracy?’ he tried a final time, but she shook her head.

Rhode waited in the doorway. ‘Bring you something?’ he offered me.

‘Just coffee,’ I said.

‘That girl is just nuts for coffee,’ Tony said, adding a maniacal laugh. Once the door closed behind them, I immediately went over to the windowsill and pulled frantically at the lock, but it wouldn’t open.

‘Damn it!’ I cried.

‘What the *hell* . . .’ Tracy said from behind me, ‘are you doing?’

That vampire was still standing there! I could reach him if only I could get the damned window open.

I pressed my hip into the window frame and grasped the lock again. It screeched as I pulled it from the left to right side and pushed the glass outwards. The hinges were at the top so I brought one foot on top of the windowsill and jumped down to the grass.

I took off.

Tracy called to me from the window but I kept going. I would have to come up with an explanation later.

Dodging tree trunks, I followed the beams of light breaking through the branches. As the beach came into view, I broke through the woods and on to the sand.

Empty. Not a soul, vampire or otherwise.

I spun.

‘Where are you?’ I screamed. ‘Why are you watching me?’ I cried to the shadows and empty beach.

I sighed, placing my hands on my waist and tapping my fingers against my hipbones. I squatted down – footprints. They led up into the woods. He wore boots, heavy boots too, because they sunk into the sand. I followed them to the edge of the wood, where I lost the trail on a bed of pine needles. I was on my knees when a pair of ballet flats entered my eye line. I followed the shoes up to jeans, to a belt and on up to Tracy Sutton’s confused face.

‘So,’ she said, ‘who did you run out here for? Did he leave the frogs?’

What impressed me was not her questions but the lack of fear in her voice.

I sighed and glanced back at the beach around us one more time. Ah, it would be useless. Whoever he was, he was very good at hiding. I was trained to uncover what moved in the shadows or to find a person watching me just outside my field of vision. He had lingered in one place too long.

Tracy crossed her arms over her chest and I was reminded of a time, in a world that no longer existed, where her tenacity had surprised me. Tracy was not

only loyal but also fierce. She had avenged Claudia and Kate's murders with as much passion as I ever had when I was a powerful vampire. And she was only ever human! One time she had walked into a cemetery armed with a kitchen knife, ready to fight the vicious Odette. I would be tied to Tracy forever.

'Who was it, Lenah?' She cocked her head, her arms still crossed.

The empty lifeguard chairs just a few hundred feet away marked how close we were to the town line. The beach itself was empty.

'He's gone now,' I said.

'Are we safe?' Tracy asked. 'Because after the frogs and everything, I don't feel safe.' Her voice didn't quiver. It was steady and her words were clipped.

I stalked past her and headed back to Turner.

'No,' I said as I pushed branches and leaves out of my way. We walked out of the woods and back on to the grass. 'No, we're not safe.'

Clearly, it was time to involve Tracy.

Tracy, Tony and I sat in the laundry room long after our bedding was folded. Rhode had left to speak with the headmistress about giving a special speech during assembly about the dangers of pranking. Apparently, and this was much to my surprise, Rhode was head of the student-body government.

Tracy jumped off one of the washing machines where she had been sitting. She placed her hands on the table. Her voice shook as she spoke.

'So what you're *telling* me, what you are *saying*, is that not only is Justin a vampire, but that you two knew one another in some alternate *reality*.'

'Yes, that's essentially what I'm saying.'

'You realize that's insane.'

Tony didn't dare say a word about how well Justin and I knew one another.

Tracy leaned against a washing machine and chewed at her nails. 'And for some mystical reason he can't hurt you? But he *can* hurt us? That's convenient.' She mocked and her bitterness made sense to me. It was all part of the human need to deny the supernatural.

'Why are you so mad?' Tony asked Tracy.

'I'm not mad,' Tracy said, but she was shaking and it was clear she was angry. She exhaled and put her hands on her hips. 'I don't know. I guess I am mad. I've had this weird feeling since I first saw you that I'd met you before.' Her eyes flickered to me when she said it. 'And every time you talk to Tony, I get really jealous.'

I should tell her about Justin.

'Jealous over me?' Tony said and perked up.

'Explain to me how you know one another – you and Justin,' Tracy said.

I had to tread carefully here. Tracy and Justin had been a couple when I had first been on campus a few years ago. In time, I would tell her the complete story. It was the right thing to do, but she had a lot to take in at present.

‘We dated. Before.’

‘Fine.’ Tracy dipped her head and I couldn’t see her expression. ‘Let’s pretend I believe you. You want me to accept that in some alternate reality you knew Justin. I mean, knew him intimately. I need some proof.’ She looked up at the ceiling tiles. ‘OK . . . How did he get the scar on his chin?’

‘Tracy . . .’ Tony groaned.

‘I just want to hear her say it! If Lenah existed with us in some alternate reality, she’ll know the answer. How did Justin get the scar on his chin? I’m the only person he’s told that story to.’

‘What scar?’ Tony asked. ‘I never saw a scar on his chin.’

‘You can only see it if you’re very close to him.’ Tracy said it simply but I could tell she softened her tone for Tony’s benefit.

Tony adjusted his hat and squirmed a little in his seat. ‘Oh,’ was all he said.

I sighed. ‘When they were kids, Roy, his younger brother, got mad at him for eating all his fries. So he threw a fork at his face, but because Justin was taller, the fork got his chin.’

Tracy’s jaw dropped a little and she plopped down in the seat across from us. She covered her face with her hands.

‘She’s right,’ she said with a sniff.

‘Isn’t that a good thing?’ Tony asked.

‘Yeah!’ Tracy said and wiped her stuffy nose. ‘It means she’s not a phony. But it means that Justin is a freakin’ whatever he is.’

‘A vampire,’ I said.

‘I don’t believe it.’ She shook her head. ‘Parallel universes? No. No, no, no, no, no, no.’ She was up again pacing the room, her blonde ponytail swinging behind her.

So much for Fire saying she might remember.

Tony turned back to me. ‘OK,’ he said in a heavy exhale, ‘let’s concentrate on the Let’s Not Die plan. I say we keep our worry to the torture he has planned for us.’

‘Interesting word choice.’

‘Frogs?’

‘No. Torture . . .’ I mused. I crossed my arms and stared at the white linoleum table. ‘Yes . . .’ I said and the table and laundry room fell out of focus. Memories unfolded in my head as I spoke, ‘When I was a Vampire Queen, I hung vampires that withheld information from me by their wrists. I left them suspended until

they needed blood so badly that they withered away. I would give them a little when they started to shrivel just to satisfy the need, and when they felt just a touch better I started the process all over again. I always got the information I wanted. *That* is torture.'

I snapped out of it and looked up.

Tracy and Tony's jaws dropped.

'Anyway . . .' I continued, 'what you just said about Justin torturing us. He's not. Not in the traditional vampire sense, anyway. Putting a hundred or so dead frogs in my room – it's unpleasant but it's not life threatening.'

'Let's not forget,' Tracy added, 'he did it to my room too.'

'But vampires don't generally behave this way,' I continued. 'When I was here at Wickham the second time, Odette—'

'The blonde vampire?' Tony interrupted. 'The one you said made Justin a vampire?'

'Yes,' I said eagerly. 'Odette went directly for the kill. In fact, all vampires do. Justin isn't doing that – assuming he's the one behind this – at least not yet. He isn't exactly torturing us,' I said, purposefully meeting Tracy's eyes, 'and he isn't going for the kill.'

'So how do we turn him back into a human?' she asked. 'Like what happened to you.'

'I don't know if we can,' I admitted.

'There has to be a way. We can't leave him like that,' Tracy said. 'We have to change him back. You did it; you know how.'

'It's not that simple. No one had performed that ritual before Rhode and me.'

She slapped her hands on the table. 'Rhode!? What the hell, Lenah? He was a vampire too?' She spat a little when she said it and her face deepened to a very bright red. Oops. I had meant to reveal that more smoothly.

Once I explained the situation to Tracy and got her sitting down calmly, I said, 'Odette made Justin a vampire to hurt me.'

'And hurt me,' Tracy said, and wiped tears away with her fingertips. 'He was my friend.'

'So what now?' Tony asked, and I could tell he was trying to diffuse the tension. 'What do we do about the guy watching you?'

I got up and rested my hands on the window ledge. The beach was still empty, and the wind had picked up.

'The first time that the vampire at the farm spoke to me yesterday, he told me to arm myself. And now, after Justin pulls this prank, that same vampire is watching me from the woods. It's too coincidental.'

'What I'd like to know is where he was last night when we were attacked on

Main Street,' Tony said.

'You know, this seems oddly familiar,' Tracy commented quietly.

'Maybe it was him who shot the arrow at Justin?' I offered.

'Really familiar,' Tracy added.

Whitecaps curled again and again out on the water.

'Either way,' I said, 'the only way we'll really be able to tell is to draw the vampire to me. Find out who he is.' I had a feeling he was connected to Suleen, but I had no evidence for this.

'You're nuts,' Tracy said. 'Draw someone to you who is shooting arrows at your head?' She dabbed at her eyes with a shredded tissue.

'We don't know who shot either of those arrows,' I pointed out.

'I think you need to find out what Justin wants,' Tracy said.

'We're no match for him. He's far too strong. Maybe this vampire can help,' I said.

I needed a public place. A place the vampire could get lost in the crowd. I couldn't guarantee he would come but I had to take the chance.

'What's the popular club in town?' I asked. 'A place we could get in.'

'We're on the Cape,' Tony said. 'It's slim pickings.'

'Bolt in Orleans, I guess. It's right outside Lovers Bay. It's the biggest one. They have an all-ages night on a Friday,' Tracy offered.

'Perfect. Tomorrow. We're going. Invite Rhode,' I said to Tony. 'I'll bring it up with him tomorrow too. He's teaching me about archery.'

'Like a date?' Tracy asked.

I had no time for modern dating explanations. 'I guess so,' I said, but tried to be dismissive about it so we could stay focused. Even though Rhode couldn't remember his old self, perhaps being in the presence of vampires, at the club, would make him recall something.

'Come on, Trace,' Tony said, and hugged her shoulder. 'Let's go to the union. I'll buy you a supreme nachos with extra sour cream.'

'Why the extra sour cream?' she asked.

'It eases the whole "change in your entire universe" hangover.'

'That sounds good,' she said with another sniff.

We piled up bedding in our arms and walked back to our cleaned and frog-free room.

That night I dreamt of Justin:

He walks to me through the waist-high water of Wickham bay. He is drenched when he steps on to the sand. He is himself as I first saw him, a young man with a beautiful future. The water drips down his abdomen to the waistline of his

board shorts. Where I would usually expect a drove of students, we are very much alone. Even in this dream world I can't help but feel enamoured by his spirit. He has such confidence and love for life.

'Gorgeous day,' Justin says and stands next to me. He smiles at the sun and I want to embrace him. 'You have little time as always,' he says, and the water drips down the side of his jaw. Once again I fight the urge to touch him.

'Why are you a vampire still? Why weren't you set free?' I sigh. I have so many questions, but this one is the most pressing to me.

'You have to use your heart to see,' Justin explains. He finally turns and fixes his eyes on me. They are as gentle as I remember. 'Your heart, Lenah.'

He backs away down the beach.

'Use my heart? How?'

He walks up the steps from the beach and on to the Wickham campus. The sunset is blinding and I have to shield my face. I want to follow.

'Justin!' I call his name again. 'Justin!'

I shot up in bed.

'Justin!' I cried.

I brought my knees to my chest and my heart beat against my legs. I wanted to scream his name again but my throat was raw.

'You called his name three times,' Tracy said, sitting up. The moonlight shone on to the floor between our beds, making the room glow in a pearl haze. Tracy leaned her back against the wall and tucked her arms around her knees too.

'Did you love him?' she asked in a small voice. 'I mean, before.' We had finally come to it, the truth.

'Yes, I did.'

'You're not telling me everything. I know. I can feel it. If you want me on your side, you need to tell me the truth.'

It was easier to confess this in the dark. Tracy didn't say anything at first. If I didn't look at her directly, it was easier to admit how horrible I had been.

'We . . .' I sighed. 'You were his girlfriend. I came to Wickham and I was very selfish. I hadn't ever had any friends that were girls before so I didn't think very much about your feelings. I'm sorry for that.'

'Yeah, well,' she said after a few moments. 'I'm sure I was just lovely to you,' she scoffed. 'Even before you guys got together.'

My eyes lifted to hers; I couldn't help it. I tried to pretend I hadn't been shocked by what she said, but it was too late.

'Oh, don't act so surprised. I wasn't very nice to people other than Claudia and Kate until this year. I don't know – I got tired of being a bitch. It's exhausting.'

I didn’t know what to say to this so I didn’t say anything at all. Because once upon a time, I had been a horrible person too.

‘It wasn’t true love – for me, anyway,’ I said. ‘There are lots of different kinds of love. I’ve learned that. Nothing will ever come close to what I have with Rhode.’

‘You’ve really . . .’ she stopped. ‘You’ve really been alive almost six hundred years?’

‘About. But I age normally now. I’m just human.’

‘What’s the best thing you’ve ever seen?’

With the exception of the hundred years I spent in hibernation, it had been a long life of blood. I couldn’t admit that walking on to campus and seeing a healthy and human Rhode was positively incredible. Seeing Tony alive was a close second. Instead I chose, ‘Carnevale in Venice. 1605. The Doge wore blue velvet. People wore masks encrusted with diamonds and rubies. I had never seen dresses so fine. The theatre and comedies made hundreds of people laugh. There were tiers of food and sweet wine. Dancing all night. Courtiers kissing in corners, and raising toasts with their glasses . . .’ The memory swept me away. ‘Rhode and I almost fit in!’ My smile faded. ‘Until we killed the Doge.’

Tracy inhaled sharply and I had to remember that she wasn’t used to associating with murderers. After a moment she said quietly, ‘I’ve never been in love. I want to be though. I wasn’t in love with Justin, only the idea of him. He could command a room – you know how people say that?’

I found myself wanting to keep talking to Tracy. I didn’t ever remember telling another girl about my problems. When we’d first met, before, Tracy had hated me on sight. I couldn’t blame her; I was completely enamoured of her boyfriend.

But now here we were, battling this together.

‘So, what were you dreaming about?’ Tracy said.

I lay down on my side. ‘I saw Justin on Wickham beach and he told me to use my heart.’

‘Use your heart?’

‘Exactly.’

Tracy scooted under her covers, both of us trying to decipher what this could mean.

Heart. Heartbeat? I had to love? *It doesn’t make any sense!*

The question that had bothered me in the laundry room bit at me again: why wasn’t he hurting those around me? His behaviour was so hard to read. Of course, attacking the people closest to me had been Odette’s tactic. Hell, it had been *my* tactic. No one had been taken from campus since the girl at the start of

the year. Jackie something? I didn’t know her. It had to be Justin. Yet, he was too unpredictable, and I couldn’t gauge his plans.

The clock read 4.19 a.m. I needed coffee, so I threw the covers off.

‘Are we getting up? Because there’s no way I can sleep now,’ Tracy said.

‘Yeah, we’re getting up.’

‘Want to sneak into the union and get first dibs on the bagels?’ she suggested.

‘You read my mind,’ I said, and snatched up my sweatshirt. Tracy grabbed her slippers. We snuck out, and as I closed the door I glanced at my bed, hardly mussed from the night.

Chapter 8

We couldn't work out a reason or a solution for Justin's cryptic message in my dream. So Tracy moved on to what I was going to wear for my archery date with Rhode that afternoon. After breakfast she spent fifteen minutes picking out an outfit for me to wear and we eventually settled on jeans with a blue tank top of Tracy's.

'All you wear is black,' Tracy said. 'You need some colour on this date. And tonight at the club? You're not allowed to wear black there either.'

'Oh yes, so I can be an easier target in a bright colour.'

'You're a target no matter what you wear,' she said, and ushered me out the door. She had a point.

I waited at the bottom of the archery hill, remembering the day Fire and the other three members of the Aeris had waited at the top and told Rhode and me that we couldn't be together. It was our punishment for manipulating the elements.

OK, Fire is not up there, Rhode is. He happens to have no memory and can't judge you for losing your mind in 1740. This is a plus. Yes, a benefit! This date isn't going to be hard. What am I waiting down here for?

I could do this, for sure. I clenched and unclenched my hands as I climbed the hill. I could spend time with Rhode and pretend we didn't have five hundred years of shared history. I took a deep breath and crested the hill.

Rhode stood bathed in late-afternoon light. My breath caught in my throat.

He was readying the arrows for our lesson and had lifted his chin to the sky, enjoying the warmth of the sun. He stretched his arms up, keeping his eyes closed.

I did not know of heaven or of consciousness after death. Every time I had succumbed to the end of my life, Rhode had saved me. Whether because of his love, or the power of the supernatural world, I had never *actually* died. But if I ever did, I hoped it would look like this, with Rhode waiting for me.

I should say hello, maybe not stand here and stare like some kind of stalker.

I took a step and made sure to clear my throat so as not to surprise Rhode. He

turned towards me and broke into a smile.

‘Any more frogs?’ he asked.

‘Nope. No more frogs.’

‘I asked the archery team if anyone heard anything. No one’s fessed up, but we’ll get to the bottom of it.’

‘After your threatening speech at morning assembly . . . what was it you said? Oh yes, there will be ramifications not only for animal cruelty but also for sheer nerve. Well said. I like the sheer-nerve part.’

‘You’re mocking me.’

‘Never.’

He lifted an arrow from the pile he had collected. Its feather was dark purple, one of the school colours. It was an arrow made for target practice, with a blunted end, for safety.

‘So, you’re ready?’ he asked.

‘More than ever.’

Rhode’s lesson was quite good. Even though I had close to as much knowledge as he did, I pretended to listen and to have no clue about the parts of the bow and arrow. I didn’t like the pretence, but I wanted to be in close proximity to Rhode. Perhaps if we re-enacted a moment from our history together, he might remember a shred of his past. Also, I just wanted to be near him.

‘See?’ He demonstrated and the arrow made a pinging sound and flew into the air. With a *thump* it hit the target. Bullseye.

‘Your turn, rookie,’ he said. He stepped behind me and I leaned into him. The warmth of his chest flowed up and down my whole body, matching the length of him. His warmth didn’t just settle around me – it comforted my soul. This human love was magnanimous; it made my fingers tingle. Rhode pulled my hand back and whispered in my ear, ‘Is it all right I’m so close?’

‘Yes,’ I barely whispered.

Together we let the arrow go. I wanted to impress him and the arrow hit the bullseye.

Exactly.

‘Wow, lucky shot,’ I said, shrugging.

Rhode stepped back.

‘Yes. *Very.* Lucky shot.’ He cocked his head. ‘Lenah . . .’

‘What?’ I kept looking at the bullseye, at the bow, anywhere but at those blue eyes.

‘Why do I feel like you know how to do this already?’

I shook my head. ‘No idea.’

He pointed at the target . . . waiting.

Damn. I could not lie to Rhode.

‘This should be interesting,’ he said, but there was an edge to the playfulness of his tone.

I lifted the bow, drew back the string and let it go. It hit the target, just next to the arrow we had set loose together.

‘OK, now I feel stupid,’ he said. ‘You’re amazing.’

‘No, don’t feel stupid.’

‘You’re an incredible archer.’

‘Beginner’s luck,’ I said with a pathetic attempt at a chuckle.

‘Lenah . . .’

He bent down to pick up an arrow but hesitated. He pointed at my left shoulder.

‘Hold on . . .’ he said, standing up slowly. He continued to point at my back. Oh boy. Stupid Tracy and this stupid top, which had shifted during the lesson. ‘Turn around,’ he said calmly.

I showed him my back. A chill ran over me as he moved my hair out of the way. He ran his fingertips over the tattooed words.

‘*Evil be he who thinketh evil*,’ I said breathlessly, reciting the tattoo on my back. His touch was so gentle and his fingers soft.

‘Why do you have this?’ he whispered. ‘That exact expression.’

‘A family motto.’

I hated this. Hated lying. Hated that he had been the one who inked it on to my skin and proceeded to kiss me for hours afterwards. We both believed it to be our motto, once upon a time. If I believed I was evil, it would inform my intentions. I could be as horrible as I wanted, if that’s who I truly was. Many, many times as I bit into the neck of the living I told myself, ‘It’s in my nature.’

I didn’t know there was so much more to me than pain. I didn’t know until I became human again.

Rhode’s fingers dropped away and he frowned at me.

‘What? You don’t like tattoos?’ I offered, trying to make a joke. Rhode clearly did not want to play around.

‘What is it with you?’ he asked. ‘Why did you come here?’

‘For school.’

‘Why did you lie about knowing how to shoot?’

‘If you knew I was lying, then why did you agree to teach me?’ We stared at one another and I wanted nothing more than to tell him the whole truth. I was on the edge of it too. I didn’t know how to start. I had made up this whole charade and Fire had made it so clear.

‘What? Say it!’ Rhode said.

I exhaled sharply. ‘I don’t know how.’

‘Forget it. It’s almost time for lunch,’ he said, breaking our gaze and slinging the quiver of arrows over his shoulder. I didn’t want to push my deceit any further, so as he walked away I mentioned our evening plans. Maybe I could find a way to tell him tonight. Once he saw a vampire or something? Perhaps it would be easier that way.

‘We’re going out tonight,’ I said. ‘To Bolt in Orleans.’

He hesitated and his anger seems to dissipate a bit when he said, ‘Tony told me. Clubs aren’t exactly my . . .’

‘Thing?’ I offered.

‘Right,’ he agreed. ‘You coming back to campus?’ he asked. I took the invitation even though he was just being polite.

We walked down the hill together and I was grateful for the change of subject.

‘Oh, come on, British. You can’t do it? Just once? Nine thirty,’ I teased.

‘Want to know the truth?’ he asked. My light jokes were clearly still not appreciated. He slung the arrow pack so it sat tighter on his shoulder.

‘I don’t trust you. Frogs in your room, lying about archery, arrows shot within inches of your head. And your tattoo with that *exact* saying.’

‘Do you remember . . . I mean, do you know the phrase?’ I asked.

‘I can’t figure you out. You show up here just when something isn’t quite right. And you . . .’ He trailed off.

‘What?’ I asked gently.

‘You *look* at me.’

‘How do I look at you?’

He said nothing, but seemed to consider what he wanted to say. He didn’t give me time to explain. Rhode strode away quickly, leaving me at the base of the archery hill, alone.

At nine thirty I walked up the path from Turner to wait for Tracy in the parking lot. When I came around the bend, a familiar wrought-iron bench was in front of the entrance to Seeker dorm. I ran my finger over the curl of the design. Vicken had sat here many times. I had yet to say goodbye to him the vampire way, with a ritual. But I hadn’t had a chance. Vicken’s life was now done. The one bright spot in this mess of darkness was that his soul was white and his story completed.

Tracy pulled up in front of the building in a silver SUV. She honked twice just as Tony stepped up the path and stopped next to me. He threw an arm over my shoulder.

‘Lenah, Lenah, Lenah. Are you sure you’re ready for these dance moves?’

‘I’ve seen them before. Trust me, they leave much to be desired.’

‘Much to be desired?’ he said in a mock British accent.

We piled into the car with Claudia, Kate and Tracy.

‘Lenah!’ Claudia said from the back seat. ‘You look amazing!’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

My red tank top revealed a bit more cleavage than I would have liked. Tracy had assured me when I was trying it on that it covered the dagger hilt that stuck up just a little from my belt. ‘That’s all that matters, right?’ she said.

‘No, really, red is better on you,’ Claudia continued. ‘I’ve only seen you in black.’

I had not forgotten the soft wisps of Claudia’s hair as it fanned out on the floor of the art tower. She had died painfully but fast in Odette’s clutches. I had not forgotten her will to fight. I would never forget.

‘I need to switch it up,’ I said, and cleared my throat. It was best to stick to the subject at hand, because after all, I couldn’t say I was happy to see her alive.

I was glad she didn’t notice that I had chosen to wear combat boots. I couldn’t run or potentially tackle someone in four-inch heels.

‘Are we waiting for someone else?’ I asked, when the car didn’t move.

Just as I said it, Rhode stepped out of the darkened pathway. I immediately fumbled with my belt, careful not to expose the ruby-encrusted hilt of the knife I had hidden away. Rhode slid into the seat next to me, he smelled fresh like aftershave.

The modern-day ointment masked the woody, ancient scent I was used to.

‘I didn’t think you would come,’ I said quietly.

Rhode clicked his seatbelt shut.

‘Two hours, Tony. That’s it,’ he said.

‘Live a little, Lewin,’ Tony said turning from the front seat.

‘No debate team? No prep for assembly?’ Kate said. ‘No speech for student council?’ She added, ‘Oh, by the way, that was a good speech on pranks this morning. You scared everyone to death.’

‘The wrath of Rhode,’ Claudia added.

‘The movie!’ Tony added, and everyone erupted into laughter, even me.

‘Since Justin’s disappearance and now Jackie Simms’s, I think it’s rather stupid to go off campus,’ Rhode said. Jackie Simms – that was her name. Jackie had been abducted from school in March and Justin was most likely the person responsible. The coincidence was just too convenient.

We turned on to Main Street and I met Tracy’s eyes in the rear-view mirror.

‘Rhode likes to talk fancy,’ Claudia said with a giggle.

‘Do you now?’ I asked, finally finding the courage to look at him. I wondered how I was going to break through the wall of distrust. He had said it so plainly. *I don’t trust you.*

‘That gem,’ Rhode said. He gestured at the necklace Fire had given me. ‘I noticed it earlier, but I thought it was a reflection from the sun. It’s really unique. Is it changing colour?’

‘Just a cheap thing,’ I said, bringing my fingers to the stone. Interesting! Rhode could sense that my gem wasn’t natural. Perhaps this was a small clue that he might be able to recall something about our life together.

His eyes lingered on my fingers covering the pendant but quickly looked ahead, his jaw tight. Damn it. I didn’t know if he could tell I was lying.

I can’t figure you out. You show up here just when something isn’t quite right.

As Rhode’s words replayed in my head, my good mood dissipated.

I don’t trust you, he had said.

He clenched his jaw tight and I knew it was because of me.

Bolt Club was the biggest club on the Cape, with two floors. We found only one empty table near the ground-level dance floor. Rhode went to grab drinks and Tracy was in charge of ordering appetizers. Claudia and Kate joined her, which made it easier for Tony and me to be alone.

‘I think there might be a table upstairs . . .’ Tony said, making an excuse so we could scout out the club. The upstairs tables were favourable seating, so it made his lie believable.

Tony and I climbed to the first floor to look for the vampire, the one with the silver pendant and strange eyes. We stepped out and on to the deck. There was no bar but instead there were many tables filled with Wickham students. Some people tried to get Tony and me to come sit with them and chat, but I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted. If the vampire was watching us now he would have hundreds of faces to hide behind. There were plenty of people crowding Bolt.

Another stairway on the deck led down to the parking lot. A woman teetered down the stairs in five-inch platforms. A girl from my French class leaned in to kiss a boy I recognized.

‘Any sign of him?’ Tony asked.

‘Not yet. He’ll keep to the shadows,’ I said. After checking through the people on the deck, we walked inside.

Tony and I found a spot where we could lean against a wrap-around balcony. Black lacquer covered most of the surfaces, making them seem slick. Tony bopped his head to the music and observed the dance floor below. I inhaled

foreign smells, still amazed how different the odours of the modern world could be. Sugary sweet drinks, and oil from bodies that were deodorized by powder and perfumes. As people passed, I couldn't help but applaud Tracy's choice of ensemble for me. Most girls wore form-fitting dresses and sky-high heels. Form-fitting was actually an understatement.

A girl walked past us. She wore a black dress with two thin straps and black heels that could have skewered a wild beast.

'Hello . . .' Tony said. He turned his body to follow the girl as she joined a table of people.

I hit him playfully. 'You have a girlfriend.'

'Who is sexier than that girl!' Tony smiled brightly.

Under the dance of lights, we headed towards the stairs to the main floor.

I imagined for a brief moment my mother and father at a table here in their simple shifts. Would anything in this club remind them of the world in which they lived and breathed? The only thing that was the same? People. They talked and laughed together; that was the same. I supposed humans would always love to converse with one another, no matter the age. But so much about this world was different from my world in England. Not just the clothes but also the casual way people went about their lives. They simply had more time than I did in the fifteenth century. In the medieval world, if you reached thirty you were positively ancient.

At the top of the stairs, a man with light skin swirled ice in his drink. Whiskey sloshed over the rim and dripped down the sides of the glass, like the blood I once carried in brimming goblets. The man motioned to me as if he wanted to dance, but I panicked and gripped on to Tony.

'That man would have been a tasty aperitif in my former life,' I muttered in Tony's ear.

Tony pulled me down the stairs. I stopped to pretend to fix something on my shoe as I moved the dagger from my waist to my boot. I could grab it just as easily, but it wouldn't be so obvious to someone standing close to me on a dance floor.

'When you're done adjusting your *accessories*, can we dance?' Tony asked with a small tilt of his head.

He pulled me along and we made it to the dance floor. When I had first come to this club, Tony hadn't been here. He hadn't understood my friendship with Justin. As I followed Tony now, he wiggled his behind to make me laugh. He should have been here back then. I shouldn't have shut him out. At the time, I thought it was the best thing to do. He had feelings for me and I couldn't return them. It had been selfish not to have been more open with him from the start.

‘So, Vampire Queen,’ Tony said, ‘did you ever see anyone dance like this?’

He waved his hand up and down, accidentally smacking some girl in the behind.

She spun around.

‘Oh my . . .’ Tony said, freezing.

‘*What* are you doing?’ she barked.

‘Accident. Complete accident.’

I laughed and let Tony fend for himself, which he did by running off the dance floor. He passed Rhode, who was standing at the top of the dance floor stairs. On cue, the song changed to a slow ballad. The lights high above flickered red, then blue over the dance floor as Rhode made his way to me. I couldn’t help but take him in; I wanted to run my fingers over his broad and muscular chest. The steel grey of his button-down shirt made the blue of his eyes absolutely radiate.

So this was Rhode and me as humans. Itrembled from the anticipation of his closeness to me.

‘Shall we dance?’ he asked in a low voice, close to my ear.

‘You sure you want to?’ I asked, given how we parted at the archery hill. He wasn’t exactly friendly during the car ride over here either.

‘Have you ever danced before?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied, thinking it was a strange question.

‘Good. See? The truth. It’s working for us already.’

I had to look away; my cheeks warmed.

Rhode laced his hands with mine . . .

Rhode takes my hand. This is the 1700s and we are in a giant ballroom. Palm to palm, we move in calculated steps, creating heat every time we touch. We love so deeply that when our skin meets, a thrill of heat shoots through my cold, dead vampire body.

In that memory we turned to the right, to the left and touched palms on each side. We danced with our hands pressed together in front of a room of humans who had no idea how important it was for us to love. To love so deeply that when your dead heart could no longer beat, your true love’s warmth could light you up from the inside.

The pulse from the electronic speakers returned me to the dance floor at Bolt. I blinked away the ballroom of my memory, but the young man across from me was the same.

Rhode slipped a hand around my waist. I was grateful I had dropped my dagger in my boot.

‘Closer,’ he whispered. ‘Like this.’ There was no space between us, our bodies completely touching. I inhaled his very distinct human smell: aftershave and

something sweet I couldn't quite identify. It was the same comforting smell from the archery field.

'Rhode,' I whispered, 'I'm sorry about today.'

'Why do you do this to me?' he asked. The music swelled around us. 'You confuse me. Completely. I can't understand you. Your behaviour, how you look at me. How I feel about you.' His eyes danced over my face as if he was understanding something about me for the first time. 'Fascinating,' he said. 'And beautiful.'

He was so ferocious in his passion. His intensity made my words stick in my throat.

'Why me?' he asked.

'I don't know,' I stuttered, because I didn't want to lie. 'Why must there be an answer?'

'Evil be he who thinketh evil,' he continued gently. 'Do you believe that?'

Rhode moved his palm to the back of my head. He was going to kiss me.

'I believe in the intent,' I said. 'I believe that if you wish harm on others you'll bring ruin upon yourself.'

'What if you want to love someone so badly that you conjure them out of nothing?' Rhode asked.

His mouth was nearly on mine. I could almost taste him. I inched my mouth closer towards his face.

He whispered softly and his breath touched my lips. 'Maybe I just wanted so badly to love you that I made you up. And now you're here. Dancing with me.'

We could have been alone in that room; we *should* have been alone. I was going to kiss Rhode. Here. Now.

'You . . . love me?' I whispered.

His lips parted to reply. He was *just* about to say something when a shadow above him stepped into the light. On the balcony, just behind Rhode's head, was the *vampire*.

He would not get away this time. Rhode followed my eyes.

'I'll be right back. Damn it. I'm sorry,' I said.

Once he spotted me, the vampire ran. Dodging as many people as I could, I pushed dancers out of the way just as the slow song transitioned back to dance music.

I ran past Tony and Tracy. 'Lenah, wait up!' Tony called.

'Don't wait for me! Go!' Tracy cried from behind us. I assumed she was talking to Tony, but I couldn't wait up – I had to keep pace.

On the balcony, the vampire tried to sidestep all the people, to get outside, but he couldn't. He had to stop and edge through a crowd.

My feet pounded across the sticky tiles. I was almost at the end of the dance floor, where I could run up the stairs and try to cut him off.

'Where is he?!' Tony yelled. He was next to me, trying to keep pace. 'Excuse me, excuse me,' he said as we pushed our way through the dancing crowd. I ran up the stairs two at a time and stopped at the top. The vampire and I were both the same distance from the door. If he was faster than me then he would escape and I would lose my chance to get him alone.

He stood below a black light, the kind that made everything purple. Vampire eyes usually remained the same colour as when one was alive. His were definitely silver.

'Where the hell . . .' Tony panted.

The vampire and I both waited for someone to make the first move.

'. . . is this guy?' Tony finished.

He continued to catch his breath next to me. 'Do – you see – him?' he stuttered.

Just wait for it. For the propelling forward. One movement of the body forward. You know when to run.

'Now!' I cried.

'I'm right behind you!' Tony called.

I ran the width of the balcony while Tony yelled behind me. I had never asked this human body to run so hard and fast.

I was going to beat him!

I pumped my arms. My legs burned from the strain. I would make it to him first. I would.

Hand outstretched, I threw myself at the vampire.

I slammed on to his back and he fell forward on to the wall.

He flipped over to me at the last second. I threw all my body weight against him and pinned him under the throat. He needed no breath, but I hoped my force would stop him anyway. His silver eyes moved like little pools of mercury. I flinched even though I was trying to stay formidable. I couldn't help but be mesmerized by the shifting colour within his pupils.

'Renoiera,' he said in an accent that sounded Italian. *What?* This was not a word I understood.

'What do you want from me?' I demanded. 'No more mystery.' I pressed my elbow into his neck even harder. *Great, my dagger is in my boot just when I need it.*

Tony pointed at the vampire and said, 'Yea! You'd better tell her everything you know, punk.'

'You're not helping, Tony,' I said out of the corner of my mouth. The vampire

wasn't fighting me. 'Tell me, why are you following me?' I repeated.

Silence.

I removed my elbow from his throat and held the pendant he wore around his neck between my thumb and index finger. It was the same necklace I had noticed at the farm the other day. A small circle with an R in the middle. It was made of weathered silver and no larger than a dime. I dropped it so it lay flat against his skin.

'It turns out you need more help than I thought,' he said, and I noticed his Italian accent again. 'You come to see me at the Wickham chapel tomorrow night. At midnight.'

'The *chapel*?' I asked. 'I'm not putting those students at risk.'

'They were at risk the moment you returned to Lovers Bay.'

That truth stung and immediately silenced me.

'I have wanted to orchestrate our meeting another way but it seems it's no longer possible. As you have so gracefully made your concerns about me known to the public, it's safer for them and for you if we speak at length,' he said. He seemed genuine, though there was no way to tell for sure. He could have been working for Justin. I had been fooled many times by the most beautiful and innocent of faces.

'I promise I will tell you what you need to know,' he said, standing up straight.

'What do you mean, need to know?' I asked, though this time my tone was much more gentle.

He bowed his head goodbye and made his way to the door.

I decided to try a different tactic.

'*Perche non si fida di me?*' Why should I trust you? I asked in Italian. He turned with his fingertips on the door. The hint of a smile played at the corner of his mouth.

'You have no choice left but to trust me, Renoiera,' he said. There was that word again.

It was strange, but I didn't sense animosity from him.

He had that waxy appearance of all vampires, but something about him was different. Besides the eyes, I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

The light touch of someone's hand grabbed on to mine. I glanced back at Tracy, who had joined the group of onlookers. I expected to find Rhode among the faces, but he wasn't there.

The vampire straightened his shirt, and just as he reached the exit at the end of the hall he looked back.

'You be careful tonight. Others are watching,' he said, and pushed the door

open. This time his strange gaze landed on Tony and Tracy. ‘And, tomorrow, come alone.’

With that, he disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER 9

‘Why do you have to go alone?’ Tony muttered to me, but loud enough so that Tracy could hear. ‘Because it’s easier to *kill you* if you’re all by yourself,’ he concluded. Tony and Tracy followed me to the railing overlooking the main dance floor.

I didn’t care any more what Fire thought. I was telling Rhode what was going on, and I was telling him tonight. He needed to protect himself.

‘And his eyes,’ Tony said.

‘Yeah, what was up with them?’ Tracy asked.

‘And what did he mean that “others are watching” – way to be cryptic,’ Tony said.

The music boomed around us, and as we stood on the balcony I wanted nothing more than to leave. In my six hundred years I had never seen a vampire with eyes like that. His demeanour was strange as well. He had followed me and watched from afar, yet he wasn’t attacking.

Tony tugged gently on my arm. I looped it through his and Tracy took her position on his other side. ‘Let’s get out of here,’ he said, leading us down to the ground floor. ‘*Others* are watching.’

Back in the car, Kate sat between Rhode and me. Rhode had waited till last to get in so he wouldn’t have to sit next to me for the ride home. I couldn’t blame him, after I had run off the dance floor. I let everyone else chat around me on the way home. I kept my focus out the window and on what lay outside. I avoided it for so long but I knew what I needed to do.

I would tell Rhode the truth. Tonight.

We made it back to campus with only fifteen minutes until curfew. ‘I’ll catch up with you later,’ I said to Tracy as we got out of the car and she and Tony walked from the parking lot to the pathway. He threw an arm over her shoulder, and I hoped that now that they were alone, he was filling her in on everything that happened tonight.

Rhode was already halfway up the path to the library. I was doing him no favours by putting him in harm’s way. There were too many scenarios in which

he would be attacked.

'Rhode!' I called, but he didn't acknowledge me. I jogged after him and said, 'Will you wait?'

He spun to me and said, 'No. Talking to you is ridiculous. You run off the moment I touch you.'

I held out my hand to shake his. 'I won't run,' I said. He sighed. After a moment he met my gaze and shook his head a little. Instead of taking my hand, he moved a few strands of hair out of my eyes. My stomach swooped.

We stepped off the path and walked on the quad.

'Curfew is soon,' he said as we passed the library.

'Right. Of course.' From a second-storey window, someone picked at an acoustic guitar and the delicate notes spread over the air.

Rhode took my hand. I expected him to hold it and keep walking, but instead he spun me like we were dancing in a ballroom. He pulled me to him, and as our unseen musician played, he dipped me. Out of instinct, I wanted to see if our touch would heat up like it did in our vampire bodies. Yet, it was not necessary as we were already so warm.

Rhode pressed his hand against my back and laughter erupted through me. His hand moved from my back to the base of my neck. His touch was so gentle. We stood on our campus, together. Wasn't it ours? Hadn't our youth been cut short? Didn't we deserve just to *be* teenagers, even for one minute? He was fixated on my lips. I couldn't kiss him while keeping the truth from him. It wasn't right.

'I have to tell you something,' I whispered. Rhode, still focused on my lips, leaned closer just for the briefest of breaths. I froze, wanting his kiss so badly that I could barely stand it. Rhode pulled back and the expression in those blue eyes startled me – he really did love me.

'So tell me,' he said, but those three words sounded like *I love you*. That's what they should have been.

As we walked, a symphony of conversations echoed out of dorm windows. The soundtrack of Wickham was the voices and laughter of students, our friends. Here we could be what we truly were, seventeen and eighteen years old, not generations old. But could we be *who* we truly were, I wondered? Fire, why did you have to put this on our shoulders?

'If you do not kill Justin, someone will take my place who does not care for you as I do.'

'You're quiet,' Rhode said, 'for someone who tried to tell me something.'

'I'm figuring out how to say it.'

We crossed the pathway towards the star tower. At least, I thought that he was leading me to the tower. Or perhaps the greenhouse. No, that's what old Rhode

would have done. Old Rhode would have shown me the plants, the herbs and flowers. He would have explained their medicinal uses as well as their symbolic meanings. Like lavender, the flower of freedom. This Rhode was leading me to . . . the beach?

I almost said, 'I really don't think we should leave main campus,' when Rhode said, 'You're a good dancer.'

I laughed aloud at this.

'That's funny?' he said.

'It's just, well, no, it's not. Thank you.'

We started talking about the club and the ridiculousness of the people there. It was almost a normal conversation. We crossed the main path and Rhode stepped down the stairs to the Wickham beach. We wouldn't venture off too far. *Others are watching.*

'I only came tonight to dance with you,' murmured Rhode.

'I'm sorry I ran off. I saw an old friend,' I said, trying to lead the conversation in the necessary direction.

'An ex-boyfriend?'

'No, just a friend. Before I tell you what I have to tell you . . . I want you to trust me. You said you couldn't earlier.'

I stopped at the line of the private beach and Wickham school beach. I didn't think it wise to go any further. Rhode still held on to my hand.

'You said you loved me—' I started to say, but he didn't let me finish.

'You know I do, and I don't even know why,' he said quickly. Rhode drew me against his body. Our chests touched. He said nothing, but my need for him coursed through me in heartbeats.

His lips met mine, sending chills all over me. The palms of his hands trailed up my back. I met his kiss by pressing myself against him harder. I relished his arm around me, and settled into that new heat between us. Just for a second it was OK if I enjoyed this.

Old words. Ancient words Rhode had once said in an opera house in the 1740s echoed back at me.

Anywhere you go, I will go.

He shook his head a little a second time.

'Lenah, tell me – why this is so familiar . . .'

'That's the reason I wanted to talk to you. We know one another much better than I admitted. Quite well actually.'

Rhode kissed my nose and he tilted his head down to graze my lips with his own. *Take me anywhere. Fly away with me. Be with me. Anywhere you will go, I will go.* Yes, this is another reason why I came back, even if it wasn't my

original purpose. To protect Rhode, to love Rhode, to make sure nothing happened to him. It was delicious to see his tall frame, clad in black, so close to me.

'I've loved you a long time,' I said but my words trailed away. Rhode's gaze latched on to something behind me. He walked towards the beach grass that ran up to the Wickham woods. 'Rhode?' I asked, following after.

I gasped. A hand extended from the grass and dangled lifeless against the sand. Rhode bent down next to the body. 'Holy hell!' he said, barely above a whisper. 'She's dead. Stay back,' he ordered, and raised a hand, gesturing for me to stay away. 'Someone *stabbed* her. There's a knife.' He pointed.

'Dead bodies don't frighten me,' I replied.

Rhode raised an eyebrow. 'Why doesn't this surprise me?'

'Well, I don't see you running for the hills,' I said as I walked through the grass to the body.

I took a step back. It was the girl I had seen on my first day on campus when I was eating in the union. I was sure of it; the girl with long blonde hair, who wore a silver necklace. Now, I could see that the pendant she wore was an encircled R. It was the same exact pendant that the vampire from the club wore. She was a vampire too; that much was clear by the translucent skin. A dagger extended from her chest directly from her heart. Her curly blonde hair radiated out from her head, falling over the grass like ribbons. By her side was a quiver and bow. I slid out one of the arrows. A tiny encircled R was carved into the wood. It had a red-fletched tail, the same as the arrows fired into the barn and on Main Street.

Rhode squatted down and his eyes travelled up and down the body. 'Her skin is so strange.' He exhaled sharply. 'We should tell someone,' he added.

'That symbol,' I said, pointing at a necklace. 'Have you ever—'

Rhode hissed, rubbing at his arms. 'It just got so cold,' he interrupted. He rubbed at his arms. Now that he mentioned it, there *was* an unnatural chill in the air. I thought it had been the shock of seeing the vampire before me. 'You have goose bumps too,' he said pointing at my arm.

'Come,' I said, pulling on his hand. 'Quickly.'

My necklace suddenly felt hot on my chest. The warmth was shocking, given the chill in the air; the necklace made its own heat? I would have reached up to it if I hadn't been holding Rhode's hand with both of my own. Yet the heat from the necklace was familiar; it had warmed my chest before.

'We can't leave this poor girl,' he said, allowing me to pull him back on to the sand.

'We won't,' I said, just to get Rhode to come with me. Behind us, the beach was empty. 'Come on.'

We hurried down the main part of the beach. A distinct thumping came from the woods that ran parallel to the beach. I turned my ear towards the sound. Could it be feet tramping? I couldn't be sure.

Wickham. Get back to the path. Where was that Italian vampire who loved to watch me? Ahead of us, not fifteen feet away, were the campus steps.

'Lenah, someone's chasing us!' Rhode cried. He pointed to the low sea wall running along the beach.

Beyond it, deeper in the woods, silhouettes jumped from behind one tree to another.

The railing by the steps reflected the moonlight like a beacon.

Almost there.

Justin sprang out of the beach grass and cut us off. We dug our heels into the sand. Rhode threw his arm out, shielding me.

'I thought you were smarter than this,' Justin said.

Rhode stepped forward. 'Aren't you Justin? From the pictures on campus? Justin, come with us. It's not safe out here – there's a dead girl.'

'Couldn't have said it better myself,' Justin replied.

Rhode had extended a hand to Justin but dropped it.

Justin's white skin contrasted powerfully with the black of his crisp suit. Behind him, a Wickham guard van swooped through campus. Now that Justin was here, what was it exactly that I thought one Wickham guard could do?

'What's wrong with your eyes?' Rhode asked. 'And your skin?'

'He's not himself, Rhode,' I said. 'Are you, Justin?'

Justin walked casually towards us. Rhode and I backed away until our boots sloshed in the water.

'Lenah, get behind me,' Rhode said. I had been about to order him to do the same.

'Go any further and you'll be swimming. And unlike you, I don't need to hold my breath,' Justin said.

'What happened to you?' Rhode asked. Like Tony had on Main Street, Rhode caught on quickly. 'What . . . are you?'

Justin was not alone. Two more vampires came out from the woods and jumped from the storm wall to the sand. They were the same vampires from the other night with Tony. They came to Justin's side.

'We can help you,' Rhode said. 'What do you want?'

'Hmmm. What do I want? World peace. O-negative blood. A bed.' Justin winked at me.

I shuddered in disgust.

'You won't get whatever sick thing you're after,' I said. 'Especially if you kill

us.’

‘Kill us?’ Rhode said with a lift of surprise in his voice.

I stepped ahead of Rhode, shielding him with my body. I reached into my boot and grabbed the dagger. It would be of no use against Justin; he was too powerful. ‘Rhode has no memory. Whatever you want, you can take me.’ I tried to bargain.

Rhode turned to me in confusion.

‘I wanted to tell you,’ I said, looking into Rhode’s eyes. ‘That’s what I came out here to tell you tonight.’

‘I don’t understand . . .’ Rhode said, trailing off as Justin stepped forward and ran a cold finger from my cheekbone to my jaw. He was supposed to be caressing me, but the chill of his fingers made me shiver.

‘Don’t touch her!’ Rhode yelled and launched himself at Justin. At the now familiar casual wave of his hand, a great gust of air came from Justin. It blasted Rhode six feet and dropped him on to the sand, where he crumpled in on himself with a groan. He got up quickly, even though he had to stumble to his feet.

‘We were waiting for you in your dorm room.’

My stomach swooped. *Tracy.*

‘But we saw you having a nice, romantic stroll so I came out to join you.’

‘What did you do to Tracy?’

‘Tracy?’ He snorted in condescension. ‘No. No. I require the assistance of your friend here,’ Justin said with a nod to Rhode. I didn’t believe him. I just prayed that Tracy and Tony were still out walking on campus.

‘I’m not frightened of you,’ Rhode said. Justin’s men circled Rhode and closed in like vultures. Rhode braced himself for the impact by taking a few steps back and widening his stance. He kept looking from Justin to the vampires and back again, and when they were within just a few feet of him, he took a swing. Justin’s men clamped down on Rhode’s arms. As Tony had tried to do on Main Street, he attempted to wriggle out of their grip.

‘No!’ I cried. I moved to run to Rhode, but Justin stopped me with a tight grasp of his hand. I yanked away to get to Rhode, but it was no use. ‘What do you want? I don’t understand. He doesn’t know anything!’

‘We’re going to fix some things, that’s all,’ Justin said.

‘All right, I do love you. I lied,’ I said, desperate. ‘You know I’ll go with you.’

We faced each other and for a second I thought Justin believed me.

‘You’re a terrible liar,’ he whispered. With a snap of his arm, Justin wrapped his cold fingers around the back of my head, drawing me to him. He brought his freezing mouth to mine. His cold tongue entered my mouth, making my stomach lurch. He moved his head to try to deepen our kiss, but it was cold and rotten.

He tossed me aside into the shallow water and the salt stung the raw cut on my middle finger. It must have opened again. I licked the blood away before the smell would attract Justin or the other vampires. That taste, which was once so welcome to me, was now metallic and bitter.

'You don't love me, but you are beautiful,' he said. 'Did you like the new decorations for your room? Frog-skin is really *in* these days.' He was pleased with himself.

Rhode wrested his body away from the vampires that held him back. Rhode stamped on one of the vampire's feet, causing him to jump back, before using his free hand to punch the other in the face. His body remembered how to defend itself even if his mind could not.

'Go!' I yelled to Rhode. 'Run! Back to campus!' I screamed so loud my voice cracked. I tried to leave the water, but Justin pushed me back down.

Rhode did not go. He continued to try to take on Justin's two vampires. A *third* vampire sprang from the woods on to the beach. I pulled the knife out from under the cover of the water and aimed at the vampire running from the woods. Hitting a moving target was hard, and this knife was no bow and arrow. Holding the dagger by the hilt, I aimed right for the approaching vampire's heart. *Please just get him, slow him down.*

'Didn't I just tell you to get down!' Justin spat, pushing me by my shoulder just as I released the knife.

With the force of Justin's hand I missed my target, and the knife bounced miserably on the sand.

'Damn it!' I cried, as something stung at the base of my throat. The pendant around my neck was so hot that it scorched my skin. I lifted it from my chest, but the pendant burned my fingertips. The salt water helped to cool it but not by much.

The third vampire held Rhode's head between his oversized hands. He could easily snap Rhode's neck.

I sloshed out of the water to help Rhode. Justin rolled his eyes and stuck out an arm in a pushing motion. A gust of air hit my stomach and shoved me backwards like an invisible hand. My heels pushed against the current and only stopped when I was waist deep in the bay.

'I didn't want you to know about this particular talent just yet, but seeing as how you're being a complete pain in my ass . . .'

There was a loud yet very familiar *pop.* A rotating disc of water hovered in the air and separated Rhode from me. I had only ever seen one other vampire able to create a water shield – Suleen. My lips parted and I breathed slowly through my mouth. This meant that Justin could manipulate not only air but also water. How

. . . ? How could he have this kind of power?

The water shield grew at Justin's bidding. The vampires continued to bind Rhode. Through the ripping waves, Rhode gritted his teeth. But when his eyes met mine, the angry heat of his expression softened.

'I love you,' I said. 'I've always loved you.'

'Forever,' he said back. Though I could not hear him, I could read his lips. Justin's fangs were still descended, nearly touching his lower lip. 'I told you,' I said to Justin, 'whatever you want from me, you can have it. Rhode won't be able to remember, no matter what you do to him,' I said again. 'It's a decree beyond your power. I don't know how many times I have to say it to convince you.'

'My power,' Justin said, squatting down to my level, 'is beyond your wildest dreams.'

'Killing Suleen doesn't make you a master. You're a murderer. And the mortality ritual is useless to you,' I said. 'Rhode doesn't remember it, and you have to be five hundred years old to even consider performing it. You'll never be human again.'

Justin threw his head back and laughed and laughed. My pendant pulsed with heat and I clenched my jaw from both the burning singe and my rage.

'You told me all about your precious ritual. You think I want to be human again?' he asked with that derisive laugh. The water shield spun on its own behind Justin, like a whirlpool in the air. It rotated in the moonlight again and again. I couldn't see Rhode's features any more, only distorted bodies rippling in the water.

'All vampires want to be human,' I said pulling my eyes away from the water shield.

'Not all vampires have my power,' Justin countered.

Justin pushed his hand out and the water shield rippled and spread even wider.

'I don't need an audience for this,' he said.

Justin sniffed the air. The cut on my finger was a bit more jagged now, and longer. Blood streamed from it down my hand. He brought my hand to his nose and licked the blood from my finger. I turned my face away; shivers ran through me.

'Remember how you said I had to abide by some silly vampire laws? Want to see what I am capable of now?'

Justin's hand travelled again to the back of my neck. I thought he was reaching for my necklace, but he tipped my head back and stared into my eyes. Was he going to kiss me again? I shivered with horror.

'What are you . . .'

Once our gaze locked, I couldn't break it. I wanted to but I couldn't. The moonlight highlighted his pinpoint pupils. A sensation of falling took over my mind. It was as though I was watching a movie in fast forward.

The beach, the moon, the woods and sky fall into shadow. My whole body seems to fall through the sand, through the earth, down into the centre of the world, into darkness. I have no form. No body. Just my mind. It's quite cool here. Peaceful, in fact.

I want to float here in this darkness. Had I been on a beach? Oh, it doesn't matter, does it? Beaches and the world, and life – it is all pointless when I can be here in this place, with no doors, no walls and no body to call my own.

'Damn it!' Justin spat. I heaved a great breath of air and fell to the water with a splash. Salt. Blood. Muscles contracting in my legs and arms.

With a sneer, Justin lurched out of the bay and on to the sand. He turned and glared at me. A revelation passed over his face. I didn't know what it meant, but Justin had clearly figured *something* out.

I wanted to move faster than my mind would allow. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I felt slower than I wanted to be.

'What did you just do to me?' I cried and ran my hands up my chest and over my arms. 'What was that place?'

'Take Rhode out of here,' Justin ordered the other vampires as he wiped some sand from the front of his pants.

'No!' I screamed, and the word ripped through my throat. I stumbled; my head was so fuzzy and my coordination was off.

'Lenah!' Rhode's scream carried over the beach. 'Lenah! Run!'

They dragged Rhode to the grass. As I turned, so did the shield, to keep me from my Rhode.

'Don't hurt her!' Rhode yelled.

A conflagration so great, Fire had said. I could do it. I could throw the necklace.

I staggered to the soggy sand and ripped the chain from my neck. The metal pulled away from my skin and crunched under the force of my grip.

Justin laughed again. 'What the hell are you doing?'

The tiny pendant was like fire in my hand, wanting to be set free. I opened my hand, and the necklace flew through the air towards Justin. He jumped out of the way as the pendant melted into a fireball.

It hit the barrier of water with an explosion, sending red sparks into the air. The water shield swallowed the fire. I hid my face in the crook of my arm, waiting for it to implode. Once it did, I would run through and rescue Rhode. The fire would chase the vampires away from Wickham, away from us, and I

could spend the rest of my time explaining to Rhode all the ways in which I would never fail him again.

I peeked over my arm.

The red pendant was now the size of a basketball inside the centre of the spinning water. The water shield pulsed to the rhythm of a heartbeat. It contracted and then doubled in size. It contracted again . . . growing even bigger. Where was the conflagration? Where was Fire's power?

Wide-eyed, Justin backed away towards the beach grass. 'What is that?' he asked, as the orange deepened to a coral colour and the sphere engorged even more.

I didn't dare breathe. No one moved. The ground rumbled and the orb shook. Any moment . . . *Come on!* I prayed.

The bubble blasted apart. A great rush of air lifted me off the shore and I flew back into the water. I rocketed to the bottom, completely submerged, and kicked to the surface. I broke through and gasped. Crackling fiery embers shot through the air like fireworks. Red trails from the combustion fell to the ground in grand arcs. There was a symphony of hisses as flames dived towards the bay and, finally, were extinguished.

What had happened?

Not even a red ember or a tiny flame flickered in the starry night.

The water shield had engulfed the fire pendant and exploded, leaving nothing behind but a black scorch mark on the sand. It hadn't produced the inferno that Fire had promised.

It had failed. I had used my *one* power and it completely failed me.

The explosion must have thrown Justin back as well. As he stood up, his mouth was lifted into a closed-lipped smile.

'He knows nothing,' I said but my voice cracked, growing hoarse.

Justin bowed and pretended to doff a cap to me. He jumped the sea wall with the agility of a cat and left me bleeding in the bay – alone.

'Rhode?' I cried into the darkness, even though I knew it was pointless.

I sloshed out of the water, tripped over myself and fell on to the sand. My palm rested in an overlapping map of footprints. I would have followed them as Vicken had trained me to do, but they disappeared at the sea wall.

'Rhode?' I called out again, and my voice cracked.

I scrambled up to the sea wall, but the woods were too dark for me to see. I spun around again. The beach was empty except for the dead vampire girl a few hundred yards away.

Rhode was gone.

I did the only thing I could do – I ran.

Chapter 10

I found my ruby dagger near the beach grass and tucked it into its sheath. The soft sand made it difficult to keep up my pace, but I continued down the beach. My thighs burned and my calves ached but physical pain was meaningless now.

Tony. Get to Tony.

I fell to my knees just as a Wickham security van pulled past the steps to the beach. I breathed in the musty smell of the sand.

Tony. He could make sense of anything.

Once the tail lights faded away, I ran up the stairs and along the back of Quartz. I stopped at Tony's window and knocked three times. A crash and a bunch of swear words followed. He came to the window and peered outside holding the paintbrush like a dagger. I brought my face close to the glass. He jumped and shook his head once he recognized me.

'Do you like me alive, Lenah?' he asked, and opened the window. 'Because you're going to kill me if you scare me like that again.' He squatted and looked me up and down. 'What the hell happened to you? You're shaking. Come inside.'

'I need my knives,' I said. My teeth chattered together. 'Knives,' I said again.

'Sure, sure. Knives. OK, Crazy,' he said as I sat down on the floor beneath the window.

'I need to get to my room. Knives are in my room,' I said.

All I could see were Rhode's eyes through the water shield. He had mouthed the word 'forever'. Even after I lied to him, Rhode still wanted me to know that he would love me forever. He instinctively understood that we were cut from the same stars. Even though he couldn't articulate it, even though he couldn't remember me, he knew we were meant for one another.

Tony's hand wrapped around my arm. 'You've got quite a cut there.' He lifted me up. 'And you're soaked.' He sniffed me. 'Were you swimming in the bay?'

'My knives.'

'We'll get your pretty knives in a minute,' he said. 'First we need to tell Tina you fell and get you a pass for being late. If we don't, you'll get a detention.

Wow, you really need to clean up. With soap.'

Tony sat on the floor at the base of my bed.

'You know,' he said, 'it would be nice if we could have a conversation that doesn't involve the expression "Holy crap, now what do we do?"'

Thunk.

I threw Fire's ruby-hilted dagger again and into a wall that didn't connect to anyone else's. I walked to the end of the room and retrieved it for another throw.

Tony held a note from Tracy. It said that she was going to take Kate to the infirmary. Apparently Kate had tripped and fallen and hit her head on the way back from the club. Going to Bolt and meeting the Italian vampire seemed like so long ago.

I threw the knife again.

'That's like ten feet. You're really accurate,' Tony said. 'It's scary.'

'We can't do anything,' I said. 'I don't know where Justin is. It's not like I know any vampires around here.'

'Well, you kind of do,' Tony said, as I grabbed the knife from the hole I had made in the wall. I resumed my position at the end of the bed and gripped the dagger even harder. The heat of my skin against the hilt allowed me to draw a deep breath, perhaps for the first time since Rhode kissed me on the beach. 'You sort of know that guy we're meeting at the chapel tomorrow night?' Tony continued, 'The nice man you assaulted at the club?'

'We? *We're* not meeting anyone.'

I threw the knife again. After it hit the target, Tony said, 'I'm going with you.' His jaw was tight. 'You're not walking into that place by yourself.'

'That *place*? The chapel?'

'The vampire chapel now, as I like to call it.'

If I tried to prevent Tony from joining me, I knew he would just put himself in harm's way anyway.

'Hey, your neck looks burned. Did you know that? Where's your necklace?' Tony asked.

I reached to the base of my throat where the pendant had been. I sucked in a breath when my fingers ran over a raised spot. I went over to the mirror; a small teardrop shape was branded on my skin. Tony stood behind me and we gazed at the reflection together. I dropped my hand away. Now that I thought about it, my palm had some small red welts too. Must have been from when I grasped on to the burning jewel.

'The pendant warmed up when Justin was close by. It's heated up a few times when vampires have been near. It burned my palms too.' I showed Tony my hands.

‘Like a warning device?’ he asked.

‘I hadn’t thought of that. But yes, I guess so. I used it to try and stop Justin.’ I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror when I admitted, ‘But his water shield overpowered it.’

Tony returned to his spot on the floor and rested his head on his knees. ‘What the hell is a water shield?’ he said in a very small voice.

Thunk.

I hit the target again.

‘Didn’t Fire give that necklace to you? Isn’t she, like, all-powerful?’

‘She’s Fire. An element. Water is an element too. These aren’t manufactured weapons. They are just the elements, which, left to their own devices, are powerful. But Justin’s water extinguished the fire.’

I investigated the scuffs on my shoes and mumbled, ‘Like I said, I failed.’

Tony’s head snapped up. ‘You didn’t fail. You tried, and maybe tomorrow night we can ask that vampire for help.’

I aimed at the hole in the wall and the dagger sank perfectly into the spot again. I wouldn’t have missed Justin’s vampire on the beach now. I would have been able to help Rhode.

The latch clicked. I didn’t have enough time to retrieve the knife. Tracy stepped into the room. Her mouth parted as she looked to the blade in the wall.

‘What are you doing?’

I hesitated, choosing my words. I decided to go with literal. ‘Practising.’

‘So I don’t get it,’ Tracy said. ‘What do you think he wants?’

‘I don’t get it either. He doesn’t want the ritual that Rhode and I performed. I don’t know why, since it’s all any vampire has wanted for centuries. I had no answers. I slapped my hands against my thighs and paced before Tracy and Tony. They sat together on Tony’s bed. I’d never been stumped by a vampire’s behaviour before. I’d been the expert.

The ritual to turn a vampire human again would provide enormous power to those that performed it, even if they didn’t intend to sacrifice themselves. Pouring negative intentions into a spell so powerful would unleash real danger and potentially morph the ritual into something else, something dangerous. It was always the intentions that mattered most.

‘Maybe he really doesn’t want humanity,’ Tony said, still talking about Justin.

‘Remember how you said I had to abide by some silly vampire laws? Want to see what I am capable of now?’

Justin hadn’t tried to get the ritual from me; his focus had been Rhode. OK, what were the rest of the facts? He had left those frogs to torment me. He had

kidnapped Rhode. There was no pattern. I was the only common factor. I stopped pacing and gripped the window frame.

More facts: Justin couldn't turn me into a vampire; he couldn't hurt me either. I shook my head – what was the missing piece? The dagger was now back in the trunk so I couldn't keep throwing it to help me concentrate. It was dark outside, so the brightness within the room reflected my face in the window. My hair was matted down on my forehead and my clothes were still soaked through. I touched the back of my head with my fingertips and winced; it was tender from when Justin gripped me and stared into my eyes.

The memory of the dark shadows overtaking the world replayed in my head. My body had nearly disappeared; I had no sense of being on the beach when we had shared a stare. Justin had tipped my head back and my reality was out of my control.

On the beach I had stared into Justin's cold and vacant green eyes and my consciousness had been transported.

I jumped in my seat.

This was part of the missing piece.

'His eyes,' I said aloud and spun to face Tracy and Tony. 'Tonight. He was doing something when he looked in my eyes.'

'Who?' Tony asked.

I explained what happened on the beach in as much detail as I could.

'. . . and then we were both back at Wickham. I fell into the water and he dropped to the sand,' I finished.

'So he sends you *somewhere*,' Tony said, trying to understand.

'Not my body. We don't transport physically,' I explained.

'Like on *Star Trek*,' he said.

'*Star Trek*?' I asked not familiar with the phrase.

'Never mind. So you don't go anywhere physically,' Tony asked.

'But my mind does,' I clarified.

What Justin was doing was very dangerous. To be able to look in my mind and transport me somewhere? I had *never* in six hundred years heard of this before. Such powers were especially surprising in a vampire so young.

I stepped back from the window until my heels hit the base of my bed across the room.

'What?' Tony asked. 'What's wrong?'

Sunrise bled over the green and highlighted the back of Tony and Tracy's heads. It was the kind of red that I would have loved had the colour not mocked me. I touched the bruise on my chest and winced.

'You have that look on your face again,' Tony said. 'You know, the one where

you’re going to bite someone?’

Whatever Justin was messing with was way out of my league and completely out of bounds for Tracy and Tony.

‘I need to arm you,’ I said, and jumped back into the mind set of Lenah the soldier. I got up and knelt before the trunk Fire had left me and quietly clicked the locks. The hinges squeaked a bit and I sat back on my heels. I had definitely seen more than a few daggers in the trunk.

I moved a few things out of the way in search of the daggers, the longsword I planned to bring to rescue Rhode, a few books, my satchel of money – and . . .

A box.

A small wooden box with a strange swirling design etched into the top. Moonstone crawled over the wood like a plant vine.

‘I’ve never seen this,’ I said aloud.

‘What is it?’ Tracy asked.

‘Come down here,’ I said. Tony and a sleepy-eyed Tracy knelt beside me at the trunk.

I opened the lid.

Inside were two silver rings and a bracelet. Each was adorned with a gemstone. The vine design covered the bracelet; in the centre was a dark blue sapphire the shape of a teardrop.

‘*Water* . . .’ a voice whispered. It echoed about the room and slowly rippled away.

Tracy gripped my forearm and froze. I looked around. The room remained unchanged; no flickers of red or crimson. Was I expecting Fire to hover above me like an apparition?

‘Hello?’ I waited, my heart beating at the base of my throat.

No reply.

‘I’m not hearing voices now, am I?’ Tony asked.

‘No, we all heard it,’ I said.

One of the rings had a very white opal set in it and the other an amber stone. It was one of the most vibrant stones of that colour I had ever seen. Wait . . . a gold stone, a white one, brown, and blue. Ah. It all clicked. These were the remaining elements: earth, air and water.

The sunrise fell through the room and over the box. It warmed my fingertips. Whether or not that box had been in the trunk before didn’t matter, *couldn’t* matter. We had them now – the remaining three elements – and if I spent my time wondering why Fire behaved the way she did, I would be asking the universe how it worked, and that was not high on my list of priorities at that moment.

‘These are weapons. Just like my pendant, they might seem like ordinary jewels, but they’re not. As you can see here –’ I showed them the burn on my chest again – ‘when they get warm, they are warning you a vampire is near. If they get hot enough to burn you, you are in mortal danger.’

Tracy raised her eyebrows and Tony lifted himself on his knees. Their eagerness sent a shot of panic through me. Maybe I was too quick with these weapons. I lowered the box into my lap.

‘What?’ Tracy asked.

‘Maybe I’m going about this all wrong. Maybe I’m being too rash. These aren’t typical human weapons. These were made in another realm by extremely powerful supernatural creatures. I have to think this through some more,’ I said, and closed the lid on the gems. I couldn’t get anything else out about my doubts because Tracy shot up and snatched every picture off her bureau mirror. She slid open a desk drawer and took out a photo album. When she sat back down, she threw the pictures of Justin and her friends into my lap and opened the album. She flipped violently through the photos.

Justin and Tracy on a beach.

Justin and Kate water skiing.

Justin and his brothers on Justin’s father’s boat.

Wait . . . where *were* Justin’s brothers? Why were there only pictures of Kate and Claudia? Justin’s brothers Roy and Curtis also went to Wickham.

‘What happened to Roy and Curtis?’ I asked.

‘When Justin went missing, their mom took them out of school.’

Made sense. Why continue to send her children to a school from which her middle child had disappeared and where no one could find any answers? I had met Justin’s mother and she loved her son like my mother loved me.

I flipped to the last page in the photo album.

It was of a snorkelling trip on a very familiar boat. *Justin’s* boat.

‘If you don’t let me help you get my friend back, Lenah, I’ll go to that chapel tomorrow night myself.’

‘That vampire could be worse than Justin,’ I said.

‘He could have killed you at the farm or in the club, but he didn’t,’ Tony countered.

I dipped my chin to my chest. ‘Look, I just can’t—’

‘Risk anything happening to us?’ Tracy asked.

‘I’ve seen what happened before. And when put to task, I failed. I failed Rhode tonight.’

‘Maybe you wouldn’t have if we had been there, Lenah. Justin was my friend. His brothers too. And you say he’s a monster who’s got Rhode, and that Tony’s

at risk too. I want to be a part of this. I need it.' She shook her head, keeping her gaze on the photos. 'I think maybe . . . maybe we've been waiting for you to come these last three years. To help us.'

Justin smiled at me from the mess of pictures on the floor. He used to lift his chin and tilt his face to the sun. In warmer weather, a wash of freckles spread over his nose. We had walked the pathways of this school together with his arm over my shoulder.

Without another word I handed the silver ring with the amber stone to Tony.

He opened his palm.

'Knives will be useless against Justin. With these, you're armed with real power that could help you. Save you. You don't know what vampire might come around and add you to his coven simply because you know me.'

I handed the bracelet cuff with a sapphire to Tracy. The colour of her eyes matched the stone.

'Cast these into the air at your enemy,' I instructed. 'The moment each flies from your body, it will become the element it represents. Make sure nothing is in its way, especially another element. That's what happened to me tonight. Justin's water shield blocked my fire. Yours,' I said, turning to Tony, 'is earth.'

'How?' he asked, but the question was directed at the seemingly innocuous silver ring in his palm.

I touched the sensitive spot where the gem had sat at the base of my neck. It had seemed so right. Rhode was taken – stolen away. That was the moment I needed it most.

'Mine was fire, yours is earth and Tracy's is water.'

Tracy twisted her wrist to get a better look. She lightly rested her fingertips on the stone.

'What about air?' she asked.

'Once Rhode returns, that will be his.'

I didn't look up from the ring sitting in the bottom of the box. Because Tony and Tracy's faces would have told me they didn't know whether Rhode was coming back. I closed the lid and placed the box in the trunk. I had to make this right.

'Remember,' I said, 'you can only use them one time. Then they're gone.' A sting of regret whipped through me. If I'd known it was there, I could have given that ring to Rhode earlier. Tracy was right. Maybe together we could have stopped Justin.

Tomorrow night I would demand answers from that vampire with the Italian accent and strange eyes. I would tell him about that dead vampire wearing a necklace with the same symbol. The woman on the beach, who at daybreak

would transform to nothing but dust.

In the morning, after assembly, I walked to the union. Nobody mentioned Rhode's disappearance yet. Ms Williams would have to say something and soon. People would notice quickly.

When Rhode and I were vampires, we could sense one another's thoughts and dreams. Even the last time we had been together at Wickham as humans, I could, at times, read his emotions and sometimes even his thoughts! We were Anam Cara, soulmates, and this was not uncommon. But so far this time, even before he had been kidnapped, I could not reach Rhode's mind.

I would find him – I would.

I passed trees dotted with 'missing' posters of Jackie Simms. Justin's posters were curling at the edges. In search of comfort, I slipped my fingers around the little bracelet I had made from my work dress. With my skin touching the stains of Suleen's blood, I was able to keep the agony at bay enough to focus.

I could not go off campus and leave Tony and Tracy so vulnerable. It wasn't enough that they now had weapons.

I stepped into the union to have some coffee and a good think. From there I would also have a good view of the chapel. The vampire had shown he could be out in the day and I wanted to keep watch. He was possibly my only hope for getting Rhode back.

'He's probably in England,' someone said at a table nearby. 'He always said he wanted to go back.' As I expected, people were talking about Rhode's disappearance already.

'For a girl, I bet,' someone else replied.

'Ms Tate said he asked to leave.'

While I listened to the gossip, I spun a spoon in my coffee cup.

Before I could eavesdrop any more, Tony plopped down across from me. He checked behind him, and on either side of our table.

'Good, we're alone,' he said.

'Yes . . . very,' I replied. 'And you have paint on your nose.' He didn't even respond to that. Instead he slid a small leather-bound book towards me.

'What's this?' I placed my hand on the soft cover.

'I haven't exactly studied it, but if it is what I think it is, you'll be thanking me.'

I opened the book and my breath caught. I flipped a few pages. Rhode's handwriting. This was some kind of journal.

'You broke into his *room?'* I wondered how he decorated the walls and the kinds of books he had on the shelves.

‘Well, you said you wanted some answers. So I figured, why not go get some? Don’t look at me like that, Lenah. A security guard was stationed outside the door so I snuck in through the window. This was on the desk.’

A guffaw of laughter erupted from the astronomy club at a table nearby.

‘We really shouldn’t read this,’ I said.

‘*I* shouldn’t read it,’ Tony said, taking a sip from my coffee without asking. ‘*You* should.’

I kept my hand on the closed book. Rhode could have remembered any number of things that he put in his journal. But he also recorded his private thoughts. I was sure he didn’t intend anyone to read them, especially me.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ Tony said. He pointed at me with charcoal-smeared fingers. ‘That you shouldn’t be reading it. But let me tell you, if I was kidnapped by Señor Crazy Pants and my soulmate had my journal, I’d want her to read it. Especially if I had no memory.’

It was true; he could have clues in this journal, memories of his life as a vampire. I wanted to know how much he remembered. Not only out of curiosity but to see if he could defend himself in any way. One thing I was sure of, even though I did not know his plans, was that Justin would coerce Rhode for information.

‘What?’ Tony said, taking another sip. ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Rhode’s options,’ I said. I still had my hand on the journal. Tony got up to fetch himself some lunch. I wasn’t alone more than a second when Tracy sat down next to me holding a tray of soup and salad.

‘I see he gave you the journal.’

‘To torment me,’ I replied, and dropped it in my bag. I would read it when I was alone. For now I had to focus on tonight and the meeting with the vampire.

‘We should meet in Tony’s room. It’s the shortest distance to the chapel,’ I said.

When Tony sat back down, he had with him possibly the largest helping of hamburger and French fries in history.

‘You need help,’ Tracy said to him.

‘So you think Justin will be back?’ Tony asked through a mouthful of meat. He ignored Tracy. ‘Tonight?’

‘Hopefully not for a while,’ Tracy said but her attention was drawn across the union. Claudia was talking closely with other girls at her table. She wasn’t wearing make-up and had pulled her hair into a messy ponytail. She wore Wickham pyjama bottoms.

‘Looks like Claudia found out Kate is dating her ex,’ Tracy said. ‘I told her to stay away from Alex.’ She shook her head.

I would have given anything to just be worried about school and the latest Wickham gossip.

‘Maybe he’ll wait for you to come to him?’ Tony said, still talking about Justin. Our attempts at optimism were pathetic.

I stood and gathered up my things. ‘Forget about Kate and Claudia, Tracy. They’re here and immersed in school stuff. It means they’re safe. Expect Justin tonight.’ I hitched my bag over my shoulder. ‘Tony’s room, eleven thirty. Both of you be ready. And wear your weapons.’

Chapter 11

At eleven fifteen Tracy and I signed in for the night with Tina and pretended to go to our room. As soon as the door closed, I tossed Tracy a dagger.

'Night!' we heard Tina call to a few other girls on our floor. Her room was only two doors down from ours.

'Let's just give it a minute,' I whispered to Tracy.

After a moment of silence she asked, 'How can someone use air to make themselves move faster? Like Justin does?'

'If you maliciously kill a living being, you break the life cycle,' I said. 'You kill them before their life contract is complete, so to speak.'

I had killed so many. I had relished in the taste of their blood as it gushed into my mouth, coating my throat. Once it coursed through me, I was renewed, powerful.

I continued: 'If you make someone a vampire, you unlatch the soul from the natural order. That's just the gateway. After that, you can unlatch other natural orders, like the elements. It gives the vampire a real rush to use an element they can no longer access with their bodies. Wield the wind, even though you can't feel it on your face. It gives a vampire a powerful advantage.

I had once stood in a field of lavender conjuring the wind so violently that it made the branches of nearby trees creak and strain. But I wasn't interested in manipulating the elements.

I loved Rhode.

But power had once been my master.

'So the *only* way Justin can get his humanity back is the ritual?'

'It is my best hope for him,' I said.

Behind her, on the mirror above the dresser, Justin smiled at me from seven or eight photographs. Tracy had put them back in meticulous order. In another picture, Kate, Claudia and Tracy sat on the sea wall smiling into the camera, the sun making them squint.

'I promise – my ultimate goal for Justin is to bring him back. If I can,' I said.

'Good,' Tracy said with a little nod. 'Good,' she added in a small whisper,

which perhaps was not meant for me to hear.

‘Let’s see,’ I said, and pressed my ear to the door. I listened for any more noise in the hall. I heard some voices but they were muted; behind closed doors. I checked the hallway.

‘It’s empty,’ I whispered.

Tracy checked the time on her cell phone. ‘Eleven thirty-eight.’

‘We’re late, let’s go,’ I replied.

We kept our backs to the wall and crept towards the boys’ dorm. We made it to the double-door entrance when I stopped.

‘I think my heart might explode,’ Tracy whispered.

I didn’t reply. I closed my eyes and tried to listen like I had as a vampire.

The hum of air systems.

More muted voices behind doors.

Light music but no footsteps.

‘I think we’re OK,’ I said. I motioned for Tracy to keep going. We tiptoed to Tony’s door, slid the key in the lock and entered.

‘What the hell are you wearing?’ Tracy asked once we had closed the door.

Tony wore camouflage pants and a black shirt. He flexed his biceps in front of the mirror.

‘What am I wearing?’ he replied. ‘Only the most expensive camo pants the Orleans Army Navy store had in stock. We need to blend in with the scenery,’ Tony said, and scoffed when Tracy’s only reply was the raise of an eyebrow. ‘What am I wearing?’ He shook his head.

‘He thinks he’s Special Ops,’ Tracy said to me.

‘What’s Special Ops?’ I asked.

Tracy clapped a hand on my shoulder. ‘When this is all over, you’re getting a tutorial,’ she said. With that, we climbed out of Tony’s window and into the night.

Security, as I expected, was subtly heightened with Rhode’s disappearance. If I hadn’t been aware of it, I wasn’t sure I would have noticed the extra cars on campus or the second guard at the gate.

Tony and Tracy had spent the better part of the morning marking where the surveillance cameras were so when we crossed over the quad and headed to the chapel, we would be able to sneak into the building without being seen. Luckily for us, the chapel had no security cameras.

As we stood with our backs against Quartz block, I rested my hands on my hips. The shadows were thick tonight. Across the quad, the dim lights from student bedrooms barely illuminated the grass. Not even the moon was out; just

the clouds passing over the inky sky. The constellations, which were meant to show me the way, help me navigate my choices, were shrouded just as they had been the night Rhode was taken.

'A veiled sky is no friend,' Rhode used to say.

Used to say. Before the loss of his memory. Before all of this.

'There it is,' Tony whispered dramatically, pointing across campus.

'We know. We see the chapel every day,' Tracy said.

'Yes, but tonight a vampire is in there waiting for us. It's different.'

'For starters, let's just make it across the quad to the union,' I said.

We ran towards the chapel, bent low. We crossed the path that led from the Quartz to the library, made it over the green and were almost at the union when Tony stopped. He hissed and slid the ring off his finger.

'Damn it. You're right. It's hot.' He bounced it in his hand.

'Mine is warming up too,' Tracy whispered.

'Get down,' I ordered. 'Now.'

We hit the grass. Within seconds a security van pulled around the library and down the car path to Quartz. It crept by and headed up towards Seeker block. Tony crawled over to me. I touched the ring in his palm. It pulsed little beats of heat just as my necklace had on the beach.

I lifted my head, though kept my body close to the ground.

'What do you see?' Tracy asked with a grimace. It seemed the bracelet had singed her skin because she lifted it from her wrist. We had to get out of here.

The lights of the union were out and the dorms were far enough away now that their light could not illuminate the quad. We had no choice but to keep going in the darkness. I just hoped we could get to the chapel before Justin or any of his men saw us – if they hadn't already. I had no doubt someone was watching. 'Let's go,' I said.

We were up and running through the shadows again.

Panic zoomed through my stomach. We moved quickly past the union and on to the second lacrosse field. Once we made it past the back of the building, we were only fifty yards or so from the chapel.

'Victory!' Tony whispered and threw his hands in the air.

'You're still an idiot,' Tracy said with a smile.

Mint and sage filled the air, from the farm, which was nearby. We slowed down and headed up the hill to the chapel. I checked behind me but didn't sense anyone following us. The area was too big for me to tell for sure.

'Yikes,' Tracy said, and slipped the bracelet off her wrist completely. Tony had slid his ring back on but shook his hand out.

'It burns again,' he said. His eyes widened and he pointed behind me. 'Watch

out!’

There was the sound of feet running. Bodies leapt in the darkness. Because of the overwhelming shadows I didn’t know where they were coming from and who, or what, we were dealing with. I unsheathed my dagger and held it in front of me. Tracy and Tony did the same, following my cue.

Vampires stood like statues in a circle around us. There were at least twelve of them, and only three of us. Each one held a weapon of some kind.

My dagger seemed so silly, outstretched in my hand. I dropped the point of my blade just enough to meet the eyes of the Italian vampire. He stood directly across from me. I evaluated these vampires; their energy was not directed at us. Some of them weren’t even facing us. I kept my dagger raised.

‘I thought you wanted to meet inside the chapel?’ I said.

‘Quiet,’ he whispered curtly, his silver eyes darted around the circle to the woods beyond. He held a long machete that curved at the tip, and the point of the blade rested dangerously close to his leg.

All of the vampires wore that symbol, the same one he did: an encircled R.

‘Go!’ the Italian vampire commanded.

The vampires moved as a choreographed unit, and within seconds there were two flanking me. One was the Italian, the other a girl with long blonde hair that fell in a ponytail down her back. Her silver eyes kept dancing at the woods.

‘I’m waiting for Lenah!’ Tony cried. Two vampires were leading him away towards the chapel and he struggled against their grasp. Tracy too was struggling against her guard.

‘Go, Tony!’ I cried. ‘Tracy, I’m all right.’

I hoped that was true.

The blonde vampire stared into the woods and whispered something to the leader in a language I couldn’t understand.

‘Formation! Go!’ she yelled, this time in English. I jumped from the force of her voice. She stepped before me, guarding me from Justin.

The same black clouds that I had seen on Main Street ushered Justin across the fields. They curled over the grass like fast-moving storm clouds. The Italian ran at Justin, his machete high in the air.

‘Run!’ the blonde said, moving her metallic eyes to mine.

Together we ran towards the chapel. I wasn’t sure how to protect myself. I didn’t want to see that darkness Justin conjured when he forced our stare. I didn’t want to watch the world fall away. With every step, I expected Justin’s grip to slap around my wrist and drag me from the field.

‘Keep going,’ the blonde girl shouted, as she slowed and shot arrow after arrow at Justin. I had to fight the instinct to turn and help.

‘You should know better, Liliana,’ Justin said from behind me. I stopped short when the blonde – Liliana – flew into the air and landed at my feet. She immediately flipped on to her back and shot another arrow. It sailed past Justin’s ear. I tried to pull her out of his way, but Justin waved his hand again and Liliana was lifted from the ground. She hurled through the air and landed with a hard crack all the way back at the union. The fall would have killed a human instantly, but with a shake of her head, Liliana was up on her feet and running back towards the fight.

Justin stood before me in the same style of black suit he’d worn previously.

‘Miss me?’ he asked.

‘What did you do with Rhode?’ I demanded.

From behind him, Justin’s vampires ran out of the woods directly at the Italian vampire’s coven.

‘Get them inside the chapel!’ the Italian screamed, and yelled something else in that language I couldn’t understand.

‘I always knew you were feisty, Lenah, but you should probably stop fighting me. Save your strength . . . for later.’

He slapped his hand around my wrist and dragged me across the field, away from the chapel. My knees gave out and I kept tripping over my boots. The tightness of Justin’s grip sent spasms of pain from my shoulders to my hands. The Italian vampire jumped in front of us, swinging his machete at Justin’s chest.

‘You’re completely ineffective, Cassius,’ Justin snarled as he batted the machete aside and yanked me away from the chapel. ‘Why bother?’

Cassius replied to Justin in the mysterious language. I couldn’t tell if Justin understood because he didn’t respond. Cassius retrieved the machete and swung it so Justin had to jump back. In doing so, I was freed from his grasp. I wanted to sink to the ground and hold my arm to my body. The pressure from his grip had been nearly unbearable. Justin and Cassius exchanged blows as I ran towards the chapel. I wasn’t sure how the chapel could protect me, only that Fire’s weapons were on Tracy and Tony and they could immediately put us at an advantage.

One of Cassius’s vampires fell into pace beside me. Ahead, by the golden light of the chapel doorway, Tony helped Tracy inside. The wind rushed above our heads again and I knew Justin was airborne for a second time.

‘Watch it!’ my guard cried out and we slowed to a stop, not sure where Justin was going to land.

Justin’s cloud cover dropped him before me like a finger snap. He wrestled me to the ground with a hard *thud*. My head pounded and I blinked fast to clear my vision. A flash of metal crossed my eye line. The vampire that had been guarding

me sliced through the air holding a sword, but there was a *crack*.

The *crack* of bone snapping.

I sat up. The vampire who was trying to help me had collapsed in a heap on the ground, his own sword through his heart.

Cassius appeared seemingly from nowhere and yanked the sword from the dead vampire's chest. He held the bloodied sword in one hand and his machete in the other.

'I'm impressed by your passion,' Justin said to Cassius. 'But Lenah's not worth it, I promise.'

The way Justin spoke as a vampire – the cadence and the tone – was so cold and precise.

'Stay behind me,' Cassius instructed, but kept his focus on Justin. If I ran, it would cause a diversion, but Justin was entirely too fast and I hated being useless.

Justin cocked his head at Cassius. The machete was high in Cassius's left hand, the sword in his right. He kept shifting his weight, ready to pounce.

'I wondered what had happened to you this past year,' Justin said. 'I thought you might just be hanging back and letting your special friends do all your dirty work for you.'

'We've thwarted your attacks on Lenah and Wickham campus four times now,' Cassius spat. 'Now tell her!' he shouted, his strong, menacing features contorting. 'Tell her why we have come to protect her! Why we save her!'

'Where were you last night when we took her precious Rhode?' Justin asked.

Cassius growled. 'You killed our watch. Our best archer. We got there only moments after you left.'

Justin pushed out his palm, and grey polluted air unfurled like a snake around Cassius's knife and machete. Cassius cried out and fell to his knees. His fangs descended with a hiss and he dropped his weapons on the grass. The grey smoke evaporated, yet Cassius's hands lay limp in his lap.

'Stop this,' I said though I knew it was pointless.

Justin's cold fingers locked on me again. His icy palm pulled my head towards his face.

Look away. Look away.

But I couldn't . . .

Our eyes met, and the moon darkened.

There is no sky. No grass. No Wickham. I am no longer standing – there is only endless, infinite space.

My tension dissipates – I can just float here if I want to. I don't need to worry about Rhode or the fight on the field. Yes, this is right. I want to be here with

Justin. I want to be without my body. Why am I even fighting Justin? I should be helping him. I love him. If I stay here, he will find me.

I crumpled to the grass. My forehead smacked the ground, sending a wave of nausea through me. I inhaled the scent of the soil and brought my knees to my chest in a fetal position. I couldn't fight any more. No more. *I am still in my body. That's what counts. I am safe.*

Justin too had hit the ground. He seemed bewildered by the sight of me. He hoisted himself up and backed away.

'What are you trying to do?' I croaked, while cradling my head.

'It's no use,' he muttered. 'That's twice now. I can't take you.'

Take me. That's what he's doing. *Taking* me somewhere.

The middle of my forehead throbbed again and again. I could barely lift my neck the ache was so bad.

'I'll find a way,' he said under his breath. And with a burst of cold air, he spread his fingers wide and was gone from the field. He moved too fast for my mind to ascertain which direction he had gone.

CHAPTER 12

I'll find a way.

I kept repeating it to myself. *I'll find a way.*

This was all part of Justin's plan.

The pain in my head had dulled, but it was still sensitive to touch.

'Get inside. Get inside,' Cassius said, leading me into the chapel. When I stepped inside the building, Tracy was sitting in the last pew, holding her wrist close to her body. Tony stood at her side with a hand on her shoulder. A vampire approached Tracy, holding a medical bag. She drew her hand away nervously.

The vampire knelt before Tracy. 'You should trust me,' he said. 'I've been a healer for two hundred years.'

My gut wrenched at the discomfort in her eyes. She stretched out her arm and he produced a bandage from the bag.

A chill ran over me and I hugged myself to keep warm. Justin had forced my gaze a few times now. It was purposeful; it wasn't just to 'look into my eyes'. He wanted to remove me from my conciousness. Like I was being transported from my body.

I'll find a way.

To do what? This plan of Justin's, whatever it was, was much more complicated than I realized. I had been wasting time puzzling it out as if his intent was simply to attack Wickham. I should have been trying to find a way to take him down. If I injured him, I could stop him from gaining any more power. I could try to find the boy I knew and loved inside that vampire shell.

I walked down the aisle of the chapel and sat down in the first row of pews. Behind me, the vampires paced up and down the rows. Two stood by the door keeping watch on the fields.

'His coven is gone,' one of the vampires said to Cassius as he followed me up the row.

When Justin takes me, what are the steps? He seemed to have power over my consciousness but couldn't follow through with it because vampire law prevented him from hurting me.

I shivered.

Wherever he took me, I liked being there. Whatever Justin was capable of doing to me numbed me to reality. My world had become his world.

I'll find a way . . . to do what exactly? What was the purpose?

Cassius handed me a towel so I could clean my face and hands. The chapel was a large stone room with stained-glass windows high up in the walls. The moon filtered through the decorated glass, casting pearly moonlight on to the pews and pulpit. Vampires had no fear of churches or religious buildings; they held no sway. Yet, in a room such as this, I felt protected.

Tony stood protectively by Tracy's side watching the vampire care for her injury. A purple bruise blossomed on my wrist. It shone through the fabric of the bloodied bracelet.

'*Renoiera . . .*'

There was that word again.

Renoiera . . .

'OK . . .' Tony said quietly. 'What's Reno-yare-a?'

At the back of the room, at least six vampires stood in a row behind the last pew. When meeting my eyes, they bowed their heads. Cassius was the only one near me and knelt down in the aisle next to my pew.

'What language are you speaking?' I asked. 'It's not Spanish or French. Nor any romance language I've ever heard.'

'It is our language,' he said. 'Called Linderatu.'

'A *vampire* language?' I asked incredulously. I leaned towards him and lifted the pendant from his neck. 'And what is this symbol?' I said. He examined my features with such awe that I dropped the pendant.

'It is *your* symbol: R for Renoiera.'

'*My* symbol?'

'Renoiera . . .' He said, rolling the *r*, like in Spanish. Tony murmured the word behind me.

'What does it mean?'

'It means queen,' Cassius said. 'For you.'

'Queen?' Ridiculous.

Cassius bowed again and the rest of the vampires at the back of the room followed suit.

'I'm not your queen. You must be mistaken. None of you should have any idea who I am.'

Cassius knelt again. 'How we know of you is but one of very many questions you will have answered tonight.'

'Please stand,' I whispered to Cassius. As I reached down, my fingers grazed

his shoulder. I gasped.

'You're . . . you're *warm,*' I stammered. 'No, you're positively hot. Like a human.' Another question immediately blossomed in my mind. 'Is this related to why you can be out during the day?'

My head throbbed and I pressed my fingertips to my temple.

Tell her! Cassius had screamed. *Tell her why we have come to protect her. Why we save her.*

He hesitated and lifted my arm with his warm fingers.

'Ah,' he said. He nodded at the bracelet. I noticed that he wore a patch of bloodied white fabric pinned to his black shirtsleeve. The blood on his shredded cloth was a rust-coloured stain.

I took advantage of the silence and rolled the word 'Renoiera' in my mind again. What Suleen had said about the revolution came back to me.

'If you are here to protect me, why did you run from me all those times?'

'We thought we might put you in even more danger if Justin saw you associating with us. As you could see from our interaction, we are not his favourite vampires. We wanted to wait until it was most dire to reveal ourselves to you.'

'But how?' I asked. 'How do you know who I am?'

'There have been whispers of a Vampire Queen who became human throughout the last four hundred years,' Cassius said. 'At first they were stories, like fairy tales.'

'I don't understand. My past was meant to be erased.' I had a hunch. It was just an idea but I could put the pieces together easily enough. Justin's power and his knowledge were beyond his years.

'The Hollow Ones,' I said aloud, 'have something to do with this, don't they?'

The group of vampires exchanged knowing glances.

'The Hollow Ones lived in a house of onyx, Renoiera,' a vampire said from the back of the chapel.

Cassius silenced him with a glare. Clearly the vampire was not supposed to talk. But he had revealed an important clue as to why they were here and why they remembered me. Onyx.

'Yes, the ceilings,' I said. In my mind's eye I saw myself reflected in the onyx foyer of the Hollow Ones' home. Vicken and I had used the reflection in the onyx ceiling to see our souls. Onyx shows the purity of the soul. At the time, in that life, both my soul and Vicken's had been grey like old snow.

'OK, but it doesn't explain how you remember me when all knowledge of me as a vampire should have been erased.'

'What started as fairy tales eventually began to circulate as fact. Do you

understand?' Cassius said in his sing-song Italian accent. 'As time went on, people began to suspect your story was not legend but truth. We had no proof, but three years ago the Hollow Ones, without explaining why, claimed that they had acquired your blood. From that moment on, the rumour became fact.'

'But how?' I asked. *It is the onyx*, the voice of the vampire queen deep inside me whispered. *Onyx . . .* she whispered again. *There were ceilings of onyx in that house. Look to the clues.*

The voice of my vampire self was a small part of my conscience, an aspect of my soul that I would never entirely be divorced from; it both helped me and hindered me. It kept me in touch with the supernatural world. At present, I was reminded of times as a vampire when dealing with creatures or vampires that were very powerful. I needed as much information as possible.

'What are you? Why are your eyes silver? How can you stand to be in the light?' I asked.

'The silver is not just the pigmentation of our eye,' Cassius said, 'it protects our souls from the sun. Like a shield, though we are not entirely sure of its exact magic. Once we are weakened we turn to ash like any vampire. Stake through the heart, beheading, and sunlight. We are not invincible.'

He reached out for my forearm.

'We can share each other's minds. This is one way we transfer information. I can share with you our story.'

'Through touch?'

I lifted my arm to meet his fingers, and when he wrapped them around my skin his warmth reminded me that these vampires were not normal. Vampires are ice cold, dead. I glanced at Tracy and Tony still sitting in the back pew. Tony mustered a crooked smile but Tracy's mouth was a firm line, guarded. She didn't trust them yet.

I gripped on to Cassius's arm and closed my eyes. Images came to my mind uninvited.

I am in the Hollow Ones' house. Cassius walks alongside Rayken, a member of the Hollow Ones' trio. They follow a long line of vampires down a hallway. At the end is a massive door decorated with sculptures of grotesque twisting bodies. Behind it is the library. Cassius looks up at the hallway's ceiling. Onyx. His soul is reflected in the stone. The hanging orb hovering over his chest is a smoky grey. His soul is not black. Cassius follows Rayken into the library. A quartet plays soft music in the corner of the room.

Rayken, Laertes and Levi, the Hollow Ones, circulate goblets of blood between all the vampires in the room. In the middle, dressed in his crisp black suit, is Justin. He doesn't take a goblet; he keeps his hands crossed over his

chest. Cassius brings the goblet to his nose and sniffs. The blood seems normal.

But he is cautious. Justin catches Cassius as he sniffs the blood a second time. Perhaps it's sweeter than usual?

'You're lucky,' Justin says to Cassius. 'Only very few vampires have been invited here. You must have done something right.'

Cassius looks about the room. He recognizes some of the vampires but not all. He knows Liliana, the blonde standing in the corner. Her sister stands by her side; both are very capable archers.

Rayken stands in the centre of the room and raises his glass.

'A new ritual,' Rayken says. 'We wish to expand the confidence of the Hollow Ones. In this ritual, we will share blood together. And in doing so begin a new coven. The strongest coven.'

The vampires in the room bring the goblets to their mouth and drink. The liquid is so sweet, the best Cassius has ever tasted. He finishes his in two gulps.

The image shifts.

Cassius is balled up on the floor. He wants. He wants. He wants. He wants to go back; he wants to take back all he's done.

'They weren't supposed to retain their sanity! What good are they to me now?' Laertes's voice echoes through a nearby door.

'It must be her blood,' Justin replies.

'Lenah kept her mind when she was remade a vampire,' Laertes reasons, calming down. 'Her blood runs through their veins. We knew it was a risk.'

'Throw him into the sunlight,' Rayken says. 'With his mind intact, Cassius is meaningless to me.'

It hurts, Cassius thinks. Don't throw me into the sunlight!

I inhaled the crisp air inside the chapel. The warmth of Cassius's hand moved away from my arm.

'We are called the Demelucrea. It means half-light,' Cassius said, taking a step back to join the rest of the vampires. 'We are only part traditional vampire. Our other half is a Demelucrea. The Demelucrea keeps his sanity and the ability to tolerate the sun . . .'

'Do you drink blood?' Tony asked.

'Yes,' Cassius replied. 'We get it from blood banks. We try not to kill the living.'

'Try?' Tracy squeaked.

'How did they alter the blood?' I asked. 'What did they do to it?'

'We do not know,' Cassius answered simply. 'It was your blood, Renoiera, That is all we do know.'

‘My blood? Impossible.’ But Suleen’s words came back to me.

He has made them from your blood.

‘The Hollow Ones acquired your blood somehow. Through a rip in time, or perhaps the power of the onyx house made it possible.’

There was that word again, onyx. The Hollow Ones had once possessed a vial of my blood. But again, Fire *changed* history. That event, when I gave my blood to the Hollow Ones, *never happened*. Just like Tony’s murder never happened! He was alive now because Fire successfully changed history when I went back to the medieval world. Even though I gave my blood to the Hollow Ones in their house of onyx, I had never bled on the stone floors. It was a very clean transaction. They would have been able to extract it from the stone only if I had bled on it, just as with the arrow that pierced Justin that first night out on Main Street.

Ugh. I groaned. *The event never happened! It’s just not possible for them to still have my blood.*

‘However they acquired it,’ Cassius continued, ‘they used your blood to mix with ours.’

Bile crept up to my throat and I turned from them, trying to steady myself. The cut on my middle finger burned.

‘Who knows the bounds of the Hollow Ones’ knowledge?’ he went on. ‘All I am sure of is that we are vampires who can be out by day.’ He said with emphasis, ‘We are not tortured by the pain of our existence.’

Tortured by the pain of our existence. He talked like a vampire too.

‘Who created your language?’ I asked.

‘I did.’

‘You made a language? In *three* years?’

‘Why not?’ he said, and lifted his chin. ‘If they couldn’t understand us, then they couldn’t thwart our plans. Once we were the unwanted we made our own language and reclaimed our existence.’

‘So you were made into . . .’ Tony chose his words carefully, ‘hybrids?’

‘From what I have gathered, our intended purpose was to kill during the day as well as at night. But the Hollow Ones’ plan went awry because we kept our sanity and reason. Our humanity, if you like.’

‘Where’s your family?’ Tony asked. It felt respectful, as if he wanted to understand Cassius.

‘My family is dead. As a vampire, without my sanity, I had no conscience; it didn’t matter what I had done or who died. I was angry and numb.’

My little sister Genevieve popped into my head, running down the orchard lane squealing with laughter.

‘Many of us miss our families,’ Cassius said gently.

I swiped my hand across the air.

‘No more,’ I said, and threw myself down the aisle, out the chapel door and outside. My stomach clenched and I took great puffs of air to prevent the tears from coming. I ran past the bodies of two dead Demelucrea in the dark field. At dawn’s first light, they would be ash. Nothing but dirt for the lacrosse players to kick up during their next game. *We are not invincible.*

‘Lenah! Stop!’ Tony’s voice called after me. ‘Please!’

I fell to my knees at the Wickham farm fence. I waited for Tony’s footsteps and he knelt by my side.

‘So there it is,’ I said, staring at the ground. ‘Suleen was right.’

Cassius knelt down on the other side of me.

‘It’s because of the blood they took from you that we kept our minds,’ he said gently. ‘We consider it a gift.’

‘Only when I was remade a vampire a second time did I retain my mind,’ I sobbed. ‘No one knows why that happened. Before that, I was evil. The blood that courses through you is cursed.’

‘A curse to be in the daylight? A curse to walk among humans? When Suleen said it would be possible for you to come back, we banded together, Renoiera. It’s because of you we have hope.’

‘Hope for what?’

‘That we can defeat Justin. That . . .’

His gaze fell to the ground.

It was not as heroic as they made it sound. But I understood why they revered me and had made me into a legend. I had broken the bonds of immortality.

‘You want me to help you be human again,’ I said.

Cassius sighed. ‘It is our deepest hope. But we need your expertise. We want freedom from Justin. He is a tyrant. Now that his plan to bring you back to the modern world as his queen has failed, we can only guess what he plans to do next.’

We thought a lot alike, Cassius and I. Even though our task was not the same; the Demelucrea wanted to destroy Justin. I wanted to find out what Justin wanted *and* get Rhode the hell out of there as soon as possible. I knew what Suleen had asked of me, but it wasn’t that simple to just kill Justin.

‘Tony . . .’ I sought comfort from my friend.

‘It’s OK. Really. We’ll figure this out, and we’ll get Rhode back,’ he said. He squeezed my hand. ‘We will.’

‘I cannot promise the ritual will work for you,’ I said looking at Cassius.

‘Why, Renoiera, we have tried the ritual with Suleen. It does not work. To

perform a ritual you must be a complete vampire, and we are not. Nothing happened. No horrific consequences, no grand gestures. It was even worse, I think. We remained exactly the same.'

'So how do you plan to become human again?'

'You,' Cassius said simply. 'We have faith that you will find a way.'

When I glanced behind me, Tracy stood before the ten or so Demelucrea.

'But first we need you to help us kill Justin, said Liliana, who had come over to us. 'He is spiralling out of control.'

'I will help you but I can't take responsibility for anyone,' I said, standing up. 'I'm not anyone's queen.'

'In exchange, we can help you to find your soulmate,' Cassius said. That word lingered in the air and I hated that he had intentionally found my weak spot.

'Where do you think he is?' I asked.

'Justin's house is not far from here. It is the first place we should investigate. Henri and I will go at dawn, Renoiera. We can make a plan.'

He motioned to the healer that had wrapped Tracy's wrist.

Renoiera. Silly word. The moonlight caught my symbol on the neck of one of the other Dems, whom I had heard called Micah.

'I'll accept your help,' I said, 'but I want to confront Justin by myself.'

'Impossible. It's too dangerous. Justin can manipulate the elements,' Henri explained. 'And you don't yet have the skills to kill him.'

I deliberately ignored the word 'kill'.

'I've seen what the Hollow Ones can do,' I said with a rub of my sore shoulder. My chest pulsed with my heart and each beat burned. The ghost of Fire's pendant reminded me how much I wanted to be with Rhode.

'Rhode has to get out of there before he's . . .' I hesitated. 'Before he's hurt.'

'Or killed,' Liliana interjected.

I flinched. 'Who knows what Justin is doing to him?' I clarified, speaking directly to her. 'But I won't be quite so pessimistic just yet. I can't.'

She wore my symbol not around her neck but on a ring. 'My twin sister,' she said, 'was killed while on watch.'

'The blonde girl in the sand dunes,' I said.

She nodded once. 'I told her not to go alone. We got there as you ran down the beach.'

'*Cianno,*' Cassius snapped at Liliana. It sounded an awful lot like, 'Shut up.'

'If I'm right and Rhode is now at Justin's house, we'd like to execute an attack in two days' time,' Cassius explained.

'Why not sooner?' I asked.

'There is a solar eclipse in two days. We think that is our best bet,' Henri said.

‘Your best bet?’ I scoffed, not meaning to be rude but that was close to being the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard. ‘An eclipse. So basically, you want to commit suicide.’

‘What’s the deal with an eclipse?’ Tony asked.

‘It’s the best course,’ Cassius explained. ‘Justin will not risk leaving his house, nor will he expect an attack on such a day. It is very dangerous for us to be out at all that day.’

‘What’s the deal with an eclipse?’ Tony pressed.

‘Two days is too long to wait,’ I said. ‘Who knows what could happen to him by then.’

‘The eclipse is the best option for trapping Justin inside,’ Cassius insisted.

‘Will someone freakin’ tell me why!’ Tony yelled.

Cassius explained the specifics to Tony but I was back in Hathersage, England, in 1739.

I am on the top floor of my Hathersage home. Rhode and I lean against the window frame and watch as the moon passes in front of the sun. Shadows dance over the lavender fields in a way I have never seen before. A diamond ring encircles the eclipsed sun. Flashes of light flicker and spark around the moon.

‘Let’s go!’ I cry, and run for the door. ‘Let’s run underneath that strange sun!’

Rhode tugs at my hand and pulls me back into the bedroom.

‘You understand, don’t you?’ he says. His long black hair falls down his back. It would have felt like silk if my sense of touch had not waned away to nothing.

‘Understand what?’ I ask.

‘The moment the moon moves from the sun, the light will be too powerful. It will turn you to dust.’ He pets my hair and his fingers trail warmth across my scalp.

‘But I can be in the sun,’ I say.

‘Not that sun. No one can withstand eclipsed light. Once the moon passes beyond the sun, the rest of the day’s rays are deadly.’

‘Good to know. You just saved my life,’ I say playfully.

‘I’ll always save you,’ he says.

‘And I you.’ We kiss at the window during that daylight darkness. When he pulls away from our kiss, he tugs at the shade and shuts the bedroom door.

‘. . . Only at nightfall is the vampire safe to emerge again,’ Cassius finished.

‘That’s uplifting,’ Tony said. ‘Step out into the sunlight after an eclipse and . . . *poof*.’

‘Poof?’ Tracy said.

Henri laughed but covered it up by clearing his throat.

‘We should go back to the chapel,’ Liliana said. ‘It’s not safe for the humans

out here.'

The humans?

'I do not think Justin will kill Rhode,' Cassius said. 'If he does, he knows you will never comply with his wishes.'

I got to my feet; I was not going back into the chapel. I was done and my head hurt. I rubbed at my sore wrist. They spoke so casually about Rhode's death, like it wouldn't have destroyed me completely if it came to pass.

'For months we've been assessing his home and grounds. But now that he has Rhode, we need to watch him again at first light. His movements may be different; perhaps he'll reveal a weakness of some kind. We already know his vampires can't be out in the day as we can.'

'Can he?'

'Yes, he is very strong. But as you know he can't survive eclipsed light, none of us can. Also, Justin won't act alone. He relies on his coven in almost every move he makes.'

The sky was lightening to a shadowy kind of purple. It would be dawn in two hours.

'We'll need to get in and out of the house well before the eclipse completes,' Cassius said.

I stopped walking at the path that led back to the dorms.

'And you're sure about Justin? Like you said, he's powerful.'

'Not even the Hollow Ones would be able to withstand an eclipse, Renoiera.'

Even if we do make it out in time, the Dems are cutting it very, very close.

'Can't we just get Rhode on a day that Justin leaves the house? You know, when Rhode might be there with fewer people guarding him?' Tony asked.

'Killing Justin is the only way to stop him. And if we want to succeed, we must do it on this day; we have no choice but to cut it very, very close.'

'Very, very close,' I said. He used my exact phrasing. He responded to me as though we were in conversation, though I hadn't said anything aloud.

'You can read my thoughts,' I said, collecting myself from the shock. This meant that the Demelucrea had experienced or could read the memory I'd had of Rhode a few moments before.

'In full disclosure, your thoughts are very clear to us and it would be wise to tailor those thoughts for your own privacy,' Cassius admitted.

'All the time?' I asked.

'It appears to be that way,' Cassius said with a quick glance to the vampire healer in the corner of the chapel. 'We heard you over the last few days in our thoughts. In and out, it wasn't constant.'

'Closer to you, it's clearer,' Liliana added.

‘And ours?’ Tracy said with a lift of her chin.

‘Your emotions are clear,’ Cassius said, ‘but your thoughts are your own . . .’

‘Tracy,’ she completed for him.

‘Miss Tracy,’ he finished.

The devotion of the Demelucrea to me was so powerful that I wanted to turn away. I was embarrassed to have a clan of vampires fighting for me when I had done nothing to deserve it.

Tony and Tracy stood by the Dems. Their loyalty was clear, even in the moonlight. I just didn’t want to fail them. I couldn’t kill Justin as easily as Cassius or Liliana would be able to do. The issue was not weapons but my intentions. I didn’t want him to die. I wanted to bring him back.

‘We’re in this with you, Renoiera, whether you like it or not,’ Liliana said.

Cassius smiled but it was a knowing smile, as if everything was going to plan.

As I saw no other way to do this without them I said, ‘Fine. Meet me at the library. Study atrium in the back corridor, tomorrow night, 8 p.m. Tell me what you find at Justin’s –’ I tripped over my words – ‘Justin’s *new* house.’

To me, Justin’s house was where his mother lived in Rhode Island: with cookies baking and a crackling fire in autumn. I was sure that where Justin lived now matched his new personality: overbearing and cold.

We headed for main campus knowing the Demelucrea would trail behind as our guard. We wouldn’t be alone again, not really. I glanced back at the vampires.

‘Oh, and while you’re here, could you avoid narrowly missing my head with arrows? I’d like an explanation for that at some point.’

Liliana dipped her chin with an embarrassed smile. ‘I believed you to be attacked, Renoiera. Only after did I realize the young man following you was Rhode.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘And she’s an archer with supernatural sight?’ I said to Cassius.

He crossed his arms and hid his laugh by looking at the ground.

‘And tomorrow night . . .’ I addressed Cassius again.

‘Yes?’ he said, and cleared his throat.

I turned his line from the dance club back on him. ‘Come alone.’

CHAPTER 13

That next night, the clock in the study atrium ticked slower than perhaps any clock in the history of time.

7.20 p.m. . . . 7.45 . . . 7.47 . . .

As I waited, I sat with my fingers inches from Rhode's journal. It sat beside my virtually unused biology notebook and my mocha latte.

My fingers hovered over the little book.

Last time Rhode and I had been at Wickham, our minds were connected through the power of our souls. One soul could not live without the other, Suleen had once told me. Anam Cara.

Connecting to Rhode's mind was one thing. But this journal was *not* his mind. It would be an intrusion. I would just sit here and continue to wait for Cassius.

. . . 7.57 p.m.

What did Rhode want to confess in the confines of these pages? What secrets? Did he watch the constellations? Did he dream of me?

I pushed the soft leather journal further away from me with my fingertips. I couldn't bear it. In my own notebook I wrote down words and ideas that had been swimming through my mind.

Demelucrea.

Renoiera. I said the word aloud and even rolled the *r* a little like the Dems had done. I blushed. Who was I kidding? I was no queen any more.

I continued to scribble hard against the lined paper.

How did the Hollow Ones obtain my blood to make the Demelucrea? If time had changed, how was this even possible? This was a mystery I would uncover if it killed me. *It probably will*, I thought, and sipped my drink.

Members of the astronomy club jogged by the window behind me, heading up to the archery plateau. Everyone was positively raucous because of the eclipse the next day.

Tell me, Fire – any clues about onyx? How is it you never told me this? How is it an entire race of vampires exists because of me? How could you leave me –

I scribbled in the notebook, my other hand resting on Rhode's journal.

Oh, I didn't want to talk to Fire. I wanted to talk to Rhode.

'Ugh,' I groaned, and got up from the table. Damn Tony! How could he bring me something so precious? He knew I wouldn't be able to resist it!

I sat down. One page. Just one page of the journal and that would be it. I tugged at the leather flaps and flipped open the front cover. On the title page in his precise, slim handwriting were the words:

Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom. — John Keats

I turned the page; it trembled beneath my shaking fingers. I read.

Dear —

I don't even know your name, dear. But I shall call you that. Dear. But what is your name? I cannot write it here on this paper. For it escapes me. Every day it sits on the tip of my tongue. I can taste it for the barest of moments and then it is gone.

I burn for you.

There is a halo of condensation here on this window that looks out on to a campus barely clinging to summer. Fall will be upon us soon. Yesterday I dreamed of you again. Your hair was pinned up above your ears and you wore a long, red gown. A magnificent medieval gown not found in the modern world. It clung to your body and you stood on a great hill that stretched out far into the dis—

Two raps on the window broke me out of Rhode's gorgeous words. 'Damn it!' I cried, and thrust away the journal so it slid across the table and teetered on the other side.

Cassius leaned against the glass outside. I ran my hand through my hair and exhaled. I pretended to be calm and collected when he lifted the window and climbed in with a roll of papers tucked under his arm.

'There's no sign of Rhode, but there's been much activity at the house.'

'But you think he's there?'

'I couldn't read Rhode's energy, which leads me to believe he's in the basement. There's a suite of rooms down there.'

'How do you know?'

'I visited the house a few times once Justin broke confidence with the Hollow Ones. I couldn't sense Rhode directly, but I could sense jealousy and regret from Justin. He experiences both of these emotions in direct relation to Rhode, so that's promising.'

I found myself nodding. 'All right. And you still feel certain that the *only* way to rescue Rhode is during the eclipse?'

'The total eclipse is expected to last seven minutes,' Cassius said. 'Our attack will surprise him, I can promise you this. He will be hiding out and much prepared for a solar eclipse. As you know, it is not something vampires take

lightly.’

‘Seven minutes to go in and get Rhode out? It’s not possible.’

‘We must be out with at least a few minutes to spare. We need to reach a building, or somewhere with a roof, where we can avoid direct post-eclipse sunlight. The cover of trees won’t do.’

He spread a plan of a house out on the table. It was hand-drawn, presumably by one of the Dems.

I rested my hand on the journal and gripped the leather like I was holding on to Rhode.

Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom. I loved the way the words sounded.

I burn for you.

Cassius cleared his throat.

‘The house, as you can see, is close.’ His voice brought me back and I focused on the street.

Right. I had to mind my thoughts.

Warwick Avenue. I did a double take at the street name.

‘*Close?* Cassius, that’s Warwick Avenue. It runs parallel to Lovers Bay Cemetery. We’re talking less than a mile from here!’

I wanted him to be shocked, to be just as concerned as I was that Justin was so close to Wickham Boarding School. Justin had chosen his location absolutely on purpose. To watch me, to watch Rhode, and to plan his attacks as accurately as possible.

Cassius pointed at the drawing of the house again.

‘There are two entrances.’ He pointed at the front and the back of the house. ‘This is a window that leads into the basement stairwell. Henri and I watched from the beach. Justin and his coven kept going up and down the stairs.’

‘All right, so we have to get into that basement,’ I said, drawing deep breaths.

‘When he first moved in, that was where the . . .’ Cassius hesitated. ‘Where the torture equipment was kept.’ I gasped and cleared my throat. I shrugged, trying to act like it didn’t bother me.

Cassius stepped back from the table. ‘Renoiera,’ he said gently, ‘I know Rhode is alive.’ His voice was so soft and deep I almost believed it was true.

‘You’re shaking again,’ he went on, and placed a hand over mine. At his touch, that *feeling* came again, the same I had sensed in the chapel. Utter and complete devotion.

‘Justin . . .’ I began, but hesitated to choose my words carefully. ‘Justin is my responsibility. If we’re in battle and you have to kill him, do it, but . . . I want to try to save him and turn him back.’

‘Are you sure . . . ?’ Cassius started to say.

‘Sure of what?’

‘That he is worth saving?’

‘Of course he is worth saving.’

I must have been harsher than I meant because Cassius bowed his head. ‘Of course,’ he replied. My cheeks warmed. He knew what I wanted without my verbalizing it.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said with a sigh. ‘Our main priority is to get Rhode out of there.’

‘We will,’ he said gently.

Another knock on the glass made me yelp for the second time that night. Cassius unlatched the lock. ‘Henri,’ he said.

Henri bowed to me and I shook my head, hating all this formality. He produced a second map of the house from a bag. ‘This is the best drawing we could render of the bottom level. Most of us haven’t been in there for a year or maybe more. Justin’s malice has grown significantly preparing for your arrival, so I assume he made changes.’

‘Why haven’t the Hollow Ones stopped Justin?’ I asked.

‘He was working with the Hollow Ones, but when he became convinced you would return, or that you *could* return, they broke allegiance. His obsession with you crowded his head. What good was he to them if all he could think of was you?’

‘So why haven’t the Hollow Ones killed him while they’ve had the chance?’

Henri lay his hand flat on the table, ‘Why . . . Renoiera,’ he said plainly. ‘They are dead.’

‘Dead?’ I laughed. ‘Sure. The Hollow Ones are dead.’

‘Yes,’ Henri said tonelessly. He looked to Cassius, who only shrugged, not seeming to understand my laughter.

‘The Hollow Ones,’ I said, continuing to chuckle. ‘Justin killed them. You realize that’s impossible?’

Henri hesitated before speaking.

‘But it’s true, Renoiera.’ He was so gentle in his reply.

My laughter trailed off.

‘Justin destroyed the all-powerful Hollow Ones. Those who have been vampires for thousands of years? He killed Suleen *and* the Hollow Ones?’

‘Yes,’ Cassius said.

‘OK, so everything I ever thought is absolute crap.’

Anger gathered within me and I rested my hands on the table. Justin didn’t know the simplest of vampire laws. He didn’t realize that if he loved me when he was made a vampire, he would love me forever. How was he managing to kill

those who were hundreds of years older than him? And suddenly I knew, because it was what I would have done. He was using someone more powerful for information.

‘The Hollow Ones aren’t dead,’ I said. ‘I know that for a fact.’

‘I saw Levi’s body myself, Rayken’s not two days later. They were tied to a pole in the centre of a greenhouse. They died a slow death,’ Cassius said. ‘It must have taken weeks to burn them to ash.’

‘What about Laertes?’ I asked.

Cassius’s expression was guarded; he kept his eyes on the drawing of the house. ‘It is rumoured that he too is dead.’

‘Rumour! So he *could* be alive.’

‘He *could* be alive, yes; no one has seen a body to contradict it,’ Cassius said, bringing his eyes up to mine. ‘But it is highly unlikely. Justin claims to have murdered Laertes as well.’

‘He must be alive. That’s how Justin’s getting his power. It’s why he knows what to do! Control the elements? Making hybrids from my blood and whatever else that lunatic is after?’ In my mind Justin stared into my eyes and the overwhelming horror of his mind control made me shudder. Cassius and Henri exchanged another set of glances, reminding me that they could sense my thoughts and emotions.

‘What else is he doing?’ Cassius asked. ‘To you, your mind.’

‘Nothing I care to share right now. Let’s just concentrate on how to prepare for our attack.’

I slid Rhode’s journal off the table and dropped it into my bag.

Cassius, without attempting to convince me otherwise, pointed at a small window on the map of the house.

‘This window . . .’ Cassius explained how best to infiltrate the house, but I couldn’t concentrate. I brought my fingers to the sensitive burn at the base of my throat.

‘What elements can he currently control?’ I said with a tap of my finger on the house plan.

‘It appears he can only manipulate air and water at this time,’ Henri said.

‘We think he’s playing with manipulation magic too. But we don’t know for sure. The Hollow Ones’ house is mastered by manipulation magic. They can change entryways and doors. You walk through one and step out in Moscow, walk through another and you could be in the basement of the house. Your mind and intentions fuel the spell,’ Cassius explained.

‘Fear really gives it power,’ Henri added. ‘The more one is fearful, the more the house complicates.’

Manipulation magic? I was not very familiar with it, though I had heard of the term before.

‘We don’t know if Justin has implemented this in the new house. We’re not sure how much he understands fully and how much he demanded to be taught and set in place for him before he killed the Hollow Ones. We must be very careful.’

Cassius began again, describing the house’s layout in detail. I wanted to pay careful attention but I couldn’t hold my focus. An uneasiness snaked through me. Not about Justin. But about the loyalty the Dems clearly felt to me.

Henri tripped on his words, distracted presumably by my thoughts.

I knew they would be able to hear me, but I couldn’t stop myself thinking.

How can I do this? I asked myself. *I barely understand elemental magic let alone manipulation magic. How can I be the leader they need me to be?* Devotion from the Demelucrea came in waves; an overwhelming aura. Whenever I was in contact with one of them, it was the core emotion. I could sense it now as we planned our attack.

How can I live up to this?

I gripped the table.

How?

I asked this again and again.

CHAPTER 14

The next morning, the union was abuzz with words like ‘total eclipse’, ‘umbra’, ‘diamond ring’ and a whole host of expressions I had never before associated with the moon. Apparently the eclipse was exciting to everyone else. Their enthusiasm made me want to punch something – hard.

All through English class, while our professor droned on about *Gatsby*, I tried to memorize the plan of Justin’s house. He had vampires of his own, though unlike the Demelucrea they were traditional vampires who could not be out in the day. I didn’t know how many were in his coven – the usual number is about five.

I hoped Cassius was right and Justin couldn’t risk going out in an eclipse. As far as we knew, Justin was subject to the danger of eclipse light like normal vampires, but I had my doubts, given his immense power. Anything was possible.

Tony and I shared a table at the back of the classroom. He scribbled a note on my paper:

Seven minutes for the eclipse. Twenty-one minutes for the whole attack? Cassius’s plan is nutzo.

I replied underneath. *I keep telling him that.*

With the power of the sun after the eclipse, even C will be dust, Tony wrote. *The eclipsed sunlight is too much even for them!*

They won’t listen to me, I wrote back.

As we left lit. class, having learned absolutely nothing about *Gatsby*, Tony said, ‘You couldn’t have more logical disciples, huh?’ His phone beeped before I could roll my eyes.

‘It’s a message from Cassius.’

‘You gave him your number?’

‘Seemed like a good idea.’

‘Wish I’d thought of it,’ I said.

We read:

PLEASE DRIVE TO 1142 TIPTOE ROAD, TRURO, 9 P.M.

‘Nice and vague,’ Tony said. ‘Do vampires ever just come out and *say* what they want?’

1142 Tiptoe Road was a two-level modern house that sat deep in the birch woods of Cape Cod where it was quiet. The ocean seemed to be Cassius’s only neighbour.

‘This is not what I was expecting,’ Tracy said as we got out of the car and walked towards the front door. The house had huge floor-to-ceiling windows that wrapped around the upper floor. The front door was made of smoked glass, so we could not see inside.

‘Not exactly what you would expect on the Cape,’ Tony said.

‘Not exactly what I would expect from vampires,’ I replied.

Of course they lived in a house with huge windows. Cassius and his vampires could enjoy the ocean and revel in the regular sunlight. An eclipse was so rare they could design the windows any way they fancied.

They get to live in the sun because of me. For an odd moment I was proud of myself.

Tony lifted a hand to knock on the glass but Cassius opened up before his knuckles touched the door. Liliana and Henri flanked him. Wow, I had almost forgotten how gorgeous vampires could be. Liliana wore smart black trousers and a cashmere sweater. Her blonde hair fell in long tendrils around her shoulders. Cassius had on a modern suit and I couldn’t help but notice he wore well-worn boots instead of dress shoes.

‘Tonight we’ll be performing a ritual together – called the Luntair,’ he explained.

I didn’t know this ritual.

He opened the door wider and we all stepped inside. Cassius led us up a set of stairs and into the main foyer on the first floor. It was a living room of sorts and small white candles sat in silver holders on top of a glass table. The windows made a panorama around the room and reflected the candle flames. White leather couches sat low to the ground at the same height as the rest of the furniture.

‘Everything in here is very – clean . . .’ Tony whispered.

‘And symmetrical,’ Tracy added.

‘Thank you,’ Cassius said with a little grin. He led us down a side hallway.

We walked over a lush Oriental runner. Even in the corridor, the walls were stark white and modern.

‘Where are we going?’ Tracy asked.

Henri, Micah and Liliana walked in a group ahead of us.

‘Cassius needs to show you something first,’ Liliana announced with a smirk. The vampires walked to a door at the far end of the hall.

‘Wait here,’ Cassius said gently, going to join them. ‘We’ll be right back.’ He left us standing outside the closed door to a room.

Another set of Dems, including one that I recognized from the chapel and knew was named Esteban, was already gathered at the door at the end of the hall. Esteban was tall with very tanned skin.

‘What do you think is in there?’ I whispered to Tracy and Tony.

‘Weapons. We’re all going down,’ Tracy said with a nervous laugh.

‘I think if they wanted to kill us, they would have by now. You know.’ Tony made a face, exposing where his fangs would be if he had them.

‘Speaking of weapons, do whatever you can to avoid thinking about those that you wear. The Dems can connect to specific images. More so within my mind than yours, but still.’ I wasn’t sure if she was even aware she was doing it, but Tracy’s fingers lingered on the bracelet.

‘Wait,’ I whispered. I was surprised I hadn’t realized before. ‘Is your bracelet warm? Does it sense the Demelucrea?’

‘No,’ Tracy said. ‘It’s cold.’ Tony agreed that his ring wasn’t hot either. This just confirmed for me another reason why I shouldn’t tell the Demelucrea about Fire’s weapons. They couldn’t sense them, or at least I didn’t think they could, as no one had asked me about the bracelet or the ring. I needed more time to figure out what these vampires wanted from me. Also, Fire’s gifts were not affected by their presence. I needed more facts before I invited the Dems into my mess with the Aeris.

Cassius walked back down the hall towards us.

‘Here we go,’ he said, holding up a key ring. With a click, he unlocked the door to a room with a hardwood floor and white painted walls.

With a flip of a switch, golden light fixtures illuminated what appeared to be a dozen or so paintings. Tony walked immediately to the largest of them.

‘You have a gallery in your house?’ I asked Cassius, approaching the painting closest to me. ‘Who is the artist?’ Cassius didn’t reply.

It was titled *Nuit Rouge*. In it, a woman in a black dress danced across the floor of an ancient ballroom. Small fangs showed in her mouth, and in the mouths of the other subjects. I took a step back; these were paintings of vampires?

While a vampire, I had created the very violent vampire holiday Nuit Rouge.

‘Does Nuit Rouge still exist?’ I asked.

‘No, Renoiera.

The woman in the picture had long brown hair, flowing in tendrils down her

back. Four men stood in a line behind her with their arms crossed over their chests. The rest of the room raised glasses filled with a red substance I assumed to be blood.

I moved to the next painting.

This one was called *Swimming Trip*.

A skiff, an old-style wooden boat, floated in shallow water. The sun poured down in a single beam on a girl, again with long brown hair, as she sat on the edge of the boat. People swam in the water, splashing one another. This scene . . . it was very familiar.

I quickly moved to the next painting, my heart gathering speed.

The Ritual.

A girl stood in the centre of a field of lavender holding her arms out to her sides. A bright beam of sunlight flowed over her and sparkles of light were emitted around her body. I brought my hand over my mouth.

'No . . .' I whispered in a heavy exhale. I hadn't realized I was holding my breath. 'Who painted these?'

'I did.'

'How?' I whispered. '*How?*'

'As I said, at first they were just stories – like fables. I created the swimming painting in 1850,' Cassius explained.

I collapsed on to a bench. Tracy and Tony stood at the end of the room looking at a painting together. Tracy pointed at something on the canvas.

'Justin didn't change back to a human when you returned to 1417. He is here in a time that should have been erased. So this is a new world. But the events of the old world, your original world, somehow crossed over.'

I looked from painting to painting before me.

The answer was so clear. Of course. Why hadn't I realized?

'My soulmate,' I said. 'Our two worlds can never truly be sealed off from one another while Rhode and I are apart. The connection between our worlds never closed completely.'

Cassius nodded. 'I believe so.'

Supernatural creatures like vampires could sense my history because of the connection between Rhode and me. The link between our souls somehow created a channel. One question was answered, but the important one still remained:

'It doesn't explain why Justin remains a vampire,' I said.

'Lenah . . .' Tony's voice was unnervingly quiet.

'Damn it,' Cassius said. 'I meant to explain it to him first.' He ran to Tony and I followed quickly.

The painting before Tony showed a young man sprawled dead on the floor. There was ornate wallpaper in the room and an orderly arrangement of oversized chairs. It had to be the Victorian era. The subject was unmistakably a young Japanese man, and above him was a portrait. My portrait, the one Tony had created of me when I had originally been at Wickham. The youth in the painting was Tony.

The girl was the one with brown hair and blue eyes that was captured in all the art in the room.

These paintings were all of my first year at Wickham.

'What happened?' Tony asked, staring at the painting. 'I heard you guys talking. Is this what happened to me before?' He turned to me.

Tears had welled in his eyes and I could see that Tracy was trying not to cry too. It nearly broke me. I didn't want to see those tears but I had to do this, I had to tell him.

'You were killed. And I wish I could say it wasn't my fault. But I got to you too late.'

'Vampires killed him?' Tracy asked quietly. She waited for Cassius to answer but he didn't. He kept his gaze on me.

'Yes. My coven did it,' I said. 'I didn't get there in time.'

I didn't tell her that Tony had sought out the vampires. That in his usual dogged manner he had become obsessed with discovering my identity.

'I should have been honest, Tony. I'm so sorry.' My voice cracked with the threat of tears.

Tony turned back to the painting of his death again.

'So you . . .' he started to say.

He searched for the words and I prayed this wouldn't be the moment I lost Tony. I deserved it for not telling him about his death from the start. I should have said that he had died too young and that seeing him in the flesh this time had nearly made me pass out. I had believed Tony's death to be final. His face and laugh had haunted me in my father's orchard. I had even taught Genevieve to spell his name.

Tony shook his head.

'So you went back in time – reversing history – so you could bring me back?' he asked with a lift to his voice.

'Yes,' I said, closing my eyes again as I confessed.

Warm strong arms slipped around me; Tony was hugging me! Tracy stood back beside Cassius. Her palm covered her mouth and tears ran down her cheeks.

I hugged him back, hard.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered. ‘Thank you for bringing me back.’

I exhaled heavily, relieved that he was here, embracing me and not walking out the door because I had let him down in another life. I squeezed him again.

‘Ow! OK there,’ he said, pulling away. ‘You’re pretty strong, Vampire Queen.’

‘Please don’t call me that.’

‘Why not?’ Tony sounded it out. ‘Vampire Queen – it’s so regal.’

‘I’ve had enough regality for a lifetime,’ I replied.

‘I think we can move on now,’ Cassius said, and the knowing smile on his lips showed that he was satisfied that I had made my peace with Tony. He led us out of the gallery.

‘Before we enter a new phase in our lives, we have a tradition,’ Cassius said. ‘We’d like you to be a part of it tonight.’ We stepped outside to a raised patio that opened up to the higher ground of the backyard. Someone had covered it in hundreds of white candles. I appreciated the sentiment. White candles were cleansing. They could purify a room; they could keep unwanted entities at bay.

Hanging lights twinkled from a lattice. Tracy’s eyes glittered and she reached up so her fingers grazed the lights. Near a path leading into the dunes, Liliana stood with her arrows and bow. Dozens of arrows were piled up on the sand.

There were only ten Dems left after last night’s fight and they stood on the patio, each waiting patiently. Cassius stepped forward with a pen and a basket of pieces of paper.

‘Take as many papers as you’d like. Write on them your deepest fears. No one will see it but you.’

‘Deepest?’ Tony queried.

‘What you fear can sometimes be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tonight we’ll help to stop that happening.’

I didn’t quite understand, but I sat down at a table beneath the lights with four rectangular pieces of paper from the basket. At another table across from where I sat, Cassius bent over, scribbling on only one sheet of paper. I wanted to know what his deepest fears were, but after seeing him swing a dagger and a machete at Justin at the same time . . . I didn’t think it possible he had any.

Tony held the pen to his mouth, as if he was taking a test. Tracy handed her papers over almost immediately. I envied her confidence. As I stared at my paper, I kept second-guessing my fears.

I feared that Justin would remain a vampire. And worse, that somehow I couldn’t bring him back to the land of the living. I feared that more Demelucrea, who had been made from my blood, would die, and it would be my fault. Deepest of all, I feared that Rhode and I would be separated forever. I had no

doubt that, if he died, I would split apart, becoming nothing but frayed edges.

Micah, the lanky, tall Dem, dipped the end of Liliana's arrow into what appeared to be water in a small gold bowl. Water couldn't light arrows – it had to be kerosene. Tony stood up and handed over three pieces of paper.

So what did I fear the most?

Paper 1: That I would fail Rhode. That he would die.

Paper 2: That Justin would die.

Paper 3: That I would create more victims in my wake.

And the last paper, Paper 4: That I would need to be queen.

I stood up, joining the group at the arrow and bucket.

'Come on,' Liliana said, and we walked to a clearing in the middle of the dune grass.

All the Dems except for Cassius, Micah and Liliana formed a half-circle behind us. Henri stood furthest away, admiring the sky.

'Go ahead,' Cassius said to Tony, Tracy and me. 'We'll go after you. You stand in the centre.' A brown wisp of hair curled over his metallic silver eyes. In the moonlight, they looked like steel.

'Tracy, you first,' Liliana said, and she took Tracy's paper, crumpled it into a ball, and handed it to Micah. He shot it into the air with a slingshot and the paper flew up to the stars. Liliana lit the end of an arrow with fire and shot it at the paper. It chased behind, caught it and sizzled in the sky. It fell to the ocean below, extinguishing in the waves.

'That was *awesome*,' Tony said.

'What did you write?' I asked Tracy. 'Of course you don't need to tell me,' I added quickly. I only realized as it came out of my mouth how personal a question it was.

Tracy kept watching the waves. 'That my friends will be hurt or killed. Claudia and Kate . . .' she hesitated. 'And Justin.' She met my eyes. 'And you too. That we get through this.' I was touched by her selflessness.

Liliana took Tony's papers. Micah readied to set them into the sky one after the other. Liliana would need to fire three arrows very quickly to hit them all.

'When the fire ignites your fear, you are burning it away, so it can't control you any more,' Cassius said.

'And when it hits the water, you are cleansed,' I finished. All of the Dems, even the silent ones waiting their turn behind us, looked at me.

Their gaze humbled me and I wished I hadn't said anything. But I had been a vampire for 592 years. I knew a thing or two about rituals, even if I was a human now.

With a quick *thwap* of the slingshot, Tony's fears went into the air and Liliana

released her bow three times. Each fear sizzled away and dropped in a long arc into the ocean. I hoped the ritual between us was true and binding.

Tony slipped an arm around Tracy's shoulders.

'And you?' Cassius said, and extended his hand, waiting for my fears to be placed in his palm. I handed them over and joined Liliana and Micah.

'Do you think this really works?' Tony asked.

'It's the intent that matters,' Liliana said. My heart swelled for her because that was exactly what Rhode would have said.

Four times my fears went into the air, and three were hit by the arrows right away. Liliana fired the last arrow, but it missed the small piece of paper by a wide berth. The white speck lingered in the black sky, was carried by the wind out over the ocean and settled somewhere deep in the waves.

'I'm a very good shot. I don't know what happened,' she apologized, but I caught a smirk on her lips when she bent down to soak another arrowhead. She could hear my fears in her head; she didn't need the pieces of paper.

'OK, Cassius,' Liliana said, 'Your turn.'

'My fear is simple,' he replied, and gave his paper to Micah. 'That I will fail the Renoiera.' His steely eyes locked on mine. 'That I won't have served my purpose.'

His paper soared into the air, and in seconds Liliana's arrow pierced it.

'That I will die without honour,' he said, and finally tore his eyes away from mine.

Chapter 15

The next morning, after assembly, Tony, Tracy and I were in the chapel with the Dems, going over final plans. Since the Luntair ritual I understood the Demelucrea better – especially Cassius. They were exactly what I would have been had I not attempted to perform the ritual for Vicken long ago. They were not quite traditional vampires but still, they were stuck, like all those who are cursed to immortality. They were not demons preying on the helpless, but they remained the undead.

Cassius wanted to set right what had been done to the Dems, and I could appreciate that.

Outside the chapel people laughed and chatted excitedly about the eclipse. The phenomenon captivated the entire school. Even Lovers Bay Main Street was getting in on it, with Moon Eclipse Lattes at Main Street Coffee and moon pie specials at Lovers Bay Diner. If only they knew what the eclipse meant for us.

Cassius checked his watch and pointed. 'We have two hours until the eclipse.' He resumed a conversation he was having with Micah. 'Lenah will go last. Make sure Liliana pulls up the rear, but we need Lenah protected. Shielded.'

'I want to go in *first*,' I said.

'The bottom window gives us the best access,' Cassius agreed. 'But you are too valuable to go before us.'

'No,' I said. 'It has to be me.' I crossed my arms to emphasize my point.

An uproar broke out. Some of them spoke in the vampire language, Linderatu, and some used English. Cassius swore in Italian. One of the words I heard repeatedly was *no*.

Tony stood by my side. He looked me over and then took the same stance as me, arms crossed over his chest. Tracy, in her usual manner, sat beside us silently. I could tell she was calculating. I had learned never to underestimate her.

'That's suicide,' Liliana said. 'We can't risk you going first.'

'I have to do this,' I said. 'If I'm your . . .' I couldn't say it. 'If I am who you say I am to you, I should go first. It's me Justin wants anyway.'

‘Exactly why you shouldn’t go first,’ Esteban added, speaking up from the darkened corner of the room.

The morning light beamed through the stained-glass windows of the chapel and on to the table where we’d laid out the plans of Justin’s house.

‘I don’t want anyone holding my hand through this,’ I said. Cassius pointed at the drawing of the window.

‘Renoiera, we’re hardly underestimating you. The basement window is four foot high by five foot wide. Please let Micah and me go first. It’s our job to protect you. That way we can show you the best way to get through the window and we can assess if anyone is waiting for us on the inside.’

‘Fine,’ I assented. ‘But I’m going in directly after you.’

‘There are at least three vampires defending Justin. He brought five to the fight outside the chapel, but we killed two. I don’t know how quickly he will replace his men. Tony and Tracy, you will be safer on a quieter floor with more of us protecting you.’

‘No way, Fang-Boy,’ Tracy said. She stood up and continued. ‘I didn’t almost die in some other life to get the quiet floor. We move as a pack.’

Good girl.

‘You make sure you get yourselves out,’ I reiterated to the Dems before me. ‘If I command you to go, you stop fighting and run out of that house. You don’t get to call me Renoiera and then not let me call any of the shots.’ I made sure to lock eyes with Cassius and Liliana when I said it. ‘Also, we get Rhode out *and* anyone else we can find, human or vampire.’

I did my best not to think of Laertes, the last remaining Hollow One, but he sprang so clearly to my mind with his gummy fangless smile that I couldn’t make the image of him dissipate.

‘Renoiera . . .’ Micah started to say.

‘Look, I know you think he’s dead, but I want you to be prepared to take him with us if we find him. All right?’

‘We’ve had no sense of him at all,’ Micah finished. He meant through the vampire extrasensory perception.

‘Of course we will save him,’ Cassius replied. He folded up the plans on the table and said, ‘We meet at the Wickham gates on Main in an hour. Just as we planned.’

Liliana slipped on a leather bomber jacket, then strapped the quiver to her back. ‘I’ll take out the guards on the ground floor as soon as we get there,’ she said with a flourish.

‘Keep your eyes covered in the daylight,’ Cassius said to the Dems. ‘They make the humans . . . uneasy.’

We left the chapel in twos and threes so as not to draw attention to ourselves.

I whispered to Tony and Tracy as we crossed the quad, ‘You have your weapons? Remember, they only work one time.’

They nodded, just barely.

And because it was a lesson I learned the hard way, I added, ‘Use them only when you need them most.’

It was 1 p.m. I stood outside the Wickham gates with Tony and Tracy. Tony kept tapping his foot.

‘Will you stop that?’ I asked.

‘Oh please. You’ve been biting your lip like a wimpy girl for five minutes. And you are *not* a wimpy girl. And you –’ Tony turned to Tracy – ‘stop looking at your cell phone.’

‘I haven’t heard from Kate in a couple days. She thinks I’m on Claudia’s side with the whole Alex thing. So I guess that means she’s not talking to me either. We only have calculus together but I didn’t see her today. It’s our drop day.’

Whatever ‘drop day’ meant. I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted by a fight between Claudia and Kate. We had to save Rhode. We would save him, like the hundreds of times he saved me. And Justin? I would try to save him too, if I could.

Cassius, Henri and Liliana walked down Lovers Bay Main Street.

‘They’re coming,’ I said, and pointed down the road.

When they reached us, Cassius said, ‘Act natural.’ He wore a baseball cap to shade his eyes. Liliana didn’t seem to care, and the silver of her eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

My jaw was clamped together so hard I raised my fingers to touch my cheek. It throbbed as we marched to the opposite end of Main Street. Cassius held a duffel bag and Liliana wore a backpack to cover the quiver; our weapons were quite concealed. Cassius handed her a pair of sunglasses, which she took with a roll of her eyes. Now, with their sunglasses and bags, they could have been tourists.

Henri and I trailed behind. It was strange to go into battle during the day; I had spent so long attacking by moonlight.

Warwick Avenue was the last road before the beach, and we had agreed that we would walk the shore to Justin’s house and cross on to his grounds from the backyard. My hands shook so I clenched them into fists.

I hated admitting it, but I was scared. Great leaders or queens shouldn’t feel such abject fear. Fire’s ruby-hilted dagger was fitted firmly to a strap around my wrist, though my long sleeves hid it. I would simply need to fling my arm

forward in a specific movement and the dagger would release from its clasp and into my hand. Micah was quite good at showing me how to use it. The dagger was a talisman now, a friend in this fight. The sword Fire had left me was hidden in Cassius's bag. He'd collected it from me after leaving the chapel that morning.

Cassius and Liliana stopped when we got to the corner of Warwick Avenue. Four properties on the right, four on the left, and at the end, in a shaft of bright sunlight, was Justin's house.

Domain. Lair. Whatever it was, it was two floors and massive.

As agreed, Liliana tracked us from the street running parallel to the beach. She would have plenty of time to identify and, with her arrows, take out any target coming at us from the beach. The other Dems would come by way of the cemetery and enter Justin's house from the opposite side.

'They'll be the second line of defence,' Cassius had explained, about Esteban and the other Dems. 'The fewer people in the house initially, the better. They'll be waiting outside the instant we need backup.'

As they could read one another's thoughts, the rest of the Dems would be able to enter as soon as we needed them. I glanced behind us at the long stretch of beach. People were starting to set up on blankets and chairs for the eclipse. They wore light sweaters and readied their cameras. I was ashamed, but I wanted nothing more than to join them and forget all of this was happening.

Henri hurried forward to catch up with me as we made our way down the beach. I clenched my hands again so he wouldn't see them shaking. *Be brave*, I told myself. *Be brave.*

'I think . . .' Henri said quietly, keeping close to my side. 'I think all true leaders feel fear.'

I could see myself twice in the reflection of his aviator-style sunglasses.

'Ah – so you're reading my thoughts. Hoped you might be distracted.'

'Sometimes, Renoiera, they are quite loud.'

'I want to be the best version of myself,' I said. 'But it's not easy.'

'It never is,' Henri said.

Cassius walked ahead of us and he turned his head a little as I was talking.

'Vampires, humans, shape-shifters, phoenix, ocean dwellers, mermaids – I think we all want the same thing, Renoiera,' Henri added. 'To be human.'

'I wish I could give it to you.'

Henri replied only with a small, appreciative smile.

Cassius checked the position of the sun. Soon the moon would cross over it, and once the light following the eclipse hit the earth, any vampire standing in its path would die.

We turned the corner, out of the sight of the eclipse watchers on the beach, and hopefully everyone else.

My hands shook; I didn't fight it. As we continued to move parallel to the sea wall Liliana's blonde frame peeked out behind fences and trees, matching our pace. I exhaled a few times. Tony wasn't cracking jokes or trying to lighten the mood with his comforting quips. Tracy checked her cell phone again.

Finally we reached Justin's house and Cassius motioned for us to duck below the sea wall. We squatted together in a small circle.

Be brave . . . be brave.

'OK. So directly ahead is five hundred feet of backyard that leads up to the house. The yard is landscaped with marble statues. Perfect to hide behind.' Cassius said, and checked the time again. 'We're getting close.'

'It's important that Lenah is the last to approach the building. It's possible that Justin will sense her,' Henri said.

'Can't he sense you?' Tracy asked.

'The vibration of our energy is very different from that of a normal vampire. It's inconsistent.'

'Perhaps. But what about us?' Tony asked. 'Can he sense us?'

'Let's hope he's distracted,' Cassius said, keeping us on task, 'All right. Tracy, did you park your SUV where we agreed?'

Tracy nodded. It was just at the end of the street.

'Good. Now remember, we need to get into Tracy's SUV exactly when one twenty-six hits. That gives us two minutes before the sun is scheduled to shine again.'

'You covered the windows of the car?' I asked.

'Black curtains. And we put up a curtain divider between the front seat and the back row.'

'We have to go *now*,' Henri whispered. With that, he and Cassius were over the stone wall and into the backyard. My eyes lingered on Tracy's bracelet and we exchanged a knowing glance. I stood up and peeked over the granite wall.

The others climbed over too. In single file, Tony, Tracy, Henri and Cassius snuck towards the house.

Liliana moved in so that her back was against the house.

1.10 p.m.

We had sixteen minutes. Cassius crouched before the window, which was much smaller than I had imagined. It would have to be completely open for anyone to get through it. Now that we were here, I would definitely need their help manoeuvring Rhode out of that window. I imagined him limp in my arms, unable to move. Henri, Cassius, Tony and Tracy had reached the window by

now.

Liliana motioned for me to join them in the backyard. I climbed the stone wall, dropping quietly on to the grass. Quickly I ran for a tree and hid behind the trunk. *Please let Cassius be right.*

I prayed Justin wouldn't expect an attack on this dangerous day.

1.11 p.m.

Rhode is alive. He has to be. Once I reached the window, Cassius handed me the sword from the duffel bag. I gripped the metal and threw my long braid over my shoulder behind me. In the time it took me to get from the beach to the house, Cassius had removed the glass from the window with a special knife.

'The total eclipse will be seven minutes maximum,' he reminded us. 'Remember, the moon never stops moving.'

Cassius hoisted himself feet first through the window and disappeared into the darkness. Henri followed. Their agility made it look so easy. I stopped next to Tony and Tracy and squeezed Tony's shoulder.

'Good luck, Len,' he said.

The sound of my nickname again made my heart surge.

It was my turn. I squatted down and held on to the window frame with my free hand. With the other, I pressed my blade close to my body and lowered myself through the gap. Someone, either Cassius or Henri, grabbed my ankles. As soon as my feet brushed the floor of the stairwell I tapped the area around me with the ball of my foot. I wanted to get my bearings and a sense of how much room I had around me.

Tony and Tracy dropped into the stairwell behind me, and lastly Liliana. I raised the sword and pointed it down the hallway. Cassius put his index finger to his mouth.

Tony and Tracy crept along back to back just as we had rehearsed in the chapel. To our left, carpeted stairs led up to a door. Hard-rock music played from the floor above. The guitars were too loud, the lead singer's voice screeched as it echoed about the second storey. Liliana's expression was razor sharp. Her movements were almost robotic. She aimed her arrow directly at the top of the stairs. I tiptoed away from the door and towards a hallway at the bottom of the staircase.

Cassius followed behind me and we headed down the hall. I just hoped he was right about Rhode's location.

I had barely gone ten feet before Liliana cried out loudly, 'Run, Lenah!' She said something else in Linderatu that I could not understand. I spun around. One of Justin's vampires stood at the top of the stairwell. 'Justin!' the vampire called. Liliana fired an arrow, but I didn't linger to see if it hit.

‘Renoiera. Now!’ Cassius demanded.

A door to my left opened before I even approached it. A vampire stepped into the hallway – a girl that I did not recognize at first.

‘Jackie!’ Tony yelled. ‘Lenah – that’s Jackie Simms!’

Justin had made Jackie Simms a vampire. Just as I had suspected . . .

She jumped at me but instinct took over and I kicked her square in the chest. She fell backwards using her arms for balance. I ran at her. Knowing the dagger would be easier than the sword, I threw the sword down. I flung my wrist forward and the hilt of the dagger slipped into my hand. In one swift motion I plunged it into her dead vampire heart. She collapsed to the floor.

I stood up and wiped some stray hairs out of my face. Cassius’s eyes travelled from the body on the floor to me. With his eyebrows raised he handed me my sword. Good. Maybe he would treat me like the soldier I was and not the queen he wanted me to be.

Jackie Simms lay motionless, her thin lips parted.

She was seventeen and she was dead.

So wasteful – another unneeded death. I was surprised how easy it was for me to kill her. But she was young and had not had time to train as I had.

Get Rhode, you dimwit, a voice that sounded an awful lot like Vicken’s yelled in my head.

Cassius kept his sword high and at the ready.

I slid the dagger out of the body and wiped the blood on my pants. The door Jackie had come through was not a room but a hidden stairway leading to the first floor. The same disjointed rock music played from behind that door as well.

‘Lenah!’

The back of Tracy’s heels bumped against the stairs. She struggled against the grasp of a male vampire three times her size. Tony threw himself on her attacker’s back, trying to wrestle him to the floor.

Liliana ran up the stairs and there was a quick draw of her bow.

‘Get down, Tony!’ she cried, and he jumped aside.

Once the arrow flew through the air, the vampire grabbed for his chest. Tracy toppled freely to the ground.

Cassius swung his sword and I ducked. He jumped at a vampire who had been intending to attack me from behind. Cassius sliced the sword through the vampire’s neck, sending its head rolling across the marble floor.

Good. Three less opponents.

I yanked open the second door, ready to fight whoever or whatever was behind it. But it was just a room filled with discarded furniture draped in white sheets.

‘This isn’t just a coven,’ Cassius said from behind me. ‘He’s got a small army here. What’s that now? Three?’

In my mind Rhode was chained, starving, possibly almost dead.

‘Lenah!’ Someone called my name but I could not see who. Feet trampled overhead, making the light fixtures shake.

I crossed the hallway to a third door.

Cassius crept behind me on the balls of his feet, ready to spring at anyone coming near us. My friends had gone upstairs where I could not watch them. *The Dems will take care of them – remember what Cassius said.*

I turned the knob to the third door . . . damn it! No Rhode. Instead, weapons of every imaginable shape and form were harnessed to the walls. In the corner was a workstation very much like an alchemist’s lab. I didn’t know why, but I could sense that Laertes had been kept in that room. He wasn’t here now, but the space held that same vibration I had experienced in his house. It was a holy sort of vibration, one of much knowledge, like a stillness, neither good nor evil.

Justin knew we were coming. Laertes was removed. My old soul whispered to me.

Maybe he didn’t think we were coming today, but with Rhode’s disappearance he had to know we would come sooner rather than later.

A piece of silver flew by my face. It was a knife knocked out of someone’s hand. It also passed within inches of my head. It clattered to the floor and I jumped out of the way of Cassius. There was a swirl of black clothing and metal. Justin.

I had expected Justin to make a grand entrance to hurt me, to make a spectacle.

This could only mean one thing – our attack *had* taken him by surprise.

Cassius swiped the sword through the air, forcing Justin further down the hall. I wasted no time and took my opportunity to throw open the final door and step into a darkened room with a carpeted floor. Clashing metal resounded behind me. A shard of light came from a square window near the ceiling. Something was huddled in the shadowed corner.

‘Rhode!’

I slammed the door closed behind me, but there was no lock. Long chains held up Rhode’s arms above his head, and his head lolled to one side. I ran to him and extended a hand to touch his chin. He didn’t look as if he was breathing. Sunlight filtered into the room but the window was too high and the light didn’t reach the floor. I couldn’t tell if the eclipse had started yet.

‘Rhode?’ I said. My voice was unsteady. ‘Can you hear me?’

He didn’t move. His legs stuck out before him, his hands unmoving like a rag

doll.

‘Rhode. *Mon amour,’* I said in French. ‘My love.’

His head snapped up and I kicked away from him. I jumped so far that I hit the wall behind me. Animalistic sounds came from Rhode. I closed my eyes tight.

His eyes.

This wasn’t possible. It was a trick of the shadows in the room. A crash echoed outside the door.

‘I’m going to untie you,’ I said, crawling forward. I had to unhook the heavy chains that were linked three feet above his head. As I inched closer, the blue of his eyes sent a sob through me.

As I got to Rhode, his hand snapped out and clenched around my wrist. He pulled me to him and examined every part of my face.

‘You,’ he said, emphasizing every word, ‘are too late.’

His pupils had hardened. The skin of his face was buffed to an unnatural polish.

For the second time in his long life, Rhode Lewin was a vampire.

Chapter 16

I caught a second sob in my chest and held my breath to prevent it escaping. For a moment, just a split second, I wished myself a vampire again.

‘How could he do this to you?’ I whispered. Rhode’s hand was still clutching my wrist.

‘He . . .’ Rhode began. He struggled with the words. ‘He thought it would bring back my memory,’ Rhode said. He looked at me, searching. ‘When did I lose my memory?’ he asked. ‘Who am I really?’

‘I didn’t want to burden you,’ was all I could say. It occurred to me how hungry he must be – I could see it in his eyes. ‘I’m going to give you some blood soon,’ I said. ‘I promise I will, but first I have to get you out of here.’

He let go of my wrist and I reached up to the chain, unlinking it from the hook. It fell in a heavy coil to the floor. He rubbed at his wrist and forearms. When I squatted back down our faces were inches apart. His eyes kept rolling back in his head. Rhode was even weaker than I had expected. He had been fed blood at some point, but barely. I would need Cassius’s help to get him out of here.

I extended my arm. ‘Feed from me.’ The familiarity of this same event with Suleen washed over me. I wouldn’t lose Rhode too.

There was a hard slam against the door. I pushed my arm just under his nose.

‘Hurry, Rhode, please. Otherwise you’ll die,’ I said, shaking my hand in his face. ‘Please.’

‘I . . .’ He hesitated. ‘You don’t know how badly I want to.’

I kept my arm extended.

‘Yes, I do. Do it. I’m ready.’

He pushed against me so I fell back.

‘No! We barely know one another,’ he cried. ‘And now this has happened. I’m . . . I’m a . . .’

The door slammed open, and Cassius ran into the room.

‘Renoiera! Justin has run up to . . .’ he said and stopped, registering Rhode’s state.

‘Cassius!’ Liliana cried from upstairs. ‘Help!’

Cassius took a step to Rhode.

‘Go to her!’ I ordered. He swept out of the room with a frown. We struggled into the hallway.

‘You must come. It’s your chance to get away from him.’ Rhode pushed up from the floor and together we made it to the basement stairs. Above the stairwell landing was the window where we had entered the house. Up those stairs was the main floor.

The lights above us continued to flicker from the heavy feet running above. Cassius’s voice echoed, but with all the commotion, I couldn’t tell what he said. When we made it to the base of the stairs, Rhode stumbled and we had to sit. The window above mocked me. It was the only escape route that would avoid us entering into the fight upstairs.

I mentally measured the distance from the floor to the window. Rhode held his head in his hands. There was no way I could get him through that window on my own. He would have to be hoisted up and he had no arm strength. He could barely stand for more than five seconds. The sun trickled brightly into the stairwell; the eclipse hadn’t begun yet. I glanced behind me and ran through my options. There was no way out. I would have to go to the first floor to try to get Rhode out.

‘Listen to me,’ I said to Rhode. ‘A total solar eclipse is happening any minute. If the sunlight touches you once the eclipse completes, you’ll die.’

‘Leave me here,’ Rhode said. ‘Get yourself out.’

I stuck my wrist out below his lips. ‘If you feed, you’ll have enough strength to get through this window before the eclipse even starts.’ Rhode leaned an elbow on the stair behind him and squinted at me.

‘Do you . . . ?’ The words were strained. ‘Do you know what I am?’ he asked.

‘You’re with me,’ I said. ‘Forever.’

I stood up. I hated leaving the window, but Rhode was too traumatized and I couldn’t get him through it alone. ‘Let’s go,’ I said.

Rhode was able to get up the stairs, but he had to lean against me when we got to the top. I cracked the door open. A living room that was in a shambles. Bookcases had been toppled over and a desk lay on its side. Vampires were fighting throughout the room. The noise was deafening.

Across the room was a great arched window. A chair, hurled by one of Justin’s coven, flew through it with such force that shards of glass exploded to all corners of the room. I tried to close the door to avoid the flying glass, but a couple of pieces hit the doorframe and skidded into the stairwell.

From where I stood, I could see a carport below the shattered window,

covering a black sports car. If Justin escaped through that broken window, the awning would protect him from the powerful sun. There was no way I could get Rhode to the carport without risking injury.

Above the awning, a quarter-moon shadow covered the left side of the sun.

The eclipse had begun.

I couldn't worry about Justin; I had to keep focused on Rhode.

He leaned his body weight against the banister. We edged out of the stairwell. To my left, just as Cassius explained, a long hallway led to a side door. That door would lead out to the lawn and the quickest route back to Tracy's SUV.

Seven minutes of total eclipse, Cassius had said.

At the far end of the room Tony jumped on a blonde vampire's back and tackled her to the ground. Tracy threw herself over the vampire for protection.

What the hell? 'Leave her alone!' Tracy ordered Tony.

I know that face . . .

Kate Pierson hissed, baring new fangs.

No. Not her. Not this way.

My lips parted and I couldn't help but stare. I clenched my jaw tight; I wanted to help. I wanted to scream.

'Stop covering her!' Cassius cried, and ran to Tracy's side. He ducked quickly to avoid an arrow flying over his head. 'Tracy, step away. It's too late.' He glanced back at me. 'Lenah, go!' He pointed to the door at the end of the hallway. 'It leads to the yard!' Cassius cried. 'Go!'

'We have to hurry,' I said to Rhode.

Rhode's head turned lazily to the scene on the floor as I pulled him down the hall.

'Kate . . .' Rhode said. 'Was that Kate Pierson?'

Rhode was six feet four and his body far outweighed mine. We got a few steps but soon his feet dragged, and dragged some more. I had barely lifted him again when the muscles in my hands seized. I had to let go, and both Rhode and I collapsed to the floor. Vampires have no need for breath, but Rhode was so weakened he couldn't get out a full sentence without stopping to gain strength.

'I feel . . .' he said. 'I feel it. I am familiar with this . . .' He shook his head. 'Whatever I am.'

Outside the smashed window, Esteban's voice echoed into the room. He must have been close by outside though his voice was drowned out by the fighting around me.

I slung an arm under Rhode and placed the bulk of his body weight on my neck and shoulder. *Just let me get him out before Justin sees us.* At the end of the hallway, Cassius, Tony and Tracy struggled to hold down the kicking and

screaming Kate. Tony had her by the feet. I glanced at the partially eclipsed sun again.

‘You have to go,’ I cried to Cassius.

‘Three minutes,’ Cassius yelled.

‘It’s not enough time!’ I screamed back. In the fray, the Dems fought Justin’s vampires but I couldn’t find Justin.

A discarded sword lay on the floor close by, but I couldn’t reach it and hold Rhode at the same time. I had no choice but to leave it. We trudged a few steps when my biceps burned and shook again. Damn this mortal body! I had to stop.

We sunk to the floor for the second time.

From where I was in the hallway, I could make out some of the living area and another flight that led upstairs.

A thud of dread fell through my stomach.

Justin was coming down the stairs. He sighed and descended into the mayhem as though arriving at a dinner party.

‘Get up!’ I said quickly to Rhode. ‘Get up, get up, get up.’

Justin sauntered down the hallway towards Rhode and me. From somewhere close by, music blared with such force that the bass made the wall hangings vibrate.

Rhode pressed his hands against the wall and we both trembled as we got to our feet.

Justin continued his slow walk. His nostrils flared and his fangs descended, just touching his bottom lip. He stopped before us. Without a word, his hand snapped out and he seized Rhode by the neck.

‘What did you plan to do?’ Rhode grunted out. ‘Turn all of Wickham into vampires? . . . Kate Pierson was your friend,’ he continued.

Justin threw Rhode to the ground hard enough to break bone and his lips curled into a grimace. He pressed his foot, clad in a designer shoe, on Rhode’s chest. There was a crack near Rhode’s ribs and he cried out.

‘Now,’ Justin said to me, ‘I’ll decide what we talk about.’

Below me, Rhode raised his head shakily. His fingers lifted too and they trembled as they reached out. He was . . .

Hope burst through me.

Rhode was reaching for the sword. I had to divert my thoughts from what Rhode was doing or Justin might sense my emotions.

‘Talk about what?’ I finally answered. ‘That I never loved you?’ I said anything I could to stall for time. Justin punched me in the shoulder, knocking me to the wall. I slammed my already sensitive head and slid to the floor.

‘Lenah . . .’ Rhode’s voice carried weakly to me.

Justin's face slid into view and he bent closer. His eyebrows were angled in a severe V-shape and a sneer grew across his face.

There was no loss in his eyes. No sadness.

In my peripheral vision, Rhode's hand curled over the hilt of the sword. Amid the music and commotion still coming from the sitting room, he was soundless.

Justin wrapped his hard vampire fingers around my neck, squeezing enough so I could only take small breaths.

'I'm going to take your soul,' he snarled. 'Once and for all. We'll do it right this time.'

He squeezed harder and blood pounded in my ears. *He can hurt me. He's done it! He's broken vampire law just like he said he would.* My lungs couldn't contract. A burning radiated through my chest. *Rhode, get the sword. Get the sword.*

The hallway light faded along with the noise of battle.

'Your soul is mine,' Justin said in a long drawl.

I couldn't fight him . . . didn't have the strength.

The light faded away and the last image I would take with me was of two pointed and deadly fangs.

CHAPTER 17

Rhode . . . don't let him take my soul. Anam Cara.

Justin cried out and I fell back to the carpeted floor. Screams and clashes of metal assailed my ears. I sucked in air, making a horrendous rasping sound.

I wiped tears from my eyes as Justin grabbed his leg. Blood dripped through the fabric of his pant leg and smeared his hands. The sword protruded from his calf muscle.

I shook the shadows from my eyes. But Justin and Rhode were both fuzzy.

'Run, Lenah!' Rhode had turned over, trying to hoist himself up.

'Don't expose the heart!' I cried. My warmth met his cold body. I protected him by lying over his stomach.

I used whatever strength I had to hoist my body protectively over Rhode's.

Justin had the sword now, and he lifted it into the air so its point hovered over our heads. My whole body tensed. I held my breath. Here it was – the end. At least I would die with Rhode. I hung on to him as hard as I could. Justin hissed like an animal. He blinked slowly at us . . . his mouth parted in shock.

Justin *lowered* the sword. Then he *smiled.*

'Of course,' he said with a hollow chuckle. 'I should have known.'

The sword's point flickered in the strange eclipse light as Justin dropped the blade to his side.

'It's *both* of you,' he said in awe.

He did not stab me. He did not hurt us. What the hell just happened?

'Justin!' A vampire appeared from the sitting room and pointed to Henri running down the stairs to our floor.

Justin immediately ran from us with no indication that he had been stabbed moments before.

I checked the eclipse. A great diamond ring sparkled around the sun. The eerie twilight would last only a minute more at most.

'Listen to me,' I said to Rhode. His eyes were closed. I slapped his face. 'Rhode.'

'Lenah . . .' he groaned. 'I . . .'

‘Get it! Get it! The Verese—’ Justin cried from the stairwell. I didn’t know if I’d caught the word in its entirety. He ran right by Tracy and Tony, who had come out of the sitting room and were now standing behind me.

I turned back to Rhode. ‘You need to help me. I can’t lift all your weight,’ My arm stung and the cut on my middle finger pulsed.

‘I love . . .’ Rhode sputtered. ‘I love . . .’

His eyes rolled, his head tilted to the side and he passed out.

I shook Rhode but he did not respond.

Tony and Tracy were now dragging Kate down the hallway by her ankles.

I lifted Rhode’s head, but his eyes remained closed.

‘The Vere—’ Justin yelled, coming back into the room, but the word was lost on me again. I didn’t think it was English. He held something under his arm. An ancient leather-bound book with a thick cover.

He called out that strange word again. Maybe it was French? I couldn’t translate.

Cassius ran at Justin but ducked quickly from an impending blow from Justin’s blade. Their duelling forced them both back into the sitting room. Taking my opportunity, I lifted Rhode’s large frame. My stomach muscles shook and I almost got him to the middle of the hallway before my tired body gave out again. Slick sweat ran down my temples to my jaw. I just needed to get us to that door. Tony and Tracy were busy with Kate while Justin’s coven was successfully distracted. The Demelucrea has allowed us a getaway as best they could. I just needed to lift Rhode!

‘Justin! She’s taking Rhode. Lenah is taking him!’ Kate cried. She broke free from Tony and Tracy and scrambled to her feet. Tony fell back, massaging his arm.

‘Kate! Wait!’ Tracy cried, and followed her into the sitting room. Tracy clearly could not understand the switch in Kate’s loyalty, but I could. Kate was a new vampire. Justin was familiar *and* powerful. It wouldn’t have taken much to get her under his control. Tony ran in after Tracy.

‘No! Let her go!’

An arrow flew through the air. There was a crump of a body falling and Tracy’s anguished voice called out Kate’s name.

Liliana’s arrow had found its target.

I hooked Rhode under both arms and dragged him down the hall. The back of his head pressed into my stomach and the heels of his boots scraped along the Oriental rug. Tony came out of the sitting room supporting both Micah and Tracy. Micah’s right leg was dangling in an odd way. Blood seeped near his hairline. Both he and Tracy were limping. None of them could help me with

Rhode.

Tony looked as if he was about to let go of Micah to come help me, but Liliana charged by and grabbed Rhode's other side. With her help, the strain on my arms lessened immediately.

Cassius lifted his sword in the air and charged at Justin. Tony, Micah and Tracy passed us. Tony looked back at me.

'I'm all right – go.'

Tony didn't like it, but he pushed on the side door and they were gone.

Cassius ran down the hallway to meet us. He bled from his head and arms. The cut on his temple looked deep and raw. Even as a vampire it would take time to heal.

'Hurry!' he cried. 'I kicked some book out of Justin's hands. It sent him running. We have mere . . .'

An icy wind lifted my braid from my back. Justin flew towards us.

'Go! Now! Now!' I kept repeating it. 'Cassius, Liliana! Take Rhode and go!!'

Liliana dropped Rhode and I nearly fell hanging on to him. She readied her arrows.

'I command it, Cassius!' I said.

He clenched his jaw and coupled it with an angry grunt of frustration. He escaped out the door to the last embers of eclipsed light.

'Liliana, stop!' I screeched.

She ignored me and fired arrow after arrow at Justin, but he batted them away with ease, one after the other. Rhode remained unmoving at my feet.

Justin threw his palm out, and a fierce gust of air rushed down the hallway, lifting Liliana and slamming her body against the door behind me. She lay in a crumpled heap, her bow motionless in her hand.

Justin moved so that he was standing right in front of me. Quickly he swiped a dagger through the air. It whizzed by my nose, an inch from my neck.

I jumped back, nearly falling over Rhode at my feet, and grabbed for my neck. I expected hot blood to seep from my skin. My fingers searched my neck and face. I was unharmed, but I should have been mortally wounded.

Shock radiated through me. This wasn't merely Justin *attempting* to hurt me as he had on the beach. He had tried and failed before because the natural law of vampires commanded it. He loved me so I was safe.

This time he missed on purpose.

Justin had tried to *cut* me. He *could* hurt me. Nothing stopped him this time.

This could only mean one thing.

'Tell me you didn't?' I said. 'Tell me it hasn't come to this, Justin?'

'It's not so tragic,' he said. 'You don't have to look so sorry for me.'

‘I am sorry for you.’

It hadn’t registered until now; I had been too distracted trying to get Rhode out. Justin had *punched* me only moments ago; kicked me too. He couldn’t stab me before this day, but now he most definitely could.

He looped an arm around my waist and his fangs hovered over my neck. I held my breath. I would be with Rhode, I would love him, but my mind would fall away, my hatred would rule me and I would be the mistress of power once more. Justin would get his wish. I would become the vampire queen again. I would kill. I would hate. I would not keep my soul.

The knife point of Justin’s fang dug into my skin and broke through. The needle-like pain made my knees buckle. The bite wasn’t enough to transform me, not yet. He would drain me and over the night, I would transform and join those that wished death on the living. I yanked my arm away but his grip was relentless. *He’s draining me, and fast*. My knees buckled.

Behind me, the latch of the door clicked; someone was coming back inside. Justin loosened his grip and pulled back from me.

‘Let her go,’ Tracy said in a very low voice.

‘Tracy, get out!’ I cried. Justin dropped me. When I hit the floor, I grazed Rhode’s lifeless hand with my own. My arms shook and my neck burned from the bite. I shielded Rhode and Liliana’s bodies the best I could.

‘You’re not Justin,’ Tracy said. ‘Not any more.’

She slipped the bracelet off her wrist.

Oh no.

She lifted her arm. ‘The real Justin wouldn’t kill Kate. She was your *friend.*’

Tracy cast the silver into the air and it flew past Justin’s ear. The bracelet stalled, hovering just past where Justin stood. Tracy fell to her knees at Justin’s feet and cradled her throwing arm.

‘No, Tracy, don’t!’ I yelled, but it was far too late. The bracelet circled again and again, melting into a silver disc. The disc morphed as it flew across the hallway into a spinning vortex.

Her weapon had worked; the bracelet was an airborne whirlpool of water that grew bigger and bigger. Just like the fireball on the beach, the element, water, grew in size.

Justin backed to the wall to watch the great spinning whirlpool. It flattened and lengthened in shape.

‘What is this?’ he said. ‘What the hell is that!?’ He raised his voice even more.

Rhode and Liliana remained passed out on the ground.

The loud guitar music that had been blasting through the speakers suddenly fell silent. I didn’t know why and couldn’t care. The whirlpool vibrated while it

spun. Its rotation made a rhythmic swish and with every complete turn, it grew in size. It made Justin's water shield look like a kiddie pool.

Justin lifted a palm, but before he could manipulate the water, the entire mass collapsed in a great sheet to the floor. Rain pelted the inside of the house with torrential force.

'Lenah!' A roaring deluge drowned out Tracy's scream. A rush of water emerged from the basement stairwell. It spilled over on to the carpeted hallway and rose higher and higher. I gasped as the freezing water licked at my ankles.

There was a splash at my feet. Rhode shook his head; the water must have revived him. Liliana too. I squatted down by Rhode. Tracy took Liliana's arm and helped her stand. The Dem wiped the water out of her eyes but it continued to pelt the house. I looked for Justin but he was at the opposite end of the hall, battling the waves of water rushing down the stairs to the main floor.

'Come on,' I said, and pulled on Rhode's arm.

'No,' he said, and yanked away. 'There is nothing you can do, Lenah.'

He zigzagged off down the hallway in the direction of Justin.

'Have you lost your mind?' I asked, following him.

'Lenah, come back!' Tracy cried from behind me.

Rhode crashed into a table at the end of the hallway and fell in the water again.

The water was now up to my shins. Rhode reached up to pull himself out of the water. His hand shook so badly that he could only wrap his fingers around the table leg before he collapsed again. I was still feet from him when Justin stepped out at the end of the hall once more. He had retrieved his precious book and held it under the crook of one arm. My legs shook from the weight of having carried Rhode. Justin lifted one hand, palm out, and spread his fingers wide.

At Justin's command, the water beneath Rhode crested and surged upward. It separated from the mass of the flood and drifted like a floating table. Rhode was limp as Justin brought him towards him.

I reached out, my hand aching and pain pulsing through the cut on my finger.

I sloshed after Justin and Rhode, but the water had now risen to my belly button. Rhode remained limp on the floating altar and hovered behind Justin.

A vampire floated by me in the water. Headless.

Justin slipped something into his pocket, like a vial or a bottle, but I couldn't tell for sure.

'Rhode, wake up!' I screamed, but my voice cracked. Through the window, the dangerous sun shone on to the roof of the carport outside. The eclipse had been over for some minutes at least.

'What are you doing to him?' I called. Now that I was closer to the open

window I could see; the windows of the car were covered in what appeared to be black paint.

Justin's sneer grew. The rain fell down around us, coating his hardened face.

Justin pointed and Rhode's body floated behind him on this odd stretcher of waving water. Justin clambered on to the windowsill, which was above the height of the water. He directed Rhode's body through the smashed window and across to the sports car.

A scream grew inside me, spilling out of me like an animal let loose. Maybe the power of my anger surprised him because Justin looked back and his face slackened.

Use it only when you need it most.

Now. This was when I needed Fire's necklace most. But I hadn't known that, couldn't foresee this kind of horror.

Justin jumped down under the protection of the carport.

'Lenah!' Somewhere behind me, Tracy called my name. The water was up to my chest. I swam back to the hallway. Tracy opened the door and water rushed out to the yard. The sunlight trickled in and Liliana moved further into the hallway to avoid the direct rays. She looked out the door and up towards the blue sky.

'Go,' Liliana said, but her eyes were on Tracy. 'Go to the others.'

Tracy obeyed, leaving only Liliana and me inside the house.

The rain had tapered off and only a light shower pattered the flooded house.

There was a crack of wood, and my heart jumped. A harsh sound of splitting of beams came next and I protected my head. I checked the ceiling; surely it was caving in; but no, it remained intact. Outside, an engine started. I quickly moved to the end of the hallway – the carport awning had cracked, and the wood fell apart.

Justin roared off in a black Jaguar with Rhode's unresponsive body inside.

Justin had destroyed the carport. Its roof fell inwards in a V-shape.

It was already shining so much lighter than before.

Liliana was trapped.

She still hid in the shadows at the end of the hallway. She looked so small to me.

The tips of my toes touched the floor as I swam back towards Liliana. The further I made it down the hall, the more shallow the water. Once the door was opened, the water flowed out.

When I reached her, Liliana passed me her empty quiver and her bow. The top of the bow had a tiny encircled R engraved in the wood, just like her sister's had.

'Swim to the top floor. We can get you out later,' I said gently.

‘The water isn’t what would kill me. I could live for weeks in a house filled with water.’ She cocked her head. ‘Don’t you hear them already?’

‘What?’

‘The sirens . . .’

She was right – the distinct sound of emergency sirens echoed.

‘They’ll hold me responsible, want to take me in for questioning. Either way, they’ll force me out into the light.’

She stood in the shadow of the open doorway and looked up at the sun.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ she asked, and met my eyes.

In the distance, Tracy hobbled towards her car on the street. I hoped Tony, Micah and Cassius were safe inside.

Water pressed against the back of my legs and pushed out the door to the grass.

Liliana took a step to exit the house.

‘No!’ I cried, grabbing her arm. She, like Cassius, was warm to the touch.

‘This is what I was born to do,’ she whispered. It was the whisper that stopped me. Liliana was so calm. ‘Let me go,’ she commanded.

Our eyes met, mine blue, hers silver. She shouldn’t die in this house of water. She should choose her own fate.

‘Thank you, Renoiera,’ she said. It should have been me thanking her.

Liliana stepped on to the grass and brought her chin to the sky. The beautiful blonde vampire slid her gaze to me. A smile played on her mouth just as a sliver of the sun moved from behind a cloud and beamed on to the grass.

Orange dust enveloped Liliana from head to toe. Like Suleen in my father’s orchard, she had become a statue of golden ashes. I stepped out of the house and my fingers shook as I touched the soft powder; she collapsed to nothing but dust.

I squatted down and pulled my fingers through her remains. My chest clenched with despair. Grief made me empty. Hollow. I hated myself for failing.

The sirens were closer now.

‘Lenah!’ Cassius called from the car.

The sirens wailed louder and louder, coming from Main Street.

It was too late to do anything else. Justin had escaped, and Rhode was trapped with him.

‘Hurry up!’ Tony called, and the panic in his voice snapped me out of it. I scooped up some of Liliana’s remains and tucked them deep in my pocket. I sprinted across the lawn and out on to the street, sliding into the car. Tony was driving, and once the door was shut, he gunned the engine. As we turned the corner, the first ambulance peeled the corner on to Warwick Avenue.

My last image of Lovers Bay was of fire trucks racing down Main Street.

The authorities would scratch their heads and wonder how that much water could fill a house. They would search for sprinkler systems and find none. There would be nothing left once the water drained; only dead vampires and a shell of a house.

I wanted to save Rhode. I wanted to save Liliana, Henri and of course Kate Pierson.

They were vampires.

Just like Justin.

Just like Rhode.

CHAPTER 18

‘Say something,’ Tony repeated as he drove. I placed Liliana’s quiver and bow by my feet and scooped her ashes from my pocket. They were rust-coloured – a brave colour to leave behind.

Tracy sat in the back. I couldn’t see her behind the black curtain, but I could hear her sobbing. ‘I couldn’t get Rhode. I’m sorry, Lenah. So sorry . . .’

‘Lenah, say something,’ Tony said once more.

One gust of wind and Liliana would be gone from my hand. Tracy cried out in pain again.

‘Let me see it, Tracy,’ I heard Micah say.

‘It hurts. Don’t touch it!’

‘It’s going to be OK,’ Tony said.

‘How is it OK?’ Tracy moaned. ‘He’s a monster.’ She kept repeating it. ‘Justin’s a monster.’

As we drove I stared at the ashes in my hand. My arms still shook from the strain of carrying Rhode. In my mind, Justin held the sword above Rhode and me and awe passed over his face. He didn’t kill us when he had the chance. The question was why. What had he meant with that comment about it being ‘both of us’?

Tony took the highway and we were back at Cassius’s house rather quickly. He pulled into the driveway and parked in the garage. Everyone was talking, though I didn’t hear what they said. Car doors opened and shut, and someone opened the passenger side door. I didn’t move.

Tracy walked into the house, holding her arm to her chest and sniffling, ‘Kate. Kate.’

‘Is she going to be OK?’ I heard Tony ask Micah.

‘I think so,’ he replied.

‘Renoiera, look at me,’ Cassius said, and squatted next to the open car door.

I extended my hands, holding out the delicate remains.

‘These are Liliana’s,’ I said with a shake in my voice.

He opened his palms and I poured the ashes into them. I brought my hands

quickly back to my lap; a gritty film coated my skin. I was reminded of a time long ago when I had believed Rhode to be dead. He had attempted to sacrifice himself by performing the ritual. When I found his vampire remains, they looked exactly like this.

'Like Rhode, she was a soldier,' Cassius said quietly. 'She was prepared to die.'

'My. Fault,' I gasped. 'I should have forced her to leave. Forced.' My throat was tight, constricted.

'She stayed to protect you. Against your orders,' Cassius tried to explain.

'You ran when I told you to.'

'*Because* you told me to,' he replied. 'If I had my choice, I would have stayed too.'

'Then you'd both be dead.'

My thoughts turned unwillingly to Justin again. Now that he had had his ability to love removed, he would be utterly ruthless. The time had come to do what Suleen and Fire had asked of me. I knew that now. I couldn't risk Justin making anyone else a vampire. Whatever his plan was, he surely wasn't going to stop with Rhode. I was his number-one target, and anyone associated with me was a target as well. That meant only one thing . . .

He had to be mine.

He would torture Rhode until I gave in. He would turn others at Wickham Boarding School into vampires until I gave him what he desired – my soul.

'What is it, Len?' Tony asked. He had come back out of the house and was standing beside Cassius. The Dems kept looking at one another. Micah too came out and stood there. He held medical tape in his hand and kept his eyes on Cassius. They were listening to me but in their minds.

What was that word Justin had yelled? *Verese-something. Justin said this word: verese-something.* It didn't sound complete when he had said it and it didn't sound like English either.

Cassius stood up and turned to Micah and Esteban.

'Say it out loud,' Micah said gently. 'Please.'

'Verese or vere was all I heard,' I said. 'It's the start of a word. I don't know the rest.'

'Vere means "towards" in our language,' Micah said. 'That's not much to go on.'

Cassius nodded.

I brought the heels of my palms to my eyes. The grit of Liliana's ashes stuck to my eyebrows. I didn't care.

'Who's with Tracy?' I asked the darkness.

‘She’s in good hands, Renoiera,’ Cassius said.

‘Stop calling me that!’ I yelled, and the word echoed in the garage. ‘A Renoiera who can’t weaken the one person who’s tormenting everyone? Who can’t save Rhode? The two reasons we went into the bloody place! You want me to kill him; I haven’t been able to. I’m no one’s queen.’

I got out of the car and headed towards the door to check on Tracy.

I stopped at the top of the stairs to the house; it was only fair to come clean.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the elemental weapons. I wanted to make sure that I could truly protect you. They were my secret, I guess. But –’ I drew a deep breath – ‘I can’t protect anyone.’

Cassius opened his mouth to reply but I interrupted him by moving my braid out of the way, exposing my neck. I showed them the circular wounds that the tip of Justin’s fangs had made in my skin.

‘You should know Justin can hurt me. He tried to make me a vampire again in that house. If Tracy hadn’t come inside, I’d already be transforming.’

‘I thought you said he can’t hurt you if he loves you,’ Tony asked.

‘He has removed his ability to love,’ Cassius said in a low voice. Micah’s eyes widened in horror.

I didn’t speak because my breath was short. My legs and arms seized from exhaustion. The pain distracted me.

‘It’s time,’ I said. ‘We have to leave as quickly as we can. Get me some weapons.’

We planned to return to Wickham Boarding School in a couple hours. After all, Tracy and Tony’s parents would be called if they were off campus too long. I also needed to make a plan. I knew better than to run back into danger without thinking through my options. Also many of the Dems, Cassius and Esteban included, needed to heal. They also needed blood.

I sat on a couch in the living room and held Liliana’s bow in my lap. I ran my fingers against the soft wood.

Cassius did something for me I should have done days ago when Justin was shot by Liliana’s arrow on Main Street. I had kept the arrow from that night in my book bag. After investigating it, Cassius tossed the arrow into a fire that was burning in the grate.

‘It’d take days to decipher what is in Justin’s blood, even if we could get enough of a sample from that arrow,’ Micah explained. ‘And we don’t have that kind of time.’

The arrow in the fireplace crackled and hissed in response. With the burning of the blood, the spells, the evil and Justin’s power evaporated with the smoke.

Anything magical stored in that onyx disappeared when it was broken apart and destroyed.

'Are there any of Fire's weapons left?' Cassius asked.

'Tony's and a silver ring in my trunk. It's air. I think we should save both as a last resort. They haven't exactly worked out to my advantage.'

'But they're something,' Tony offered.

'How do we get into the Hollow Ones' house?' Tracy asked, and sipped on some tea. 'That's the next stage of our plan, right? Get Laertes and Rhode?'

'We don't even know what Justin was trying to protect,' Tony pointed out. 'Back in his house, he seemed interested only in taking Rhode and keeping that book. Did you see him chase it after it when it was kicked out of his hand?'

'What's inside that book might explain how he is so powerful,' Cassius replied. 'It would explain his desperation to protect it. And it's our only lead.'

Micah and Cassius met my eyes. 'Let's get moving,' I announced. Micah started to prepare a bag and dropped a dagger, sheathed with my symbol, into it. It made a soft clunk against the other weapons.

'I'm not afraid to fight Justin, not after what he did to Kate,' Tracy said, getting up. She and Tony kept talking about battle plans.

They can't come, I said pointedly to the Dems, using only my mind. *Tracy and Tony. Answer me in your mind.*

Both Micah's and Cassius's bodies stiffened. Micah kept packing, but his eyes flickered to mine.

We need to go back, protect the school, I said. *No one else dies. No one.*

Cassius's deep voice rang in my head. *I agree we need to go back. Someone needs to watch the school. But it's too dangerous for you, Renoiera.*

'No,' I said aloud.

'What? I don't think a scythe is too much,' Tony said, misreading my reaction. I shook my head.

You should tell them, Cassius said in my mind. He was right. What was that phrase? Time is of the essence.

'Tony, Tracy, you need to go back to Wickham,' I interrupted. 'You will not be coming with me to the Hollow Ones' house.'

Tracy shot up. 'No way! You saw what Justin did to Kate – she was one of my best friends.'

I placed Liliana's bow on the side table next to the couch.

'This isn't up for negotiation any more. You need to stay safe. So that you can protect Claudia and the others at Wickham.' I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. I rested my back against the large window.

Tracy sighed and pressed her lips together. After a moment she nodded. It was

the mention of Claudia that convinced her, I thought.

‘With Micah, Cassius and the other Dems,’ I continued, ‘you can keep things under control. We have to figure out the best way to discreetly keep everyone safe. Then I’ll deal with Justin.’

Tony stood up, joining me in a shaft of moonlight, ‘We’ll do it. You can count on us.’

Pegasus, the constellation of the winged horse, had always been my navigator. Once he illuminated in the sky, we left for Wickham.

‘We go back and we play it cool,’ I said from the passenger seat. Tony was driving again. ‘If anyone asks where we’ve been, I had to see my sick aunt and you two gave me a ride.’

‘Micah’s really good at forging official documents,’ Tracy said from the back. She read over a memo Micah had printed. Micah and Cassius were to meet us at my dorm room at nine, but in the meantime they were meant to assess the perimeter of the school. After the fight, we expected that Justin would need at least some time to regroup – after all, his house was destroyed. But I didn’t think it would take him long. Once I knew Tony and Tracy were safely protected, I would find Justin and destroy him. I now saw no other way out of this. Suleen had been right.

I hope we can protect them, I sent to the Dems.

We can, we will. Micah’s gentle voice said in my head. Cassius remained silent, in the back seat, plotting.

Tony, Tracy and I stood on the street just outside the Wickham gates. Lights from the union shone across the campus.

‘Sick aunt,’ Tony said.

‘Yep. Very old. Ancient,’ I replied.

We had rehearsed our excuse on the drive back. The guard started out of the booth towards us. As we waited for him to reach us, a breeze blew through the trees and one single leaf fluttered in a slow seesaw to the ground. I lifted my arm, opened my palm and the leaf landed in the centre of my hand.

Look . . . a voice in my mind said. It was the vampire queen deep down reminding me danger was near.

A man stood against the stone wall near the entrance to Lovers Bay Cemetery. He hid under the shadows of the trees. He wore a light leather jacket and kept his hands in his pockets.

‘Go,’ I whispered to Tony and Tracy. ‘Go to the guard.’

‘A vampire?’ Tracy whispered back.

The other way towards Main Street was more crowded, especially near the

coffee shop.

There! A second vampire! This one was standing in the shadow cast by the post office. He watched us, his arms crossed, but he did not step out into the light of the street lamp.

The guard put up his hand and stopped us from walking on to the quad, 'You're on the list, all three of you, to see Headmistress Williams immediately. You know you're not allowed off campus for extended periods, *especially* without permission. We were about to call all of your parents.'

Who would they call for me?

Two more vampires stood even further down the street. Another was in a car parked near Lovers Bay Diner.

'Come along, Ms Beaudonte,' the guard said. On the street, the vampire in the leather jacket lifted his chin and scowled.

All of them, each vampire on that street, was watching our every movement. Looks like I was right about Justin. I had no doubt these vampires were here on his orders.

They had come to Lovers Bay on command.

They had come for me.

Chapter 19

‘We didn’t even miss any classes,’ Tracy whined.

‘Irrelevant, Miss Sutton. Kate Pierson *and* Rhode Lewin have gone missing in the same week’ Ms Williams said while she paced in her office. ‘We were worried sick. Not to mention what would happen if the media got wind of the newest disappearances.’

‘Is that what you’re worried about?’ I asked. ‘The bad publicity?’

She stopped pacing. ‘You keep your opinions to yourself, Miss Beaudonte. I expect you three in your rooms at curfew, with no visitation privileges for forty-eight hours. You cannot go off campus and I expect you all to abide by the school rules for the rest of the semester. Contrary to what Miss Beaudonte thinks, I want you safe. I’ll see you all at the school meeting tomorrow morning.’

We stepped out of the office.

‘You keep your opinions to yourself,’ Tony mocked. He sighed and shivered. ‘She’s good. It’s creepy.’

‘She’s a fool,’ I replied.

‘I’m going to find Claudia,’ Tracy said, and the firm line of her mouth told me that now that she was here on campus without Kate, she was stepping into the role of protector to her remaining friends. My plan was working exactly as I hoped.

‘I’ll go with Tracy,’ Tony said. ‘It’s nearly eight o’clock,’ he called as he followed behind. It didn’t matter what Ms Williams said. I was done belonging to the world of Wickham Boarding School. I had made peace with that when I had asked the Aeris to return me home to the medieval world; I was no longer a part of the modern world.

I stood with my legs shoulder-width apart and did a panoramic sweep of the beach to the science buildings and to the media centre. I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin. Whoever these vampires were, they were still watching me, and I had to exude confidence and power.

I didn’t care if I looked crazy to the students. I didn’t have vampire sight; I

hadn’t possessed it in three years. My eyes swept over the infirmary to Seeker, to the main gates, the library. I turned completely around until I faced straight ahead again. I said words they would not hear but I knew they would be able to read on my lips.

‘I. Am. Not. Going. Down. Without. A. Fight.’

At exactly 9 p.m. I stood at my dorm window and opened it up. Within seconds, two pairs of hands and legs crawled through.

‘We saw them,’ Cassius said. ‘We were able to detain one but didn’t get much information.’

‘I did get this though,’ Micah said, gesturing at his black eye.

‘Justin called them here. We know that much,’ Cassius said.

‘I figured as much,’ I replied.

‘You shouldn’t have come back,’ Micah said to me.

‘How did he summon so many? Send out a telegram?’ I asked.

‘It’s more email now,’ Micah replied, with a hint of a smile.

I couldn’t laugh.

‘We should go back to my house,’ Cassius said. ‘Tonight. You and I should go.’

‘We can’t leave Tony and Tracy alone. We need a plan to find out what these vampires want.’

‘I think we’re going to find out either way,’ Cassius said. Micah nodded, and by the time he turned back to face me, the bruise around his eye had already faded from black to a pale gold. ‘We tried to negotiate, but our appearance is strange to them. A threat.’

‘When they found out who we were, they attacked,’ Micah said. ‘And they promised more would come.’

‘Which is why you must go,’ Cassius pressed.

‘Not until I know Tony and Tracy are safe.’

‘Where is Tracy now?’ Cassius asked.

‘Claudia’s room. She’ll be back. Just give me until morning.’

That night I sat in the window seat with my head resting on the wall behind me. I held a dagger. The proximity to a weapon made me feel better, even though Cassius and Micah stood outside my window keeping watch. I had lost Fire’s sword in the fight at Justin’s, but still had the dagger. The campus was silent. Beyond the quad and surrounding the campus, the night settled over the Wickham woods. Shadows moved around the perimeter, silhouettes waited, preying on my fate.

What had Justin promised these vampires haunting Lovers Bay? What scheme had he concocted? Was it some backup plan in case he was compromised?

I turned away from the window when I spotted a vampire on a tree branch outside, leaning his head on his arm. Watching me.

'Is this what the other –' Tracy paused – 'life was like? Death and fear all the time?'

I had thought she was asleep. She'd come home and gone straight to bed. I pulled the shades down, shielding our room from vampires watching in the night. I turned to her and leaned my back against the window again.

'Isn't that part of life?' I asked. 'Death?'

She lay on her side. 'I'm not afraid to die,' she said. 'I'm afraid I won't get to live my life. Grow old, get married, have a zillion cute half-Asian babies with Tony.'

I liked the sound of that.

And I knew what she meant. The unlived life perhaps was worse than an eternity of being undead.

'I want that,' she said quietly, 'I bet Kate did too.'

'And Justin,' I added.

'Yeah . . .' she said. 'But the world is different after what I've seen. I'm different.'

'Different how?'

'I want to go to college. I want to sing in the Christmas pageant. I want to see my little brother graduate high school.'

I hadn't even known Tracy had a younger sibling. I wanted to mention Genevieve but she continued. 'I want to go to prom with Claudia and get our pictures taken in that stupid booth,' she said, her voice breaking at Claudia's name. 'But now I don't know if that *can* happen. We might die, Lenah. All of us.' The tone of her voice was one of sadness and realization. She tried to tuck her hands away so I wouldn't see, but they shook in the moonlight.

I moved to the side of her bed and took Tracy's cold hands into mine and squeezed.

'I'm going to protect you. I don't know how but I'll do whatever it takes, even if I die trying.'

Tracy hugged me to her small frame,

'Get Rhode,' she said with a sniffle. 'Get him out. We can't lose anyone else.'

I had almost forgotten that, in this world, Rhode and Tracy were classmates. Friends even.

'What about Justin?' I asked. 'You don't want me to save him any more?'

'I'm not like you and Tony,' she said with a wipe of her nose. 'I don't forgive.'

I didn't want to tell her that I too had come to believe the same sad position.

She got up from the bed and snatched the pictures down from the mirror. She waited, keeping her back to me, but I could see her face in the reflection. She pressed her lips together and a grimace broke through as she fought not to cry.

'Whoever that was – that *thing* that took over Justin's body? – that is not the guy from freshman year. That is not him, Lenah.' She sobbed once and turned to me, wiping her tears away. 'I went to Brownies with Kate.' She shook her hair back, swallowing her tears and lifting her chin defiantly. 'And I want every vampire dead. Every single one.' She stalked across the floor to the bathroom and shut the door.

I waited there by the side of her bed. I was sorry she wanted them all dead, though I could not blame her. Perhaps Tracy would never understand the complexities of vampires. She had only spent time with the Demelucrea and they were special – hybrids in possession of their sanity. If she understood Justin's pain, would she be more forgiving?

Justin wanted nothing more than to destroy my life. I understood that compulsion, the need to destroy. Hadn't I been brilliant at pain? Still, she was right. He was not the boy I had loved here at Wickham.

I walked to the bureau. The photos of Justin and Kate sat in a pile. I lifted one of Justin and his brothers. In the photo, his arms were around the shoulders of Curtis and Roy. Kate, Claudia and Tracy sat below them, also with their arms around one another. I needed to keep this. Perhaps to remind myself how quickly our lives turn. I slid it into the back pocket of my jeans.

I leaned on the cushion, snapped the shade up and peered outside.

The night should have been my friend. The sky and stars once provided guidance for my problems. But I could not decipher the constellations. All I could see now was darkness and shadow.

'It is my hope that you will continue to abide by these rules,' Ms Williams said at assembly the next morning. Tony, Tracy and I sat in the very back of the auditorium. We could see the whole student body this way. The administration went over a new buddy system. I had seen Wickham like this before. Buddy systems, signing in and out. It was all useless if –

My body jolted.

With a smattering crash, an explosion of glass sent kaleidoscopes of sunlight all over the room. Screams erupted and the upper-school students leaped to their feet. Most students were at the doors before they could see who was attacking.

Vampires of both sexes and all ages swarmed the auditorium. There must have been thirty of them. The one I'd seen on the street in the leather jacket raised one

long arm and pointed directly at me.

I slid my dagger from its sheath and jumped to the aisle.

Tony followed behind me.

‘No. Get them out of here. As many students as you can!’ I cried.

Tracy pulled a girl I didn’t recognize towards the door.

Another vampire ran towards me, but Tony back-handed his face and sent the vampire to the floor. I dropped to one knee and stabbed the vampire in the heart.

‘There’s another one!’ Tony cried.

‘Get the students and teachers *out*!’ I yelled. ‘Remember the painting in the gallery?’ I cried to Tony. ‘Get yourself to a safe place.’

He squeezed my arm in a gesture of good luck and ran for the main floor.

At least ten more vampires crawled in through the windows.

Cassius! I cried in my head.

We’re here! Just as his voice sang through my mind, he ran out from behind the auditorium stage. The vampire from the street was throwing students aside in order to get to me.

‘Lenah!’ Tracy called out. I couldn’t find her in the fray. I kept my eyes on the vampire running at me. Once he was within arm’s reach, I kicked, getting him in the shins.

Students dodged us, running through the aisles and to the exit.

‘Give it to me,’ the vampire from the street cried.

‘Give what?’ I ducked a punch and swung the dagger. He jumped back and I missed. A backpack flew through the air.

‘Don’t play dumb. Give it to me and I’ll kill you before Justin can.’

The vampire clawed at me, but I twisted my hips, throwing a sidekick so he fell back over the seats.

‘Someone help Lenah! Call security!’ Ms Williams shrieked, but she was pushed out the double doors by a mass of students.

‘Look at their teeth!’ a girl in the second row cried, and a vampire pushed her to the ground. Her chin hit the floor with a smack as he continued up the rows to me.

Cassius crawled up the seats to me like an animal.

Two more vampires ran down my row, one from the left and one from the right. I was attacked from all directions. I held my dagger in both hands and drew a held my breath, preparing. I wished I had my sword.

Cassius yanked at the other vampire crawling up the seats by tugging his ponytail and pulling him to the floor. There were dozens of vampires coming at me at once. They were a blur of arms, legs and fangs.

A familiar yell ripped through the air. Tony’s voice.

He stood at the base of the auditorium with his hand outstretched as if he had thrown a disc. The door was behind him and daylight trickled in from outside. The sun glinted off of a circular piece of silver that flew through the air.

Tony's weapon. The ring.

The silver ring became a strange olive colour. It grew into an orb. All the vampires stopped, their eyes following its movement.

I searched fruitlessly for Tracy among the few remaining students in the auditorium. The orb pulsed its energy through the room.

Tony waited in the doorway. The ring that represented the element earth was an orb darkening in colour from pewter to charcoal to a dark brown. Cassius and Micah jumped away to join Tony by the auditorium exit. The orb hardened and hovered over us, its colour as dark as the deepest earth. Rootsas pale as the faces of vampires reached in thick, curly twists towards the floor.

The floor vibrated and shook beneath me and I held on to a nearby seat.

The airborne land mass grew bigger and bigger. Little explosions of dust rained down in the auditorium. Some of the vampires scrambled over each other for the exits as cracks edged through the dirt.

I froze in my row at the top of the auditorium. The deluge caused by Tracy's bracelet had been swift. The water rose in seconds and soon filled Justin's house. This brown orb hung in the air; everything fell still till it seemed even quieter than silence could be. Any minute now . . .

I searched again for Wickham students but couldn't find any in the crowds of vampires. It looked as if they'd all got out.

With massive strength the earth fell to the floor, crushing the dozens of vampires in the auditorium. Cassius and Micah held on to Tony by the back of his shirt. The whole building shook and I hoped the ceiling wouldn't collapse in on us. A weight of that magnitude would have killed any human instantly, but it was also strong enough to break the necks of vampires.

The dirt lay in heaps as high as the base of the broken windows. The pungent odour of deep soil enveloped the room. What had been thirty or so vampires running at me had dropped to six.

'Give it up!' the vampire on my left cried and jumped at me.

I steadied myself, spun on my heel and cut my dagger through the air. I looked for skin, for flesh to disarm. I ducked but was kicked in the stomach. I fell back into the last row of seats. An armrest jabbed into my back. I tried to sit up but my stomach muscles shook with pain. Another vampire jumped at me. Cassius flew into the air and sliced his sword across her neck. The vampire's head went flying into the heap of soil.

An army of vampires was climbing through the windows. They just kept

coming! We couldn't fight them all.

I placed both hands on the dagger again and winced at the soreness in my stomach. I braced myself for impact, for the clash of bodies, for the pain as they drew my limbs apart. I would fight. The rotten smell of blood wafted to me. I drew breath, ready for –

The air around me crystallized.

Tiny crystals floated around me.

Every time I exhaled, my breath unfurled in white tendrils. I wiped sweat from my forehead and spun, trying to understand what was happening.

I was encased in a sphere of the lightest air.

The commotion on the hill of dirt stopped. The vampires looked at one another, then to where I stood. They twisted and turned.

'Where did she go?'

'What happened?'

My heart thudded and my dagger remained clenched in my hand.

I loosened my grip and my forearm released with an ache. I reached out, trying to find the limitations of where I stood. The very molecules around me were suspended in the air. My fingers fluttered through the crystal dust motes but they sifted away like soft clouds.

The crystals *moved*. They travelled outwards, down the dirt that covered the rows and to the auditorium floor. They made a tunnel all the way down the grass and dirt to the stage behind the podium. Laertes appeared, walking out of the darkness of the backstage area and up the hill of earth towards me.

'Lenah?!' Cassius yelled. He stood right before me. The terror in his voice made my gut clench.

'Cassius!' I cried. He did not acknowledge me.

I tried with my mind. *Can you see me, Cassius? Laertes is here!*

Can you hear me?

But he did not answer. My thoughts couldn't reach his mind from this place.

I could die in this sphere with the great vampire walking towards me. But I did not fear him. The last vampires scrambled out of the auditorium the way they had come in, some muttering insistently that I had escaped by some powerful spell.

Laertes, the missing Hollow One, walked towards me, limping on his left leg. He wore his familiar black habit, though it was ripped to tatters. Despite his limp he had no problem marching up the hill. In his eyes was not the fight I expected. He lifted the side of his mouth into a smile. He was a very old man, with a gaunt face, thinner than I remembered. He might have been fifty when made a vampire, but he seemed much older to me now. When he finally stood across

from me, he pointed at Fire's dagger clenched in my hand and chuckled.

'She does have *fantastic* taste, doesn't she?' He took the dagger. My calmness surprised me. Wouldn't I have been better off frightened? Fighting him? What overwhelmed me most was my need for answers.

'Did you somehow get my blood because of the onyx ceilings? In your house?' I demanded. 'How is that possible?'

'Good question,' he said, admiring the stones on the hilt. 'Onyx is very powerful.'

'Great. Riddles,' I replied, disgusted.

Laertes laughed again. A sea of shattered glass clung to the bottom of his robes. A thick fall wind came through the window, bringing with it the smell of Lovers Bay. The room was empty now.

'I just saved your life, and I'd think you would offer me a thank-you,' he said.

'You're late. And you're holding my dagger. I don't think I'm out of the woods yet.'

'Oh, do trust me, Lenah Beaudonte. You could kill me with your bare hands.'

Laertes took slow steps to a chair. Through the broken glass windows people called my name. Laertes eased slowly into the chair. It was only then that I understood just how badly he was hurt.

'I used my last strength to come here. I escaped the one place I made nearly inescapable.'

'You had to flee your own home?'

We remained in the sphere as we talked.

'How do I know you weren't sent here with a mission like the rest of those vampires?' I asked while pacing. I didn't feel comfortable enough to sit down.

'What? As though I'm some kind of spy?' he said with another chuckle. When his mouth opened, I gasped a little at the dark holes, although I knew the Hollow Ones had removed their fangs as part of a commitment to knowledge and power.

'Yes,' I said finally. 'You could be a spy.'

'This attack was a foolish tactic on Justin's part to drive you out. I knew this would kill you,' he said. 'So I had to come for a variety of reasons. I waited until your situation was most dire.'

'You could kill me.'

'Do sit down,' he said. 'I have something to give you.'

He dug in his robes and unearthed a piece of paper.

'You get this from Justin and you will serve your purpose, Lenah Beaudonte,' Laertes said. 'I could not get it from him myself. He is guarding it too closely and I, well . . .' he said, gazing at his wrinkled hands, 'I don't have the strength any more.'

I unfolded the piece of paper.

On it was one word: Vereselum.

‘That’s it!’ My voice jumped in pitch. ‘Vere-selum,’ I sounded it out slowly. ‘What does it mean?’

‘I will tell you only this. That this –’ he gestured to the paper – ‘is the best gift I can give you.’

I knew from old that the matter was now closed for discussion; he would not tell me more no matter how much I begged.

Something about Laertes’s demeanour shifted. I remembered all too keenly his desire to siphon out my blood in return for calling the Aeris. This time his expression was one of admiration. He was more like a grandfather or a doting uncle, neither of which I had ever had, not even when I was a human.

‘Why are you giving me this?’ I asked.

‘Let’s just say, as of late, I’ve had a change of heart.’

‘Heart?’ I chuckled. ‘That’s rich, coming from you.’

‘That’s a nasty cut,’ Laertes said, referring to the jagged line running down my middle finger.

‘Why?’ I asked, ignoring him. ‘Why make the Demelucrea from my blood? How did you get my blood?’

‘You should clean that up.’ He pointed to the cut again and sighed. ‘If you must know, we never meant to lose ourselves,’ Laertes admitted. The strange air still hovered around us. ‘At first our knowledge was a means to power. The most powerful vampires, standing as kings on the black wings of the vampire world. Then we removed our ability to love. But with that we lost passion, compassion and joy.’

‘Justin has too,’ I said softly.

Laertes extended his right arm and I gulped hard. He splayed his fingers wide, showing that his index and middle fingers were cut off at the knuckle. The skin was brown and bruised where he had lost the tops of his fingers.

‘He only had to cut off two before I revealed the secret of how to remove love. So much for inner strength. I was more powerful with my brothers.’

He meant Rayken and Levi. *Did I dare feel pity for this monster?*

‘We thought that making hybrids was another example of our power. If we could make day *and* night wanderers, we could kill at any time. Rule the day as well as the night.’

Laertes stood up, still holding my dagger. He turned it over in his hands.

‘We were nothing more than the lowest form of vampires. We wanted to siphon out our pain. We were cowards,’ he said, still admiring the rubies.

‘And now you’ve made a monster,’ I said quietly.

‘He does not love. And without me he will not be as . . . effective.’

‘But you tried – you tried to put back the love you removed.’

‘I spent hours, years, decades attempting to put it back into myself once it was gone.’

‘What about the onyx? Maybe if you destroyed the ceilings in your house, the love would come back?’

‘Love is not a spell. Love is beyond spells. Beyond power. It is a white light like your soul. Once removed, it can never come back. No destruction of onyx will help me. Why do you think we had Rhode search it out? It’s impossible. All I feel now is pity. Guilt. Maybe a shred of compassion, perhaps, in some limited way. But not love. I cannot bring myself to feel love for anything. So Justin made me take it out so he would no longer be a victim of his love for you.’ he paused. His mutilated hand still held the dagger.

I hated that word, ‘victim’. Some people were victims, yes. But we were here, survivors, and we could at least control the evil that seethed and spread over Wickham. I wanted to ask where Justin took me when he tried to take my soul, but Laertes stood up straight and the dagger stiffened in his hand. I stood up slowly.

‘What are you going to do with that knife?’

‘I’m old. 1,795 years. I don’t love anyone or anything. I’ve hurt enough people.’

‘We can find a way to get you your love back,’ I said, readying to jump on him. ‘There is always a way out of the darkness,’ I said. ‘I found a way, didn’t I? We’ll do it together.’

He lifted the dagger and aimed it at his chest.

‘Soulmates are rare. Rarer than you might think,’ he said. ‘But it might just be the *thing*.’ He shook his head. ‘Love. After all this.’

Before my hand shot out to stop him, Laertes plunged the dagger into his heart. He crumpled on to the glass-strewn floor. A pulse emanated from him, blowing my hair back from my face. A ripple of energy shot from his body out through the room. A loud pop came from above and the panorama of windows that lined the ceiling exploded littering the auditorium with jagged shards of glass. I fell backwards from the force of the energy and my head smacked the end of a chair.

A ring of black circled my sight and pain pulsed at the back of my head. I reached out, searching for my dagger, but lights flashed in my vision and my strength waned. I reached out again and my fingers ran through the gritty familiar remains of a vampire, this time Laertes. My sight slid to black just as my head found the carpeted floor.

‘Where is your power now?’ I whispered. As my world fell to darkness, a phrase went through my mind.

Flame, flame, flame to live; only to scatter to dust when we die.

There is grass at my feet. It is bright green, surreally so, as if someone has painted it too green and too bright.

And the smell. I draw a deep breath . . . lavender. I blink – just once – and I am no longer in the auditorium. I stand alone in a field. Far in the distance, a familiar stone manor overlooks huge hills of lavender. The sun is high in the sky but its rays don’t seem to touch this field.

Wait . . . I know this place. I turn, taking in the lavender swaying in the breeze.

I have been here before! When Vicken remade me a vampire. But Rhode was here too. I spin, looking for him, but the wind strokes the fields, bringing with it an earthy scent that I love.

Something is moving out there.

I squint.

Someone is there. The figure is getting closer to me. Tall, wide shoulders. A man. The figure comes closer and closer. I bite down on my lip.

The figure is tall with cropped hair. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

I run towards him.

‘Rhode!’

The figure picks up speed.

‘Rhode!’ I cry again. Goose bumps sweep over me. This is our place. Ours.

‘Lenah!’ his voice carries back. It is Rhode. And he knows me. I can tell from his tone. ‘Lenah! I’m coming!’

This place, wherever it is, I could stay here forever. Hadn’t I said that before? I would. Forever.

The fuzzy figure running at me breaks through the ether and comes into full focus. Rhode’s arms pump at his sides as he runs towards me.

Rhode’s smile widens. He is healthy, human and his blue eyes sparkle.

I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist. Rhode kisses me all over until my cheeks are wet with tears. He keeps kissing me. My nose. Lips. Forehead. I can’t get a word in.

‘I love you, do you know that?’ he says softly, but the intensity in his tone nearly shatters me. ‘Do you know how much?’ He holds me up so we are eye to eye. I keep my legs around him.

‘Don’t let go,’ I cry. We hold one another. He doesn’t have to let go, shouldn’t let go. But after a few moments he lowers me down to the grass.

‘I love you,’ I whisper. ‘I’ll do whatever it takes to save you.’

He crouches over me, running his hand over my hair.

'I'm so worried about you,' I say, and his mouth is on mine again. 'What does Justin want?' I ask when he pulls away. 'How did this happen?'

'He believed if he made me a vampire I would remember everything and I could change him into your soulmate instead of me.'

'But that's not possible.'

'He knows that now, and his desires have changed.'

'To what?'

'I don't know.'

Rhode sits up and twists his body in the direction from which he came.

'What are you looking for? Can Justin find us here? In this place?' I turn to peer in the same direction as Rhode.

'I don't think so. I can sense him back where my body is.'

'How much time do we have?' I ask.

'Moments. As always.' He turns back to me. 'Listen, Lenah. This is the place we go. You and me, our souls. It's why I found you here when Vicken remade you a vampire after the winter prom.'

He tucks my hair behind my ear and brings his soft lips to mine again.

'I will always find you. Anywhere you go, I go. Never forget that,' he says.

'If we have limited time, I must know. In the Hollow Ones' house – how do I get you out?'

'It's very complicated magic,' he says. 'Because Justin did not create it, he truly doesn't have control over it. It's more powerful than he is. Laertes is missing and he was the one who could control the house. I'm not even sure Justin can fully navigate it.'

'Laertes is dead. He came to me. And listen, Rhode . . .' I hate to tell him this. 'Justin killed Suleen. He died in my arms.'

I want to show him the bloodied bracelet, but in this special, in-between world, I don't have it.

Rhode bows his head and exhales deeply. 'The best we can do is succeed,' he says. 'You'll need to keep your wits about you. Those who are unfamiliar with the house's magic can lose their sanity to its labyrinth of tricks. The more frightened you are, the more complicated the maze will become.'

'Where can I find you?'

He stands up and pulls me with him. He looks back the way he came again.

'I'm in the library with Justin. Promise me,' he says, 'if you feel yourself losing your sense, you leave me there.'

'I can't make that promise.'

'He is coming. I must go.' He puts his hands on my shoulders. 'Justin believes

he can siphon out my soul. Every time he's tried, he's failed but got closer. I don't know how much longer I have until he will succeed.'

I clutch him to me again. I want to ask about his memory and how I can make him remember, but there is no time. 'I love you. I must go,' he says.

'I'll come for you,' I reply.

'You must trust yourself, Lenah,' he says. 'And remember, evil be he who thinketh evil.'

The sun washes over the field. Rhode backs away from me without breaking eye contact. I want to run after him, but the sun is too bright. I can't see him.

'Rhode!' I cry. 'Rhode, wait!'

I drew in a breath and blinked away the Hathersage field. I stared up at rain pelting a glass skylight. I inhaled the scent of a strange herb and burning candles. This meant one thing – I was back in Cassius's house.

Chapter 20

‘Tony,’ I whispered. My voice was weak. ‘Are Tony and Tracy all right?’

A warm compress rested on my forehead. I reached my hand up to it, and groaned; the back of my head still ached. My fingers too. I cradled them to stop the throbbing.

‘What are you saying?’

Italian accent. Cassius.

‘Are they safe?’ I said, and tried to sit up but the blood rushed to the sore spot at the back of my head where’d I’d hit the armrest of the chair in the school auditorium. Cassius’s warm hand helped me up.

‘Don’t move too much,’ he said.

‘Tracy and Tony,’ I said. ‘I didn’t see them. What happened?’

Cassius hesitated, his eyes shifted away from me and he said, ‘Tracy was taken, Lenah.’

I jumped in my seat and pain rattled through me all the way to my fingertips. ‘*Taken?* Where’s Tony?’

‘The other Dems are with him; he’ll be OK for today.’ His silver eyes were swirling again in the grey light.

I cradled my head. ‘But he’s not hurt?’

‘Not physically, no.’

‘Is Tracy dead?’

‘We don’t know. Justin had told the vampires that attacked campus that you have an antidote to vampirism. Absolute *fiction*,’ Cassius said, nearly spitting the word. ‘That’s why they were so violent.’

‘A good lie,’ I said. I was on the couch in the living room of Cassius’s house. It was so grey here compared to the sunny field in my dream with Rhode. ‘What else would send droves of hungry vampires to find me? But hopefully they won’t kill her,’ I said. ‘They’ll use her as ransom.’

‘They’ll believe anything Justin says,’ Cassius said. He got up and grabbed some alcohol and cotton pads from a nearby table. ‘Once you are back on your feet, I suggest we attack immediately.’

‘But how is he getting his power?’ I wondered angrily. ‘Laertes is dead. He killed himself before my eyes.’

‘You *saw* Laertes?’ Cassius asked.

I described to Cassius what happened in the auditorium. I explained what I thought must have happened when Justin looked in my eyes.

‘He was getting all his knowledge from Laertes. We might have a chance against Justin now that he’s dead.’

The note from Laertes was still in my pocket and I had to show Cassius, as I didn’t understand the word and had a hunch it was in Linderatu, the vampire language.

‘Let me just finish cleaning your hand,’ Cassius said.

The Hollow Ones, as horrible as they were, had spent lifetimes understanding their magic. Their apprentice had led a coup and now here we were – with all of the Hollow Ones dead. We needed that book.

‘I am sure Micah and Esteban are doing everything they can to get Tracy back,’ Cassius said, and applied alcohol to the cut down my finger. The sting made me hiss. ‘It’s a nasty cut,’ Cassius said, motioning to the jagged wound.

‘Laertes mentioned it too,’ I said. ‘The cut . . .’ My words trailed away.

Cassius’s hand hovered over mine. ‘What about it?’

A thought clicked into place.

‘Wait . . .’ I said, standing slowly. An edge of panic laced my tone.

I brought my finger closer to my eyes. The cut was about four inches long and ran the length of my middle finger to my hand. What could have injured me there, repeatedly in the same spot, in the same design?

Justin had grasped my hand out on Main Street the very first night I’d encountered him, cutting me there. It happened again the night he took Rhode; the wound had burned in the salt water of the bay.

It burned and reopened when he grabbed me in his house too.

‘Something’s continuously cutting me there,’ I said aloud, but I wasn’t speaking to Cassius, I was talking to myself.

‘Renoiera, are you all right?

What was on Justin’s hand that could cut me? A ring? Had I even noticed a ring? Something emerged in my mind very slowly. What ring would Justin have? My thoughts trailed away and I brought my hand over my mouth. I held my breath. I could barely put the thoughts together fast enough.

Oh God . . . could it be possible?

‘Renoiera? Please, your fear is making me uneasy. I don’t like to see you like this.’

Onyx holds people to a world that no longer wants them.

I had been so distracted, so taken by the changes in Justin's face. I closed my eyes: *Justin rushes to me across the lacrosse field, fingers splayed. On the middle finger of his left hand is a silver band.*

'Never wear onyx unless you want or know death. Rhode said that once long ago,' I said to Cassius.

Three years ago before I returned to the medieval world, I had lost a ring. It had been in the fight with Odette in the Wickham gymnasium. A conversation I had with Rhode replayed in my mind . . .

'Hey . . .' Rhode said, his eyebrows narrowing. 'Where is your onyx ring?'

I held my hands out before me and spread my fingers wide.

My onyx ring – it was gone.

'It must have fallen off during the fight.' I glanced towards Hopper building. 'I'll go and look for it,' I said, pushing against the ground to stand up.

'Ah, let it go. It's a cursed stone anyway. It makes people linger. Souls too. Connects people to their pasts in a world that may not want them any more.'

'Your thoughts are confusing, Renoiera. Rhode. Wickham.'

I scrambled to a table and drew a sketch of Rhode's ring. The one he had worn for hundreds of years, and the one I had worn for hundreds of years after he gave it to me.

'Have you ever seen this ring?' I asked.

Cassius turned the paper towards him. 'Yes,' he said, and the thrill of his answer made my breath catch. 'Does this mean something to you?' he asked.

How could I explain to Cassius? I needed him to see my associations with that ring along with my history wearing it.

'I have an idea,' I said. 'It's mad, but perhaps it'll work.'

We faced one another with just a few inches between us.

'Your powers come from me. Maybe we can reverse them,' I said.

Cassius's eyebrows met. 'Reverse them? I don't think . . .'

'Why not? You heard my thoughts when I desired it and even when I didn't. Grab my forearm,' I said. 'Let's see if you can see my memories. My history.'

Cassius took a step back. 'I don't know.'

I extended my sore hand. 'Come on, Cassius, give it a go.'

He gave me a sidelong glance. 'All right,' he said, and extended his arm. This time I thought of specific images and hoped he could see them.

I walk the long hall in my Hathersage home. I enter a dining room, the one with the long black table. Rhode stands before a collection of jewels, all with the same black stone.

'What are these?' I ask, admiring necklaces, earrings and rings, all adorned with similar black gems.

Rhode stands beside a tall vampire wearing a top hat. Both of them wear black suits and they peer through a microscope at the jewels.

'Doesn't it hurt your eyes?' I ask.

'Please see, miss,' the vampire in the top hat says, standing back and gesturing me to look. When I peer through the microscope, I gasp. Onyx is not black after all but bright diamonds compressed so closely together that they cannot be individually distinguished by the naked eye.

'The tiny diamonds together capture spells and hold on to them. They just keep sucking the energy,' the tall vampire says. 'It's marvellously powerful. You wear it to enhance your spells.'

'I have no use for such items,' I say with a dismissive wave of my hand, though Rhode purchases a ring and slides it on his finger immediately.

'You be careful with that, lad,' the vampire says. 'It is a tricky stone, has a real –' he chooses his words – 'personality. It knows blood, so be careful not to bleed on it too often.'

I don't think much on his words, only that I am hungry and the hour is late.

I made the image shift by recalling a different memory. This time I showed Cassius a selection of images, one after the other. *Rhode telling me about the ritual, taking my hibernation in 1910, awaking at Wickham, and meeting Justin in the rain.* I followed that with the moment I first tried to die from the ritual. I showed Cassius the onyx ring on my finger. I showed him Vicken and me standing beneath the ceiling in the Hollow Ones' home.

I show him Justin's face, happy. Then the fight at the gym. 'It is a cursed stone,' Rhode says from underneath the tree. I show him Justin happy again: playing lacrosse, holding open a car door, and dancing at the Winter Ball with Tony and Tracy. I ended with more recent memories like Laertes's death in the auditorium.

When I pulled my hand away, a small light popped from our hands and we both fell back. Cassius immediately turned away from me and faced the window.

'Did it work?' I asked.

His rested his hands on another table and cried out in pain. To the living, to cry was a relief. To the vampire, it was a punishment. He gripped the table so hard that I thought the wood might crack.

'That ring, Cassius, is linking Justin from my past world to this one. He must have found it in the auditorium during the fight with Odette. The power in those stones anchored him to this world.'

The onyx and its connection finally made sense to me!

Cassius turned to me, his face still pained from experiencing my memories.

'Do you know how many spells, *including* the ritual, I performed while

wearing it? Rhode too? How many times my blood seeped on to that stone? Countless. It's so clear to me now. The Hollow Ones extracted my blood from that ring and made you.'

Justin had remained in this world wearing that powerful ring, and it not only linked him to the past world where I had been a vampire, but it gave him a power source from all of the spells I performed while wearing the ring. The added bonus, at least for the Hollow Ones, was my blood.

I drew a breath and threw my shoulders back even though my head still ached.

'But, Renoiera, what about the onyx in their house? It knows all the spells the Hollow Ones have ever performed.'

'I'm not afraid of that house. Not any more.'

'Why?'

'Because I believe I can get Rhode out.' I shook my head, mostly talking to myself, and continued: 'I should have known that Fire hadn't failed me. Justin had to be harnessing his power from somewhere. Magic has to be stored and created, it can't just be summoned endlessly. The ring is his power source.'

I slid my hand into my pocket, and Laertes's paper bit at my skin.

Rain lightly smacked the leaves outside.

I unearthed the paper from my pocket. 'This is the word I heard Justin say,' I said. 'Laertes gave it to me moments before he took his own life. He said that it was the best gift he could give me.'

I put the piece of paper on the centre of the table.

Cassius used two fingers to drag it towards him.

He swore in Italian and jumped back from the paper as if it was on fire. My eyes met his. And I had a feeling, deep in my gut that the reason this was written down was because Laertes knew the Demelucrea would help me.

'Vere-selum,' I said.

'It . . .' Cassius's fingers fluttered over the paper and he paced. 'It could have a multitude of meanings,' he said.

'Yes . . .' I led.

I didn't understand Cassius's tone; it was not one I had ever heard him use before. 'But it . . .' He steeled himself by standing up straight. 'The exact translation is "towards-health".'

'What does that mean?'

He held up his weight by putting both hands on the table. He dipped his chin to his chest. 'Renoiera . . .' He shook his head. 'Renoiera, it means antidote.'

Justin's ridiculous lie had been just that – a lie, a way to drive me out of Wickham.

'Antidote? To what?' I asked.

‘To . . .’ He started but didn’t finish.

He gripped the table.

‘Renoiera.’ Cassius’s voice was so quiet it was starting to put me on edge. ‘If he didn’t lie . . . it’s an antidote –’ his eyes searched the room and then met mine – ‘to vampirism.’

There was buzzing in my head. I wanted Tony. No, I wanted Rhode, who was a vampire stuck in a house with *Justin*. I wanted to go home too. I wanted all of these at the same time.

‘Say it again,’ I said. ‘Slowly.’

‘An antidote. To vampirism.’

Antidote. Antidote. Antidote. No matter how many times I said this word it didn’t – it couldn’t – make sense.

‘Justin created an antidote?’

‘It’s unlikely *he* created anything,’ Cassius replied.

‘Well, keep talking!’ I threw my hands up; I couldn’t stand the silence. ‘Think of something. I can’t just stand here.’ I paced and shook my hands out as I walked.

‘OK. Well, if it’s an antidote, perhaps the Hollow Ones created it before tossing him out.’

‘Laertes was too weak to get it,’ I said.

That stupid piece of paper sat on that table, mocking me.

My bottom lip trembled as I paced and I brought my fingers to my mouth to stop it. An antidote. Had I seen an antidote?

At Justin’s house . . . a vampire floats by me in the water. Headless.

Justin slips something into his pocket, like a vial or a bottle, but I can’t tell for sure.

‘He was definitely protecting something besides the book,’ Cassius said, clearly following the train of my thoughts with his mind.

‘Could it be true?’ I dared to ask Cassius. ‘I can’t imagine Justin would keep such a powerful serum and not destroy it.’

I needed to keep talking it out or I would start crying. Hope bled from my heart, overwhelming the rest of my body. It kept whispering to me . . . *You can turn Rhode back.*

‘He clearly needs it for some reason. If I know the kind of vampire he has become, he will use the Vereselum as some kind of weapon,’ Cassius said. ‘Maybe it has to do with the need for your soul.’

‘We have to get it from him before he can change it,’ I said.

‘If he hasn’t already,’ Cassius said.

I finally unclenched my hands, shook them out and leaned against the wall.

‘If it’s true, we can turn Rhode back. Turn *you* back,’ I said. I couldn’t help it; I smiled. How long had it been since I’d actually *smiled*? I stood up. Yes! ‘First we’ll use the antidote on Rhode and then force it on Justin. Rhode is big – he’ll help hold Justin down. I don’t have to kill him after all.’

I laughed but it was shaky. My giddiness made my head light. I leaned my head back against the wall again and closed my eyes. *Thank goodness, a resolution. One bright spot in all of this madness.*

Suleen had been right. I was part of a revolution but it went much deeper than the Demelucrea. Even Laertes was part of the efforts. A revolution against the curse of the undead. A revolution to come back into the light. To live. I walked to the weapons on the right-hand side of the room. I needed to prepare for this battle against Justin.

I walked past Cassius towards the knives hanging on the opposite wall.

‘Renoiera . . .’ Cassius said.

I slid a knife from its sheath. ‘You’ll see,’ I said to Cassius. ‘It won’t take long for Justin to help us.’

‘Lenah.’

This was first time Cassius had ever called me by my name. I turned.

He wasn’t smiling.

‘You do understand, don’t you?’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Even if you get the antidote and all your dreams come true, Justin will be a human with no capacity to love.’

‘But the—’

‘Some things are absolute. *This* is absolute. Laertes told you himself – they tried to destroy the onyx to get back their ability to love. It didn’t work. The love Justin had is somewhere, used in some other way, but it’s gone.’

Cassius gripped his forearm where a dagger had cut into his skin during the fight in the auditorium. In only hours it would be healed, faster if he drank blood. I appraised my own wounds.

‘You know what you must do,’ he said gently. ‘You’ve known since Laertes’s death.’

He extended an arm as though directing me into a fine theatre. But instead, what met his fingers were the swords, knives and the many dangerous ways to take down a vampire in a impenetrable house.

He was right. Justin would be a killer and a murderer as a human without love. He would be empty – a vessel of hate.

My choices were down to one.

I had to get the Vereselum for all those who walked the night. Even the ghost

of the vampire queen who at one time would have wanted nothing more than to take a deep breath and go home.

I stood before a full-length mirror and Cassius strapped a baldric to my back. It was a leather belt worn over my shoulder that strapped a sword to my body. It made it easier to transport the sword, and draw it when I needed it.

'Tight enough?'

I nodded once.

'Good. This is made from onyx,' Cassius said, holding a longsword up in the reflection of the mirror. 'If someone is beyond a door, or behind a shield, just aim. It'll do the job.'

I wanted to use it on Tracy's attackers. I wanted to break through any doors keeping Rhode from me.

'My favourite satchel,' he said, and pulled out a black leather bag from a trunk. 'Inside you'll find space for all the items you need to carry.' He meant the Vereselum.

Four daggers. Two in my boots, two attached by straps to my forearms. *But how to get the antidote?* How to get into the Hollow Ones' compound without Rhode? Without Suleen? Laertes had said something about love being the answer, but that did not help me get Rhode and the antidote out at the same time. It didn't matter. I had to go into that house and try.

Antidote.

The end of all vampires.

It was like a mantra. The more I said it, the more it became a prayer.

'And last,' Cassius said, and pulled out a small box, like a jewellery box but tiny. 'This is called amaranth sand. It is made from the flower. It will show you the way to your heart's desire.' He dropped it in the satchel.

Once the sword was in the baldric, he fastened it even tighter. He tried speaking again but instead said with his mind, *Only use the amaranth when you must find your way out. And do find your way out. You come back to us.*

I had the satchel, the longsword and the daggers. In the mirror, Cassius stood behind me with his silver eyes shining. He folded his arms over his chest and said, 'You look like a queen.' He held a tight-lipped smile.

My hair was in a long braid down my back; I felt most comfortable that way. I stared at myself in the mirror again. I had breathed lavender for centuries. The sun that touched my skin only in the last three years spotted freckles on my cheeks. I lived outside the natural ebbs and flows of the world. Yes, the Earth had turned, but its rotation had passed me by.

Not any more.

I pulled my shoulders back; the last thing I needed rested on a table nearby.

The moon sent a wash of pale light over the wood. Rhode's journal peeked out from my bag. It was my only real companion in his absence. I opened it and a small piece of paper fell out. I read the words in a whisper,

'Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom.'

I had not ripped out that piece of paper. I didn't need to. I knew the words by heart.

Cassius checked the position of the moon.

'It's time,' he said.

I nodded, knowing he was right, and with the heavy weight of my weapons, I folded the paper and stuck it in my pocket.

Except . . .

Something crackled or frayed like a piece of beach grass bit at my fingertips. I pulled it out and stopped.

'What is it?' Cassius asked.

Of course . . . I had completely forgotten. I had put it in these pants after the frog debacle. The lavender from my mother's hearth. I lifted it to my nose. The fragrance was light and soothing like yellow sunny mornings and Genevieve's golden hair. I slipped it in my pocket and hoped I would see my family again. They had to stay in the back of my mind or I would lose focus. I tucked the lavender away with the images of my home.

We had started with twelve Demelucrea; we lost two in the fight with Justin outside the chapel three days ago. We lost three more yesterday in the fight to get Rhode out of Justin's house and four more in the attack at the auditorium this morning.

Esteban, Micah and Cassius were the only ones left.

At the front door, when the moon was high in the sky, Cassius embraced me. I squeezed, trying to reassure him that the Dems had put their faith in the right person.

When he pulled away, he slid a silver watch from his wrist. It was digital and he showed me how to illuminate the time with a push of a button.

'Focus on the time and getting to Rhode. Don't linger any longer than you *must*.' The last word was so intense that I hugged him to me once more.

'Will you watch out for Tony? Don't let him run into danger with Tracy's disappearance.'

He nodded. 'You know I'll go with you,' he said in his stately and quiet way.

'I have to do this alone. So it's just me and him.'

He said nothing more but kissed my forehead. He swept from the house to the

car. When the tail lights of Cassius's car were all I could see through the uneven rain, I placed my hand on the door to pull it behind me. Just as the door was about to close, the phone rang on the foyer table.

I went back inside and answered it.

'I heard you're leaving now. The moon is rising. Or as we low-lifes like to call it, it's eleven thirty.'

Tony.

I rubbed at the wood of the table. We could have panicked, said a hundred things, like be careful, don't go, but we didn't. He made a joke and I was glad to hear his voice before I entered that battle.

My voice cracked as I said to him, 'Tell me that I don't have to have supernatural powers to defeat him, Tony. That he won't be able to love anyone or anything, that he would be a monster of this world if I let him live.'

Tony was quiet for a moment and I could hear Micah's voice in the background.

'I don't need to tell you that, Len.'

'Do I have to be the vampire queen to kill him?'

'No. You just have to be you.'

I looked to the ceiling so I wouldn't cry; somehow it made it easier to keep those tears inside.

'Who's that? Who *am* I?'

'You're compassionate. Giving. You don't fear anyone or anything if someone you love is at risk. And you have great taste in art as you're a fan of mine.'

I chuckled, but it was hollow.

'Come on, Lenah. You went back in time to bring your best friend back from the dead. You don't need me to tell you who you are.'

A hot tear rolled over my cheek and I wiped it away.

'No crying before battle,' Tony said, and I laughed for real that time.

'How could you tell?' I asked with a sniff.

'I know you pretty well, Lenah. Within a week you . . .' He hesitated. 'Well, you're my best friend.'

'I'm glad you called.'

'Always,' he said. 'Always.'

Maybe I was never meant to go home again. Some people are meant to die young. They do not age. They do not wrinkle. They illuminate the world for the briefest of breaths. Maybe I was always meant to go out in a flash. Because I was never truly ready any of the times I was taken from the beating heart of my world. I always fought the source that took me away before I was ready.

I was ready now.

Forty-two, the number of the Hollow Ones' home, sat on the stone marker just as it had last time I had been there. The walk down the driveway was at least a half-mile, and this time the sound of my feet crunching over the driveway seemed louder. I didn't care if any of Justin's new coven, which I was sure he would already have created, were watching me approach. This was not a covert operation and I was finally walking on to a battlefield. I tightened the bow and the strap of the baldric. In my mind's eye I could see the ghost of my old car at the end of the drive and Vicken sitting next to me. That's how it had been the last time I'd visited this house.

Maybe I didn't need to do a ritual for Vicken's death after all. Surviving, no, *living* would be the best way to honour my friend's life. He would have been proud of me here with a sword on my back.

I could have sworn a hint of cigarette smoke was on the air.

I don't know about you, but this house says to me, Come inside if you want to die.

With the memory of Vicken's words, I stopped before the front steps.

Even with that monstrosity of a house looming in front of me, I laughed and shook my head.

This time I wouldn't knock.

CHAPTER 21

I turned the knob, expecting it to be locked.

But no.

The door creaked open and the foyer where I had once been so afraid was lit by the moonlight. I hesitated, peeking my face into the house. Above my head was the same black onyx ceiling I had seen before. Red candles burned in iron wall sconces. Directly through the vestibule was a hallway.

Whatever you do, Lenah, do not think about the Vereselum, I told myself.

I mustn't think about it or my intentions would be known. If I kept my focus on Rhode, which was easy, I could deflect Justin's attention from the antidote. With a last glance back at the driveway I stepped inside, closing the door behind me.

As I released it, the gold doorknob melted away into the dark wood.

There was no way out.

My breaths were loud, so I made them smaller, gathering myself and getting my bearings. A pearly halo shone down from above. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see that it was the reflection of my soul hanging above my chest like a friend lighting the way. The onyx ceiling remained as polished as ever; even with the deaths of the Hollow Ones, the place remained immaculate. I checked Cassius's watch. I had been in the foyer thirty seconds.

'Well . . . come in already.'

Justin's voice slithered into my ear. Goose bumps swept over me at the chill in his tone. Justin could have been anywhere in the house; he could have thrown his voice just to frighten me.

I slid the onyx sword from the baldric and held it before me. Its light weight was welcome, given how sore I was from my attempts to drag Rhode out of Justin's other house. I took a step forward.

An arrow flew through the air. I heard it before I saw it and dropped to the floor. The daggers attached to my belt clattered when I hit the tiles. I looked to see where it landed and just saw the arrow, which had embedded in the door, dissolve away to nothing – vanished.

‘Stay calm,’ I whispered to myself. ‘You can do this.’

Sure, Justin could make a water shield and use air to transport himself, but he hadn’t mastered the elements as Laertes, Rayken and Levi had. But as long as the onyx ring remained intact, as long as my blood and energy remained in those crevices and microscopic cups, Justin would be extremely powerful.

I pushed against the onyx floor with my sweaty fingertips and stood up. I remembered from my previous visit to the house that if I turned left I would go down the hallway leading to the door with the twisted sculptures of bodies on it. Behind it was the library.

You will get Rhode out. You won’t fail this time, I told myself.

I scooted to the doorway, pressed my back against the cool marble and peered around the corner. Candles lit the blackened hallway and portraits lined the walls. Four candle sconces. I had to keep count. They had black candles and flickered only a two-inch flame within their holsters.

Black candles sucked the positive energy. They held on to fear. Coupled with the onyx, they sent a wash of dread rolling over me. This house wanted me to fail.

I slipped around the corner, my back against the wall. It was dark blue and softer here – wallpaper. Just as I exhaled, another arrow flew into the now empty foyer, embedding itself into the front door again. It was on a loop!

I shuffled down the hall and stopped at two doors on either side of the hallway. *Rhode. Rhode. Rhode. Come on* . . . I clenched my jaw. Which door to pick first? I opened the one on the right. Inside was a lush bedroom with a four-poster bed. A bureau sat across from it with very intricate engravings; it was old, possibly Victorian. But it was clear – this room had not been used in at least a hundred years. There was no television or technology of any kind. A small oil lamp with a white frosted shade sat on a nightstand.

‘Where the hell is he?’

I needed the door made of sculptures.

I opened the other door.

No . . . this was the exact same bedroom with the four-poster bed.

It was an absolute replica, down to the folds in the comforter.

I slammed the door and leaned my forehead on the wood. My breath was hot on my hand. The watch beeped. I’d been inside two minutes.

I lifted my head and stood up slowly. Horror riddled through me.

This hallway had no beginning and no end. The doors went on forever, endlessly. The candles flickered on the wall in two infinite rows.

I licked my lips.

Keep focused, Lenah.

I hated this house. Hated it.

I had to play the game to figure the way out. I tried another door. It creaked open.

The four-poster bed and the lamp with the white frosted shade.

Another door. The same room.

The same.

Four-poster. My heart slammed in my chest.

White frosted shade.

I drew a deep breath, held the power of my voice in my lungs for a second and screamed as hard as I could, 'Rhode!'

I leaned my back against the wall and slid to the floor. My breath rushed in and out as frustration rolled over me. I ran my hand over my braid.

Six minutes.

I didn't want to use Cassius's amaranth sand. Not yet. I knew what it meant now to use your most powerful weapon before you truly needed it. *I can do this.*

'What is the trick? There has to be a trick,' I said out loud.

Great. I was talking to myself.

'You!'

A man's voice snarled and I jumped up. A vampire I recognized from the street of Lovers Bay ran at me. He was a barrel of a man, at least 250 lbs. My shoulders were tight, my back tired, and I was done playing games.

The vampire skidded to a halt just when our bodies were about to collide. I crouched, sweeping at his right leg. He tripped, hurling towards the ground. I swiped once through the air, drawing the onyx longsword in a grand arc from the ceiling to the floor.

The sword might have been lightweight but it sliced through his neck with ease and the head of my first opponent flew through the air. I didn't care about the victory of my aim or the swiftness of my sword.

I needed Rhode and I needed to get out of this house with the Vereselum.

Nine minutes.

This is what he wants. He wants you to lose focus.

That giant vampire had given me a clue. He had got to me somehow, which meant there was a way out. *Think rationally, Lenah.*

It had to be in the bedroom, which meant that I had to actually go right inside.

I slipped the bloody longsword back into the baldric.

I opened the next door and of course found the bedroom. In the right-hand corner of the room near the head of the bed was another door. It could have been a closet or it could possibly be an entryway. It could also be nothing and I could be stuck inside that bedroom, trapped forever. I would have to take the risk. I

stepped into the room, leaving the door open behind me. I took another step and was standing in the room completely.

The door behind me slammed closed.

Stay focused, stay focused.

I hopped on to the bed. It squeaked beneath my weight. I was childishly afraid something or someone might be lurking underneath. I landed on the balls of my feet on the other side, gripped my hand around the doorknob and for the briefest of seconds prayed the door wasn't locked. The gold knob turned and I ripped it open.

I found myself . . .

In the same hallway! The dark wallpaper with the wall sconces were lit now by red candles, not black. I walked over the same exact Oriental rug.

This time there were four wall sconces, not hundreds. There were only four doors as well; two on each side.

Directly ahead was the great door with the stone statues of twisting and agonized human bodies. I exhaled heavily and smiled. I knew I would find it eventually. I closed my eyes for one brief second before the closed stone door. When I opened them, I narrowed on the statues. They were crawling up the door as though escaping from hell. Some cried out to the sky, others clutched on to the marble flesh of the other tangled bodies.

There was no escape for these sculpted tortured souls.

A kick in my back sent me forward. My cheek hit the stone and it burned as I fell to the ground. I flipped over to face my attacker. A vampire had jumped from the ceiling to the floor, so its feet were on either side of my ribs. I brought my knees up, aiming for the crotch. At one quick push of my knees, he was bowled over.

With a flick of my wrist, one of my daggers flew into my hand, I crouched on one knee and plunged the knife downward. The vampire blocked it with his hand, and my dagger went flying into the air, clattering against the wall.

I slid the sword from the baldric; I would only extend my arm at the last second. I could do this; I had to be quick. He was almost on me. He carried no knives that I could see, but he was fast. I could smell his bloody breath. His shadow was over me and I drew my elbow back. I thrust forward, stabbing him directly in the heart. The vampire stumbled back, his mouth open, and he fell backwards to the floor, lifeless.

I too fell down, catching my breath.

'Are you going to sacrifice any more men, Justin?' I panted. 'Or are you going to deal with me yourself?'

He didn't answer. Something in the onyx ceiling caught my attention. I could

be seen sitting on the ground before the dead vampire. My reflection showed the white orb travelling away from my chest and through the stone door. It disappeared to the other side.

When I had seen it before, my soul hadn't moved . . .

My soul was trying to get to its mate.

I stood up slowly before the door. I still needed to catch my breath. I trailed my fingers over the sculptures of the bodies. If I ever had the chance, I would come back and break this door into smithereens.

A white hazy glow illuminated the ceiling again.

My soul bobbed back into the hallway, hovered over my chest and then entered my body. A familiar warmth rolled over me.

It was the same warmth I felt when Rhode and I touched as vampires. I had experienced that exact kind of heat when I was first human and came in from the cold and my face was so numb I could barely feel my mouth. The kind of warmth that fed my soul whenever Tony laughed or took Tracy's hand in his. The warmth of love.

In that moment, in that house of darkness, I finally understood why I could once wield the power of light with my hands. Why I was remade a vampire by Vicken and could kill the members of my coven. Love had lit me up from the inside and it had worked its way outwards, manifesting itself in a weapon so powerful no vampire could come near me. Selfless love. The kind I now had for Tony. For Tracy. For Cassius, and for the Demelucrea. At one time I had had it for Justin too.

I always loved Rhode. Always.

There was a click of the latch and the great door before me opened. I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

CHAPTER 22

Just as when I had last seen it, the room beyond was filled top to bottom with books. There was an oversized onyx fireplace and forty-foot-high bookshelves. Three or four ladders rested against the stacks. The ceiling was decorated with an Italian-style fresco. Where the three Hollow Ones once sat in black leather chairs, Justin presided alone.

I waited in the doorway.

'It's you and me,' Justin said.

'Just what you wanted,' I replied calmly.

I had expected guards, but there was no one else in that room. There was a door next to the fireplace – Rhode had to be in there.

I kept my sword across my chest like a shield, with the blade pointing up at the ceiling.

'Where is Rhode?' I demanded.

'Here,' Justin said simply.

I pretended to sweep the room for Rhode but on the middle of a table in front of the leather chairs were the book I'd seen at Justin's house and a bottle. They were sitting under a square glass case. The Vereselum. It had to be. Justin wanted his prize next to him like a trophy. He got up and approached me so quickly that I jumped back and extended my sword between us.

At a swipe of his hand, my sword flew into the air and clattered on the ground. I wasn't surprised. I hadn't even held on very hard.

'How did you harness the magic to move my soul out of my body?'

'Ah. So you figured it out.' He shrugged. 'Just a trick Laertes taught me.'

'He's dead – he killed himself at Wickham when you sent your rampage of vampires after me.'

He smiled and the stench of blood coming from his mouth was rancid. 'You're a terrible liar. He's quite under my control.'

'How many fingers did you have to take until he showed you how to remove your love? Two, was it?'

Justin pushed me away and walked back to his seat. I considered this a

victory, as he didn't want me to see his face.

'If you want to see Rhode, drop all your weapons. Even the daggers in your boots and hidden up your sleeve.'

I released the last remaining dagger strapped to my arm and the three in my boots.

'Done,' I said, making a mental note where I had left all my weapons. Justin walked to the door next to the fireplace. Once his back was turned, I brought my left leg back into fighting position, ready to defend myself if necessary.

With a click of the latch, the door next to the fireplace opened.

Rhode was chained, like I had seen him at the house on Warwick Avenue.

'Rhode! I'm here!' I cried. With a wobble, he raised his head.

He didn't smile.

There was no light in his eyes.

His gaze dropped to the floor. He mumbled something and Justin slammed the door.

'What did you do to him?' I yelled, and jumped towards the door. Justin threw an arm out and a gust of cold wind lifted my feet from the floor. I was thrown backwards but caught myself by gripping the table.

'You left Rhode to wither away. He needs to feed,' I said with gritted teeth as I regained my balance.

'Because he's so useful to me? He couldn't give me any information. It was simple. All he had to do was tell me how to switch it so I was your soulmate instead of him.'

'You're mad. It's not possible,' I replied.

'It doesn't matter. I don't love you any more. In fact, I don't love anyone any more.' He threw a glass decanter filled with blood against a bookcase, and it smashed to pieces. Blood spattered on to books and dripped to the floor. 'To even think about my old life makes me sick.'

He paced before the shelves like an animal stalking its prey. When he stopped, he crossed his arms over his chest. I gasped. Just as quickly my onyx ring slid out of sight. I made myself concentrate on Rhode to deflect Justin from understanding my intentions.

'When Rhode couldn't give me what I wanted, I got rid of the problem causing all of this.'

'You removed your ability to love; I know.'

'I went to Wickham a few days ago,' Justin said, without acknowledging what I had said. 'All of the students walking up and down those paths. Doing what they're told at every hour of every day.'

'You miss it and it kills you.'

He laughed at that and his unnaturally fanged smile grew wide on his face; it did not hide his pain.

‘What should I miss? That I can’t ever go home again? Or play lacrosse? Or see my brothers? Those sheep do what they’re told. But they’ll join me soon enough.’

‘You leave them alone!’ I warned.

He launched himself at me and pushed me to the floor. His cold hands were around my neck but he didn’t squeeze; he just held me down.

‘I had to watch as the two of you fell back in love three years ago, when he came to that school. You left me,’ he snarled.

‘I never meant to hurt you. You know that.’

He released me and straightened his dress shirt. I wanted to rub my stinging collarbone but refused to give him the satisfaction.

‘I’ll never have to see it,’ he said, and sat down. He folded his hands in his lap and smiled.

‘What could you possibly be smiling about?’ I asked, and immediately regretted taking the bait.

‘I don’t ever have to worry about you and your pathetic boyfriend again,’ he said.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Why not?’

‘Why, Lenah, I thought you would be able to figure it out . . .’ He was positively beaming when he said, ‘I removed Rhode’s ability to love.’

Red flashed before my eyes. A white-hot anger exploded within me and I launched myself into the air, my hands out like claws. *Hurt, hurt. Take him down, hurt Justin.*

He slammed me to the ground, holding me paralysed. I screamed to the ceiling like a caged beast.

‘Rhode!’ I yelled to the fresco-painted ceiling. I gritted my teeth. My hands shook and my legs too.

‘You questioned my power, which was stupid. When I’m done, I’ll be more powerful than the Hollow Ones ever dreamed.’

‘You will never succeed,’ I croaked.

‘Don’t you see, Lenah? I already have. You and Rhode are here. The last two pieces of the puzzle.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘I am going to harness your souls and combine them with something very special.’

He meant the Vereselum.

Justin bent close to me again, nearly kissing me when he said in a hush, ‘One

drop of my Vereselum, and all of Wickham Boarding School will be vampires at my command,' he whispered.

My voice was hoarse but I spoke anyway. 'You underestimate those that have come before you. You have to be bitten. It's law.'

'I make my own laws.' He slithered around me as he spoke, grabbed my chin and ran his cold tongue up the side of my cheek.

He let me go, knowing that I had no advantage. I lay there, catching my breath. Justin's shoes clicked as he walked back to his chair. I realized that he never held me for long because he wanted to be close to the Vereselum.

Justin took a long knife out from a wooden box.

'I need the souls of both of you,' he said. 'That's why I didn't kill either of you when I had the chance.'

The horror of his intentions riddled through me.

Justin's knuckles cracked when he gripped on to the sword handle. That ring mocked me, so I focused on the door. *Rhode, Rhode. Have to get to Rhode.*

'I'll need to bleed you almost until your last breath of course. Rhode too. I'll call out each soul when the other is just about to die – one of the many advantages of onyx.'

'You sound ridiculous.'

'Why? Because it's what I want? Because Wickham reeks of a fake life? A life where I pretended to be happy? Where most people pretend to be happy?'

'You *were* happy.'

'Were *you*? Always trying to erase the things you'd done.'

I hated that he knew me so well.

'You once held my hand in a boat. You comforted me when I thought Rhode was dead. You were a great boyfriend, Justin.'

He held my gaze. Wow. Had something I said actually reached him?

'Why do you think I raced boats and bungee jumped?' His voice was calm. 'My human life wasn't enough.'

He took a few deep breaths and held my gaze.

'I can never go home,' he said.

'You could have.' I didn't have to say anything about the Vereselum.

'No!' he yelled. His anger had resurged. 'The second that Rhode came back into your life, I lost everything. Now I'll show them what it's like.'

Justin stood next to the door, pointing at Rhode. I couldn't tell what force he was wielding over him, but almost on cue, Rhode screamed. The shock of the agony within that scream sent me to work.

I didn't know what I was doing. I jumped on to the nearest table, hopped to a desk, and landed on the floor near the stone door. My sword. I had to get to my

sword.

I slid the sword from the floor. Justin charged for me but misread my intentions. Instead of running back to Rhode, I ran to the Vereselum. Justin did a double take and opened his left hand wide to transport himself to me on a rush of air. He was almost a blur in his black suit.

I held the hilt of the sword over the glass. Justin stopped instantly.

'This is an interesting twist,' he said.

One downward motion and it would smash the glass.

He lifted his hand, preparing to do that now familiar motion of using the wind.

I jabbed the glass with the sword, shattering the case into hundreds of pieces, and Justin dropped his hand. He even took a step backwards.

I reached into the wreckage and snatched up the bottle. But with a sword in one hand and the vial in the other, I couldn't grab the book. Justin did. I jumped to the floor and we circled one another; Justin's eyes almost never left the vial in my hand.

'I'll destroy it right now,' I warned.

'You don't know what you have there,' he said.

'Antidote.'

He pressed his lips tightly together. Another small victory.

'You think we'd let you have something so powerful? Guess you should have checked on Laertes when you sent those vampires to Wickham. Now there's no one else to help you ruin the only hope for vampirism.'

He eyes jumped between the bottle in my hand and me. He licked his lips.

'You want this?' I said. 'You answer a couple of questions for me. First, how does my soul have the power to instantly make someone a vampire?'

Justin said nothing.

I lifted my arm, threatening to smash the bottle.

'It's not you. It's you *and* Rhode. Soulmates are the most powerful energy in the universe. The Vereselum, combined with your souls and the blood of a Demelucrea, will cause the antidote to morph. Once I bleed into it, whoever drinks it will not only become a vampire but they will also lose their ability to love.'

'What were you doing to me, when you kept staring into my eyes?' I insisted.

'Give me the bottle!' he ordered.

'Tell me the truth!' I screamed back.

I took a stupid risk. I threw the bottle into the air just a couple of inches and caught it again.

'All right!' he cried. 'Eyes are the windows to the soul. It's not just a saying. Laertes taught me. I could take your soul and hide it away for a while. Until I

needed it. But it turns out I couldn't take it from your body without Rhode. it has to be done at the same time because it's the same soul in two different bodies.'

I dropped the bottle into the cushioned satchel.

Before I could swing the sword, Justin grabbed me under my arm. The room went topsy-turvy as Justin threw me to the ground. The sword clattered out of my hand.

I kept one hand gripped on the satchel. Justin dug his knee into my chest. I was completely vulnerable but I didn't care. I searched with my other hand for the sword. The grip brushed against my fingertips which curled around the hilt.

Justin, trying to understand what I was doing, turned to look. I lifted my arm and stabbed him in his side.

He immediately let go, falling backwards.

Justin grabbed at his wound. He would heal instantly so I had to be fast. I came to my knees.

'Give me the bottle!' Justin grimaced and pulled out the sword. He hurled it to the ground so it clattered far away. He yanked my hair and dragged me along the ground in the direction of Rhode. It burned at the roots. *Don't instinctively touch it,* I told myself. *Hold on to the bag!* His hand was tight around my head, and when he stopped pulling me I flipped on to my back.

He stalked across the room to grab the sword.

'Let's just do this already' he spat.

I had nothing. No way to protect myself. He could take the Vereselum with the satchel if I wasn't armed.

I was just a girl. A human girl who wanted happiness. Who wanted to love Rhode, and go home and see her little sister.

Wait . . .

You have to use your heart, Justin had said. *You have to use your heart.*

I shoved my hand into my back pocket. The photo of Justin and his brothers was still there! I slid it out as Justin swung towards me, the sword high, poised to plunge. I pushed my hand out, clutching the photo. In the picture, his brothers smiled out at the camera: three blond boys under the summer sun. Below them were Kate, Claudia and Tracy.

Justin stopped, his sneer fell away and he lowered the sword. He reached out very slowly and knelt to the ground, taking the photo from my hand.

He stared at the photo, his eyes dancing over its contents.

'Where did you get this?' he whispered.

The ring stared straight at me. He held the photo between both hands.

'Why did you bring this to me?' he said, still mesmerized by the sight of it.

I slapped my hand around his left hand, crumpling the photo.

‘What are you doing?’

I drew him forward by the wrist and said through clenched teeth, ‘I believe you have something of mine.’

I gripped my fingers around that ring and only then did his lips part in understanding. I ripped it as hard as I could and it sliced through his skin as I pulled that ring off his finger and slid it on to my own.

A glint of red winked in the corner of my eye. My sword lay just beyond my fingers.

I was on the ground and Justin circled me, gripping the bloody, ruined photo. He bared his fangs and barrelled my focus on to his body movements. All I needed was the simple lift of his foot or the bend of his knees; any small clue that he was going to attack and I would slice the sword towards Justin’s body.

He raised his own sword and sprang at me.

For the briefest of seconds – time stalled.

Justin’s entire body was in the air, his arms out, legs spread, the point of his weapon angled down at me.

I snatched my sword.

There was no boy in the rain standing by my side. There was no boy waiting in his tuxedo at winter prom with a corsage in his hand, nervous as I approached in a dress.

I pulled back my elbow just as Justin fell towards me. With a scream that burned my throat nearly in two, I plunged the sword into his chest all the way to the hilt.

Justin’s eyes widened and he stared at me. I scooted out from under him as he fell forward, catching his hand.

Where was a dagger? The desk was empty, all the pens, papers and books now in a mess on the floor. Without the ring Justin would be weakened, though the ring’s power would still protect him for a little while longer. I had to destroy it.

A stone paperweight would have to do. I snatched it from the desk and placed the ring on the floor. In that ring was 592 years of vampire power. The onyx stone held on to the intentions of Rhode’s spells, the ritual and all that I had done in all the time I wore it on my finger. If I destroyed it, it would stop Justin’s power source and break the link between him and the world I was meant to change. It would also release the remainder of my vampire blood.

Justin screamed and arched his back in pain. He had somehow got the sword a little way out of his chest.

I clenched the polished heavy stone paperweight and brought it up over my head, so it hung over the small ring, which waited to be destroyed.

‘No!’ Justin howled.

I brought the paperweight down and smashed the ring. A white light exploded in the room. Words filled the space as though thousands of people were talking.

Go forth between darkness and in light.

A child, Lenah!

I love you. Love love love.

Believe and be free.

The whispers evened out and the silence of the house settled over the room.

I crawled to Justin, and when he looked up at me, I fell back.

His skin wasn't waxy. His pores were open and sweat lined his brow. Vampires don't sweat. Vampires don't have pores either.

When the ring broke open – Justin became human again.

My hands shook and I reached out to touch his skin. Just to prove to myself that what I was seeing was real – he was warm.

'Look what you've done,' he spat. Even his freckles were back.

'What I've done?' I echoed, with a crack in my voice.

'I removed it,' he said. His eyes had returned to their soft evergreen colour. 'I removed it so I wouldn't have to love you.' He drew a rattled breath. 'Love is for cowards.'

There was no remorse in his eyes. The green was cold and the vampire strength he would have had against the sword waned. He still held the bloody photograph in his hand.

'I used my heart to see,' I said. 'You told me to and I did.'

The photograph of all the people Justin loved had been his undoing. Laertes was right, love *was* the thing.

'I wanted to help you,' I added. 'Bring you back.'

'Stop,' he yelled, screaming until it was a cough. 'Stop lying!'

'I'm sorry,' I said, still kneeling next to him. 'That I didn't get to you before you removed your ability to love.'

I didn't know what else to say. That the onyx made him a vampire? That Laertes said it was impossible to get it back once love was removed. Perhaps I should say: thank you for once trying to save me. But he was gone. *That* Justin didn't exist any more.

'I should have killed you the night of your birthday. The night in the tent. When Odette was still alive,' he said. He sputtered, 'I hate . . . I hate . . .' He grimaced, and looked as if he was gathering all his strength.

'I hate you,' he pushed out. He gasped once more and his mouth finally slackened.

He stared up at the ceiling, motionless.

There was no long escape of air. No last heaving breaths. He didn't soften or

say I love you. He died angry. Defeated.

He was gone.

In a flash of memories:

Justin walks down his parents' hallway towards me. It is night and the moon coming through the window illuminates his toned stomach muscles. He loves life. He wants to love . . . us.

His sweaty kiss after a game. His warm body under the sheets, and the tip of his chin to the air when he laughs at something I say.

His eyes plead with me not to perform the ritual.

I blinked away the memories and focused on the vacant eyes instead. Jealousy. Hate. As a vampire, he had been motivated by all of his human insecurities. He would be one of the most horrific tragedies of my life.

I grabbed the hilt of the sword and pulled it all the way out. The blood on the end of the blade was the darkest red, almost black. And momentarily I thought of Fire and if this was what she truly wanted for me. To kill Justin. I couldn't imagine anyone would have wanted *this.*

My eyes travelled from his cropped hair to his broad shoulders and down to the Italian leather shoes. The sneakers were gone. Frayed jeans, gone. Sports uniforms smelling of grass and sweat. Gone.

I took his hands and placed them across his chest. I tucked the longsword underneath his arms so he lay like a soldier. Wasn't he a soldier? Hadn't he in some way been fighting my war? Only recently had he switched to the opposing side. And even that could be said to be my fault.

Justin Enos was gone.

To where all souls go – wherever that might be.

CHAPTER 23

I reached inside the satchel; the bottle and book were safe. Next and most important on my list was Rhode.

This was clearly the beginning of my life. A life with a young man who would have no passion, no love, no excitement. Justin had removed his ability to love? Fine. Rhode was my Anam Cara and I would have enough love for both of us.

I turned to the doorway. Rhode had passed out again. He was weak and depleted of blood, as he had been in Justin's house on Warwick Avenue.

I glanced back at Justin's body. It was still. Through the immense window that faced the grounds, the sunrise made the sky a dark pink.

I would need to get Rhode somewhere safe, and as soon as possible. I walked into the room where he was being held and knelt in front of him. I reached out, my fingers shaking, and touched his hand. His eyelids flickered and his vampire eyes met mine. They were bluer than I ever remembered seeing them before. He looked at me like a scientist examining an insect.

Rhode reached out his hands, but they were restrained by the great chains that held him to the wall. I unhooked the chains and the metal fell to the ground. Rhode collapsed immediately. I met him on the floor and when I reached for his hand, his fingers trailed gently over my palm. I shuddered.

'You . . .' His voice cracked, weak from lack of use or from torture, I couldn't tell. 'You're here,' he said. 'I dreamed of you.'

'I'll always find you.'

With a tug on my wrist, Rhode pulled me to him and kissed me so deeply that my body reacted before my mind. I kissed my Rhode back. Our mouths were hot and he kissed me deep. Rhode *loved* me. He did. I felt it in the touch of his hands over my body and the grip of his arms as he pulled me close. I let him.

I pulled away, my tears making both of our faces wet.

'It didn't work!' I bowed my head for a split second. More tears dripped down my nose and cheeks and on to the floor. 'He said he took your ability to love.'

'He couldn't,' he said, and the morning sun broke through the doorway. 'Every time he tried, it failed. He kept saying, "Not without your soulmate."'

That was what Justin had meant in the hallway. To make the new Vereselum he needed us both.

Rhode kissed me again.

'Come, we have to go,' I said, throwing the metal to the ground. 'Can you walk?'

Rhode shrugged and stretched out his arms to see how his body was feeling.

'Actually . . .' he said, and stood up from the floor on his own, 'I'm weak but I'm OK.' Just as he said it, his knees buckled. I took hold of his hand and squeezed. He stood back up using his own strength. 'I'm better with you,' he said.

Rhode *was* weak, but not nearly as bad as he had been during the eclipse. Justin had to have fed Rhode a little to keep him alive, but he needed my help as we walked. He could, for the most part, support his own weight. As we passed through the doorway and back into the library, Justin's body lay unmoving. The sun had edged across the carpet and on to the Oriental rug.

'Wait,' Rhode said, touching my wrist. He pointed at the ground.

The sun pierced a cloud and a shaft of light ran over Justin's foot, then his leg, his beautiful torso, and finally his face.

With a soft hush, he turned to ash.

'But he was human when he died,' I said. 'I saw it.'

'Some magic is beyond our comprehension,' Rhode whispered. He almost sounded like the old Rhode.

'But . . .' I said.

Perhaps the body could not withstand sunlight after the soul had touched such darkness. With no love in our hearts, we might as well be ash.

You can't hide from the sun for the rest of your life. Right? Justin's ghost whispered to me. *You gotta let go . . .*

Justin died as he lived.

Fast and dangerous.

Someone would have to come back to this house and catalogue the Hollow Ones' items. There was much in here that could be used for good. Spells, books, perhaps the house itself.

I pushed open the door to the darkened hallway. There were the same dark blue wallpaper and sconces, though the candles were now extinguished. But the problem was there were . . .

Endless wall sconces again. I sneered at the onyx ceiling.

I reached into my bag across my chest and drew out the amaranth sand. I threw it ahead of me and begged: *Find the way out of this house.* The amaranth

illuminated a clear pink path that led through the first door to our right.

'That's convenient,' Rhode said.

'Not convenient, deliberate. And when we get out of here, the first thing we're going to do is get you some blood. There is some at Cassius's house.'

We walked through the door and found ourselves in the entrance hall. I exhaled, relieved to see that we were not in that same blasted bedroom.

'Care to explain . . .' Rhode leaned against the wall. He drew a deep breath to get the sentence out. 'Care to explain this place?' he said.

When I approached the front door, the doorknob materialized.

But there was one thing I had to check before we left.

In the onyx ceiling above Rhode and me, one white orb hovered between both of our chests, right near our hearts. It was larger than the little one I had seen before.

A single orb for a single soul.

'Come on,' I said.

We opened the door, finding ourselves not stepping down on to the driveway but into a large garage. There were a dozen luxury cars parked in it, different models, all with tinted windows. A corkboard held seven or eight sets of keys.

'This one seems comfortable,' Rhode said, and slipped into the nearest car, which was unlocked. It was some kind of SUV like Tracy had. *Tracy*.

I would make a call once we returned to Cassius's house.

Justin once had a car like that too. In a different life.

I paused at a memory of all of us – Tracy, Kate, Claudia and me – driving in Justin's car to a bungee jump. We sang at the top of our lungs and danced to songs on the radio. It was a lifetime ago. I looked for the right set of keys. My fingers set off tinkling sounds as I brushed over the metal.

Finding them, I got into the driver's seat beside Rhode and started the car, and with a press of a garage clicker Rhode and I were out and back on the driveway. My hand rested on top of the gearshift and Rhode slid his hand over mine. I didn't look back; there was no need.

The only way ahead now was out.

We went via Cassius's house. There was no one in, but Rhode drank from a container of blood immediately. It was no shock to me, but he turned away to drink. Once sunset hit, and I knew Rhode would be safe from the sun, we were on the road again and parking in front of Wickham Boarding School.

Before getting out of the car I opened the satchel. I just wanted to make sure the book and antidote were still there and safe. I did see that they were still together. But what kept them in place was Rhode's journal.

‘Wait,’ I said, lightly touching Rhode’s cold skin, and pulled out the notebook. I handed it to him, and for a second it seemed we weren’t going through those gates and we didn’t have a powerful serum in our hands.

‘*Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom*. I love those words,’ I said.

‘Keats,’ he said. ‘And it’s true. Your love has changed me. Forever.’

‘You dreamed of me?’ I asked.

‘For three years. And when you walked on to campus that day, I didn’t know what to do. I had no memory of you, yet I spoke to you in my dreams, held you, and even . . .’ He didn’t finish. ‘You were so familiar to me, and yet I felt so guilty whenever I was around you.’

‘I’ll tell you about your life once we get settled.’

‘Besides, if that antidote is going to work, maybe my memory will come with it.’

I had been assured in ten different ways that restoring Rhode’s memory was impossible. Fire had explained it first, and Justin had confirmed it.

‘I can feel your doubt,’ he said.

‘I’m too worried to dare to hope,’ I replied.

Rhode slipped on a baseball hat from Justin’s back seat. It must have been Justin’s at one time. Rhode’s warm hand reached for mine.

Even though the evening clouds shrouded the moon, the clear blue of his eyes shone out at me.

We walked through the gates.

The guard did a double take at Rhode and stepped out from the booth. On the campus, students were packing cars and moving big boxes out of the dorms. Even at night, the campus was continuing to empty out – no time to waste, apparently, after a massive vampire attack. No one wanted to stay at school after what had happened. Who could blame them? Across the campus, the smashed windows of the auditorium remained ruined.

The guard held on to the booth door frame.

‘Rhode?’ His mouth opened a little and he jumped back into the booth. He checked something off on a clipboard and called someone on a walkie-talkie. Rhode adjusted the baseball cap further down over his eyes.

‘Rhode, we need to call the police. I – yes, Lenny, yes, he’s here. Tell Ms Williams,’ He smiled into the radio. Perhaps we were the best bit of news he had received all year.

‘You need to see your RA, and then the administration in the morning. The cops might want to speak to you too. I don’t know if you heard, but the school is closing until next fall.’

‘When?’ Rhode asked.

‘Two days. What with the missing students and what happened in assembly yesterday, the board and the town think . . . well, your RA will explain everything,’ the guard said.

He stepped into the booth again. I had no interest in seeing Tina, our resident advisor, and neither did Rhode. We needed to get the Vereselum to Cassius, and now. We said goodbye to the guard and walked up the pathway. As previously arranged with Cassius, we went directly to the chapel.

At night it was easier to avoid the last trickle of students walking to and from the union. Only the salad bar and sandwich stand seemed to be open. We were able to slip into the chapel unseen.

Cheers exploded around us as Rhode and I stepped into the building. As we walked towards the altar at the front of the room Tony attacked me with a giant hug.

‘See? I knew you could do it,’ he said.

He affectionately tackled Rhode, nearly bringing him to the ground.

‘Man, it’s good to see you.’

Cassius stood against the wall beneath a stained-glass window with Esteban and Micah. He met my eyes and I walked the rest of the long aisle to the front of the room. He held out his hand to shake, but I pulled him to me and we embraced.

The ring is destroyed, I said in my mind. *And when it cracked in two, breaking apart the magic, Justin turned human. Just for a moment.*

I’m sorry, Micah and Cassius said in unison.

He turned to dust when the sun hit his body though. I’m not sure why, but I think it’s because his very substance was riddled with too much borrowed magic.

‘You did what you had to do,’ Cassius said aloud. ‘What we knew you could.’

Cassius pulled away and nodded to the corner of the room, where Tracy stood. I gasped. Esteban stood by her side like a guard. Tracy stepped out of the shadowed corner and held me. The chill from her cold body enveloped me as we embraced.

‘When did it happen?’ I whispered.

‘Right after the attack in the auditorium.’

We pulled apart. It was easy to forget even after all this time the danger of those hardened eyes. She could see all my human imperfections. Her blonde hair shone and seemed more full than ever as it fell over her shoulders.

‘Stop that,’ she said. Her gaze fell to the floor.

‘What?’

She allowed her fangs to come down. ‘You, above everyone else. Don’t

admire me.'

'What you said about the vampire pain – it's guilt I feel most. And regret. I keep focusing on every crappy thing I've ever done.'

Tracy didn't ask me about Justin.

I turned back to the table where we'd laid out our plans for the attack on Justin's house. I reached into the satchel and unearthed the antidote. The glass vial made a little click against the wood when I put it down. Cassius, Micah and Esteban backed closer to the wall. Tracy bit at her lip and leaned into Tony's arm. He continued to wrap his arm around her and gripped her shoulder tightly.

Rhode didn't edge away, though he kept his hands in his pockets. The moonlight trickled down through the window and on to the little bottle. The antidote was red, and the starry light made it glimmer.

'First,' I said, moving to stand next to Rhode, 'we didn't see any vampires on campus this evening.'

'They negotiated with me,' Tracy said, shaking her hair back. 'After what they did in the auditorium earlier, they agreed to stay off campus until sunset tomorrow.'

'How can they be trusted? How did you get them to agree? Just guilt won't work.'

Tony reached into his pocket and took out the box that Fire had given me, the one that had held the weapons. He opened it – the ring that represented air was gone.

'Let's just say they thought we might have more,' Tracy said.

'Well, let's get a move on then,' I said. 'Cassius, take this.'

I handed over the book, and Cassius immediately sat down and flipped it open.

After an hour, the Dems, Tracy, Rhode and I were sitting on the floor, while Cassius continued to work. We needed to hear if Laertes's book explained how to make more of the antidote once we finished the initial batch. We would also have to find a way to distribute it to every vampire who would need it!

While we waited, I told them what had happened in the Hollow Ones' house, the battle with Justin, and his death.

'So he didn't show any remorse?' Tracy asked. The muscles in her face were stiff, her expression tense like a porcelain doll's.

'None,' I said. 'He wanted to inflict pain until his last breaths.'

Cassius got up from reading the book and stepped to the end of the table. We all stood up.

'This book is going to take months to decipher,' he said. Rhode got up to stand

at the other end of the table. ‘But I’ve read and reread the section on this antidote five times,’ Cassius went on. ‘I think I understand its construction.’

‘So what the hell is it?’ Tony asked.

‘This *is* the antidote. It contains traces of Lenah’s blood. It’s the original source of what changed us. But it’s a combination of many things. When we transformed, Rayken or Levi, one of them, mixed Lenah’s blood with ours.’

‘Ours?’ Micah said in awe.

‘It can’t work without Demelucrea blood,’ Cassius said. ‘But there’s not nearly enough here,’ he added, echoing my thoughts. ‘If we want to recreate it, one of us will have to distribute it. It’s the only way, because it requires Demelucrea blood to be successful. We have both our blood and Lenah’s running through our veins.’

‘We’re part of the antidote?’ Esteban whispered.

Pride mixed with diffidence emanated from the Demelucrea, and I couldn’t blame them. I had been embarrassed to feel that pride too.

‘How do we know it’s not a trick?’ Rhode asked. ‘That the real book isn’t hidden away in that house somewhere?’

Tracy and Tony stood up and leaned against the wall, Tony with his arms crossed. Tracy rested her head on his shoulder. Micah had stood up and held a hand to his mouth. He kept shifting his weight from leg to leg.

Cassius bent over the book. Pressed herbs and flowers were attached to pages. He turned one particular page: scribbles in Laertes’s handwriting trickled down the page next to a sketch of my face.

‘It makes no sense to have fake information or to spend so much time making a fake book of this calibre. It’s a risk either way, Rhode.’

Cassius nodded to the vial, gesturing for Rhode to step forward and drink.

Rhode reached for the bottle, but stopped just before his fingers touched it. He squeezed his hand into a fist. ‘You can recreate it?’ he checked with Cassius. ‘You’re sure?’

‘Once you drink, I’ll take a sample of your blood and, if this book is right and I’ve understood it properly, that’s all I’ll need.’

‘But the blood . . .’ Tony said. ‘You were talking about yourself, weren’t you? You’re going to have to bleed into it to distribute it too.’

‘It’s always blood,’ I muttered. I wanted nothing more than to leave this horrendous world of bloodlust behind.

‘And the last person you turn?’ Rhode asked.

‘Will be the last vampire I can find,’ Cassius said.

‘This is a big world,’ Tony said.

‘And I’ve got all the time I need,’ Cassius replied.

I didn’t know how to show appreciation to Cassius. Saying thank you seemed so feeble, given the extent of his loyalty and determination. What he had said that night at the fear ritual came to mind. He feared he would die without honour. Eradicating vampirism would be his journey to earn that honour.

Rhode lifted the bottle and, just as he did, the moonlight hit the magenta contents of the liquid.

Our gaze locked. We had no choice; we had to take the risk.

‘Everyone leave the room,’ Cassius said. ‘Even you, Lenah. He needs to put all of his focus and intentions into this. You could distract him. I will stay here.’

I followed the others to the door but kept my eyes locked on Rhode. The moon shifted behind the clouds and the room fell into darkness again. The only glow came from Cassius’s silver eyes. Rhode removed the lid and lifted the vial to his mouth. His eyes met mine again over the bottle.

Just as the door was about to close, he said, ‘To you, my love.’

He tipped his head back, draining the contents.

CHAPTER 24

Tracy led me outside. I would not have left the chapel otherwise.

‘Come with me,’ she said in a newfound stately and calm tone.

We walked towards Hopper building. In her vampire state she walked with less bounce than she had as a mortal teenager. The vampire sight allowed for more grace, as the eye could see infinitesimal movements. I missed her old walk.

‘Look,’ she said, and pointed to the woods.

Shadows of bodies waited under trees. Others, I noticed when I squinted into the distance, sat along the wall. Vampires. It was as I had seen them the night before the auditorium attack. They came in droves. According to Micah, messages had been sent around the world about the antidote. On my hands were the lives of Justin, Kate and Jackie. Liliana and Henri too. Maybe we could set free all vampires and the deaths of my friends and acquaintances would not be in vain.

‘When they made me – you know what I thought about?’ Tracy asked.

‘The darkness? Your heartbeat?’

‘That I had no compassion for Justin as a vampire.’ Her crystalline eyes stared at me under that bright moonlight. ‘I wasn’t even afraid of what they were doing to me. I just wanted to be human again. So I could live my whole life, from start to finish. So I could make sure I appreciated all of it.’

I paused, ‘A hundred cute half-Asian babies?’ I offered with a laugh. She laughed too and it was a gift to see. ‘This will work,’ I said.

Tracy’s eyes focused on the woods again.

‘They’re watching us,’ she said. ‘If anyone comes near you, Lenah, I’ll kill them.’

My, what a powerful vampire she made.

‘I thought you might hate me,’ I said.

She shook her head, tearing her eyes away from the vampires in the distance.

‘Never.’ We shared a simple smile.

‘I’m going to go tell them we’re working on the antidote right now,’ she said. ‘I’ll be OK.’ She must have sensed my hesitation, but I hadn’t even had time to

register the feeling. ‘And so will you. You’re protected, I promise.’

Tracy pointed at the beach. Tony was sitting on the wall facing the ocean. ‘I think he’s waiting for you.’

Tracy leaped across the main path and slipped into the Wickham woods. She eased into the shadows, knowing as all vampires do exactly how to disappear into the night.

I was eager to join Tony, and despite Tracy’s promise, I was confused why anyone would leave him sitting out here so exposed. I walked swiftly towards the beach.

The school would reopen in a few months, but things would change; the world would change. And I would require the vampires who were healed to adhere to one important rule: while vampires waited to be turned, Wickham Boarding School and Lovers Bay were never to be touched. The school must be protected. Forever.

Tony sat on the stone ledge looking out at the calm bay.

The way the moonlight sprinkled over the water and the boats bobbed on their moorings would always endear Lovers Bay to me. I was never supposed to be here. I was meant to live with my family in the 1400s. Any other time in which I participated was not mine to have.

I walked to the steps and stood by the wall where Tony sat. Even though he wouldn’t remember our first conversation, it thrilled me to ask him now the same thing as I’d asked him then.

‘Can I sit with you?’

‘Hey there, Road Buddy,’ he said, scooting over. ‘My brain is on a loop. It keeps saying –’ he put on a robotic voice – ‘I really hope that antidote works and that we can make enough for everyone. I really hope the antidote works, I really hope . . . You get the point.’

‘We’ll know soon enough,’ I said gently with a small laugh. I could not worry any more. Those days were over. This was the last hope I had left.

‘It’s gonna be a long night,’ Tony said with a sigh. He leaned back on his hands.

‘Maybe.’

The moon’s light rippled over the water and reflected in Tony’s eyes.

He turned to me, excited to tell a story. ‘So I totally used the last ring to take out a whole gang that was holding Tracy. Fire’s last weapon. Lenah, you should have seen me. I threw the ring and it tossed them up in the air like a . . . well, like a huge cyclone. We didn’t even see where they went, it was so powerful. We grabbed Tracy, but she didn’t run. She stood her ground and screamed at the ones who hadn’t been swept off.’ Tony slid off the ledge and re-enacted Tracy’s

standoff.

‘You want this antidote?’ He even raised his voice so it was girlie. His laughter broke through. He quickly put on a stern face again. ‘You stay away from us. Anyone who comes near and hurts a single person left on this campus will not get the antidote. We’ll just stab you through the heart.’

He hopped back on to the sea wall and spoke in his normal voice.

‘They listened to her though. Hundreds of them are out there, but no one’s stepped on campus.’

‘She told me,’ I said. ‘But she didn’t give me that rousing rendition.’

He lifted his chin. ‘It’s me. They’re totally afraid of me.’

‘I bet they are.’

His mock hubris dissipated when he pointed at my neck.

‘You have some bruises.’

I reached up to the tender spots on my neck. So much of my body still ached.

‘It’s where Justin tried to strangle me.’

Tony’s eyes lingered on the bruises. ‘You had to do what you had to do . . .’ he said soberly.

‘There was no way,’ I said. ‘I wanted to save him even after I understood what he’d become. And deep down, even at the very end too,’ I finished quietly.

‘I know,’ Tony said. ‘You had no choice.’ He hesitated and after a moment said, ‘I think I want to tell his mom – you know, the truth.’

‘She’ll never believe you.’

‘She will if I bring Cassius.’

‘Justin did, in some way, have a hand in getting the antidote to us,’ I said. ‘You could tell her that. That’ll make her happy. The Hollow Ones didn’t know Justin would keep it.’

Tony raised his eyebrows. ‘Yeah . . . so he did help. That’s really important. Even if it’s completely messed up.’

‘You can change the story. For her.’

He seemed to sit up straighter at this thought, but he hunched a little, deflating. ‘There’s something else,’ he added.

‘What?’

He squinted at the ocean, as if he was concentrating hard on his choice of words. ‘I remembered something. After the fight in the auditorium we went back to our dorm, and when I walked into my bedroom. I remembered you. From before.’

‘You did? What?’

‘You tried to warn me about your coven, didn’t you? In the other life. You told me not to meddle, but I did anyway.’

‘I didn’t want to tell you,’ I said.

‘I dreamed it. A million times. I just never knew it was you until I remembered the dream and then put everything together.’

I put a hand on his knee and Tony looked over at me.

‘I should have listened to you,’ he said. ‘If I didn’t stick my nose where—’

‘I thought sheltering you from the truth would save you. But it sealed your fate, because you wanted to know the answers so badly. I didn’t do that this time. See? Smart moves. Without you, we would have failed.’

‘It’s true. I am awesome. Like Superman. Without the tights.’

‘Who’s Superman?’

Tony threw his head back and laughed to the stars. I loved how his shoulders bounced when he laughed really deep.

‘I love you, you know that, right?’ I said.

He fell silent instantly, and even in the moonlight, I could see that he blushed.

‘No one’s ever said that to me before who wasn’t, like, required to,’ he said.

I pulled Tony to me and held him tight. I inhaled his familiar scent mixed with the salty air of Lovers Bay. I had wanted to thank him for the phone call before I went into the Hollow Ones’ house. I didn’t need to, because he *was* my best friend. The only best friend, besides Rhode, that I’d ever had. I didn’t know if I would ever have any others. This young man would grow up to be someone truly great. I could be sure of that.

‘You did good,’ he said, pulling out of my hug. ‘Really great. You’re going to change the world. How many people can say that?’

‘I didn’t do it on my own,’ I said.

Tony’s arms fell away.

‘Lenah,’ he whispered. He was peering out at something over my shoulder.

I twisted to follow his eye line. Was it Rhode? Yes, he walked down the beach and the moon made a halo over his head and shoulders.

Had it worked? I couldn’t yet tell.

‘Go to him . . .’ Tony said.

‘What if—’

‘*Go*.’

I stood slowly. My legs were unsure how to walk. *One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other.* I wanted to ignore it, but my heart slammed in my chest. Rhode kept a hand in his pocket. He had a small wrinkle on the left side of his mouth. That smile was very specific.

Very Rhode.

Rhode, who had fought battles with Richard III.

This could only mean one thing.

I pumped my arms like I was back in the lavender field.

‘Rhode!’

He ran to me and this beach was a lavender field, my parents’ orchard the first time we met, it was Wickham farm, an opera house, and all the many paths we’d walked together. Closer and closer. Almost there now.

‘Rhode!’ I cried.

He was there.

Rhode picked me up and kissed me. His hand cupped the back of my head, and I swear the supernatural warmth we made as vampires rushed through my body.

Love *did* soar. It could fly.

As the Earth turned on its axis, the power of Rhode’s kiss told me that he loved me, and when I pulled back he ran a thumb across my cheek. The deep blue of his eyes was even more jewel-like than I remembered in the fading moonlight.

‘Well . . .’ he said, and sighed. In his gaze was an apology. ‘That was an adventure, wasn’t it?’ I was so aware of our love for one another, he didn’t even have to say the words. ‘I have my memory back.’ He lovingly touched my hair with the tips of his fingers.

‘I’d do it all over again,’ I said. ‘For you.’

He brought his mouth to mine. Our lips parted and I tasted Rhode as a human. We could do this now; we could kiss whenever we wanted. I matched the movement of his kiss. Next to us, Tony cleared his throat.

‘Hello, Tony,’ Rhode said, placing me gently on to the sand.

Tony had walked down the beach to join us. ‘Don’t mind me. Just watching the bay. It’s really riveting this time of night.’

Rhode kept one arm wrapped around my waist while he extended the other hand.

‘It’s an honour . . .’ Rhode said.

‘Any time, man. Any time.’

‘So what happened?’ I asked Rhode with a nudge.

‘It took twenty minutes. The antidote was so strange. It tasted like lavender, sunny days, and it flowed through me. For every inch that it spread through my body, I remembered more about you. You, me, the orchard, the Hathersage house, Lenah, all of it.’ He grinned.

Tracy and Esteban ran towards us from the pathway near the greenhouse.

‘Is that Rhode?!’ She cried and jumped up and down. ‘Esteban, I think it’s Rhode!’

‘Where’s Micah?’ I asked. ‘He was transforming next.’

Cassius ran towards us down the beach from the same direction Rhode had. Once Cassius reached me, he slapped both hands on my shoulders. The calculated and understated soldier was like a little boy. ‘It worked!’ We embraced and Cassius was positively mad from excitement. ‘It worked!’ He lifted me up and when he put me down, he spun to Tracy and Tony.

Micah walked right through our cheering and directly to the shore. We turned from our embraces and watched as he knelt down and placed both palms into the water.

‘It’s cold,’ he said while on his knees. ‘It’s cold.’ He broke into laughter. He laughed and laughed until all of us were laughing together again on that beach. ‘When this is over,’ Micah said pulling out of a hug with Cassius, ‘I’m going to my sister. She’ll be forty. She was eleven when . . . well, when I left.’

Rhode kept his arm around me.

‘Tracy, you’ll be next,’ Cassius said as Tony hugged her close. ‘Then Esteban, it’ll be your turn.’

‘Not yet,’ Esteban replied. ‘There’s nothing I want more. But, you need help, Cassius. You’ll need to get this message to vampires safely. I want to help you.’

‘All right. You can decide when you’re ready.’

‘And the house,’ Esteban said. ‘The Hollow Ones. I’m dying to get my hands on that library.’

Cassius slapped a hand on Esteban’s shoulder. ‘We’ll do it. We’ll go there and make it our new residence.’

‘Hey, what’s this?’ Tony asked and picked something up near my feet. A dirtied grey cloth dangled between his thumb and forefinger. It was blotted with crimson stains.

It was the bracelet that I’d made from my skirt so long ago, the one stained with Suleen’s blood. Tony handed it to me and I held it in my palm. Rhode’s and my eyes met and I knew I didn’t have to explain what happened to Suleen.

‘Send it out to the sunrise,’ Rhode said gently.

I placed the little bracelet in the water. I had half expected it to fall off after Justin had died, yet it had clung to my skin until now. As the fabric rolled over the small waves and out into the bay, I whispered, ‘Goodbye.’

My bloodied bracelet disintegrated, releasing the fibres into the salty bay.

The sky was no longer peppered with stars. It was now purple, would soon be pink, and then the yellow of sunrise. When I first asked Fire to send me back to the medieval world, she instructed me how to return home.

‘All cycles must complete. The sun that begins the day must set. The spark that lights the world must go out. Finish what you started.’

Rhode met my eyes.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

If I wanted to go home, I could. I just had to wait until the task I completed was over.

‘When it’s over, you must go to the archery field. When the new sun rises, you will be sent back.’

The pathway behind me was empty. The dorms mostly dark. The breeze now was light and warm. I inhaled the salty air and whispered to Wickham Boarding School, ‘In darkness and in light.’

I had done what Fire had asked me to do. I could go home.

‘What about you?’ Tracy asked Cassius, and I zoomed back in on the conversation.

‘I’ll be last to turn,’ Cassius said. ‘First I need to go to the Hollow Ones’ house and break down the ceiling and floors of onyx. Rip it apart and we can bring it back to the ordinary world. From what Lenah told me there is a lot to be uncovered and dismantled within that house.’

Micah crossed his arms. ‘And I’ll help you as much as I can too.’

‘No. At day break, Micah, you get on a train home to your sister,’ Cassius said. ‘That’s how you can help.’

‘There’s money in my trunk in my room,’ I said to Micah. ‘You should take it and go.’

Micah pressed his lips together and nodded.

‘Wait, won’t you need it?’ Tracy asked me.

The sun peeked over the horizon. Rhode squeezed his arm around me.

The sky was lavender and a fat line of orange sat at the base of the sky.

Rhode turned me to him.

‘I’ll go anywhere you want. Just say it.’

Behind the library was the hill that stretched up to the archery plateau. The campus was just touched with autumn, and the green trees dotted red and orange, a hint of a chill to come in the air. It had been summer in 1417 when I had left to come back to Wickham.

‘I want to go home,’ I said. ‘To my family.’ Rhode kissed my forehead in reply.

‘When are you doing that?’ Tony asked with an edge of panic to his voice. ‘When do you go?’

I could stay. I wanted to see the faces of the vampires we changed as day broke over Lovers Bay. I would have loved to see the joy as the sun rolled over their skin.

But it was sunrise when *I* had to leave.

The sun hovered just over the horizon line. ‘I need to go now,’ I said.

‘Now?’ Tony’s voice cracked.

I stepped away from Rhode and towards Micah, Esteban and Cassius. They bowed to me.

‘No, please. No more Renoiera. No more bows.’

Micah reached up to the pendant still hanging around his neck. ‘I think I’ll wear mine,’ he said. ‘To remember.’

‘How do you go home?’ Tony asked.

‘She has to go back. To her time,’ Tracy said, taking Tony’s hand into her own.

‘You have what you need?’ I asked Cassius.

He thought it over a moment but in his silver eyes, almost purple now from the changing sky was the word – ‘yes’. He would never deny me anything. That was his way and I would never forget his loyalty.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Everything we need to do is in order.’

‘Promise me one thing within that house.’

‘Anything.’

‘Destroy that door. The human-sculpture door. Into thousands of pieces.’

‘First thing,’ Cassius said. He turned to Tracy. ‘I need you one last time. Alert the vampires in the woods that the antidote was a success. Tell them we’ll work out a schedule for administering it to all of them at the Hollow Ones’ home starting tomorrow. Meet me in the chapel; get out of the light.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ Esteban said to Tracy.

She nodded, ready for her last task as a vampire.

‘Wait,’ I said, stopping Esteban before he and Tracy could run off.

Thank you, I said to Micah and Esteban in my mind. Esteban smiled but Micah looked back and forth between us.

‘I said, thank you.’ Micah hugged me goodbye and I handed him the keys to my room and trunk. After, he would go to the chapel to collect his things. They each had long days ahead. Tracy and Esteban stood beside Cassius.

‘Good luck,’ Cassius said, extending an arm. Instead of shaking his hand goodbye as he intended, I slipped off the watch he loaned me and handed it back to him.

‘You’re coming to say goodbye, aren’t you?’ I asked.

A smile twitched on the edge of his mouth. ‘Of course.’

I faced Tracy. Her lips were closed though she was smiling.

She grabbed me into a cold vampire embrace. The chill of her skin would warm. Her heart would beat again.

‘I can feel your hopes for me,’ she said. ‘They’re stunning, thank you.’

‘Be brave.’

She backed away, ‘Like you.’

She kept her eyes on me until the moment grew stale. She turned, and she and Esteban ran across campus. Her frame got smaller and smaller as she ran and finally disappeared into the shadowed woods. A collection of silhouettes circled around her.

‘It’s time to go,’ I said, not needing to check the sunrise. The colour of the sky had changed to a bright pink.

Tony took my left hand, Rhode, my right. Cassius walked next to Rhode. We began the walk home. We headed past Quartz dorm, then the union, past the long windows where I had had meals with friends. I stepped on to the archery hill and only made it a few feet before I had to turn back to face the campus. There was my life.

The union. The library. The star tower too.

My eyes passed over the lacrosse field and farm and I paused when Tracy stepped out from the woods by the Wickham farm. At first I thought she was alone in that lavender morning.

Vampires from all walks of life – Asian, African, European, men and women – stepped out from the trees. Together they stood against the perimeter of the Wickham woods. My eyes swept from one end of campus to the other but a vampire took up every single space. In one graceful movement, all of the vampires extended a hand outwards before them and in unison, brought it over their hearts.

‘What are they doing?’ Tony asked.

‘I think . . .’ Rhode paused and with a pleasant lift to his voice said, ‘I think they’re saying thank you.’

Rhode squeezed my hand. I didn’t want to let go of Tony or Rhode’s hands so I hoped the sight of the tears spilling over my cheeks would be enough for the vampires watching. Hundreds of vampires stood en masse against the trees holding their hands over their hearts.

They would cry tears too. They would be free.

The sunrise dotted the top of the hill. The target. The way home.

We climbed. We walked together up that hill and every step I took I was leaving Wickham Boarding School behind me. I walked away from Tony and the life I could have had if I stayed in the modern world. I walked away from friends, modern dances, and mocha lattes. Music inside a stereo that could play so loudly it filled a whole room, pop music, and libraries with thousands of books. My list was so long. The sunrise grew brighter around my family of friends. My soulmate’s hand was tight in mine and we kept climbing.

‘Almost there,’ Rhode said with another squeeze. I looked back one more time

at Wickham and the vampires watching me leave. I said one last goodbye with a glance at the greenhouse, Lovers Bay Main Street, and beyond.

‘Ready?’ Rhode asked. ‘This is it.’

I took the last few steps of the incline and as I stepped on to the archery plateau, the sunrise burst over the horizon.

And there – waiting far in the distance of the field was Fire.

She stood before an orange path of light that led to an infinite horizon.

I pulled my hand from Rhode’s and we started our goodbyes. Rhode shook Cassius’s hand and I threw myself at Tony. He held me tight and sobbed against me.

‘I love you,’ he said.

I pulled away and held him by placing my hands on his shoulders. His familiar and beautiful almond-shaped eyes met mine and in them was every history of our friendship. He didn’t have to remember everything we had done, or ever said, because he *felt* all of it. We had a very special kind of love. His Adam’s apple rose and fell as he searched for words to say in this very unique goodbye.

‘I want you to understand something,’ I said. ‘Something very important. You’ve given a meaning to this experience that I never fathomed was possible.’

‘Lenah . . .’ he said and his eyes filled with tears.

‘No, Tony,’ I said with a little shake. ‘I’ll *never* forget what you’ve given me and I will always miss you.’

‘But you’re leaving,’ he said. ‘You could stay.’

‘It’s time for me to go home. Where I always should have been.’

‘What am I gonna do?’ He asked with a little sob. ‘Without you?’

‘Something important,’ I said. And I knew it was true. ‘Don’t be surprised by your greatness, Tony Sasaki. Be surprised that no one expected it.’

I held my best friend to me and told myself never to forget his warmth.

Rhode tapped my shoulder and I pulled away from the strong grip of my best friend. Rhode took my place and embraced Tony. I turned behind me to Cassius.

We grasped each other’s forearms in true Demelucrea fashion.

‘Grazie,’ I said with a little laugh.

‘Prego,’ he replied in turn. My smile fell as I said, ‘Don’t wait too long to use the antidote on yourself. Promise me.’

‘I promise, Renoiera.’

A surge of something like nostalgia overcame me as he said the word. I reached up and touched the pendant he still wore around his neck.

‘Tell the story. My story. Tell it so every vampire everywhere knows.’

‘I will.’

I kissed his cheek.

Thank you, I said in my mind. *For everything.*

All will be done, Lenah.

I kissed his other cheek, thankful that he called me by my name. I backed away from Cassius towards the love of my life; Rhode now stood beside Fire.

Tears streamed down Tony's face. Why should we fear the pain of goodbye? It is the natural course of life.

I wanted to remember Tony this way – in the sunrise.

No more fear. No more running from the daylight. Now I would walk into it and go home.

For good.

When I got to Rhode, he took my hand again and we turned to face the orange path.

'He was right, you know,' Fire said.

'Who?' Rhode and I asked in unison.

'Suleen. About you. About what you could accomplish together. He would be proud.'

Even in his death, Suleen's spirit touched me.

She motioned to the orange and yellow glittering pathway.

'It's time.'

Before Rhode and I stepped on to the pathway, I pulled him towards me. I needed one more kiss in the place he so desperately tried to give me. In a place to which we would never return. Our mouths met and his strong arms slipped around my back. Tremors flowed through me, up and down my legs. The sunlight shone on both of us, warming our kiss, our bodies, and the ground on which we stood. When Rhode and I pulled away . . . at the same time, our eyes met. Together – we took a step.

We made it a few paces before I needed one more look behind. My best friend cried an ugly cry. Tony lifted a hand in goodbye. I extended a hand and then held it over my heart as I walked backwards into the light. I would love him forever.

I couldn't stop the tears. Why should I? I had worked so hard to finally say goodbye. With a last glance at Fire, Tony and Cassius, I turned back to Rhode.

'I think I see apple trees,' he said with a smile. Yes, I too could make out the familiar roundness of the trees of my father's house. I was almost home.

Behind us, Tony, Cassius and Fire were just orange shadows now. Soon they would flicker and fade, and I would be back with my family and Rhode. As it always should have been.

The smell of apples overtook the air around us. The pathway at my feet turned from the orange of Fire's light to brown dirt, then manicured soil. The path

flickered away and we were met with a collection of trees and a wooden fence. Rhode looked behind him but was met with Hampstead Heath. Before us, in the distance, beyond the orchard trees, a chimney smoked into the sky.

We hesitated at the end of the orchard row where so long ago Rhode had made me a vampire, where we had started the bloody history that we had now undone.

Good girl, Vicken would have growled. I smiled at the ground, allowing pride to overwhelm me for the briefest of moments.

'Do you have any regrets?' Rhode asked.

'No,' I said. 'I'm ready.'

'For an adventure?' he asked.

A light laugh escaped and it flittered away on the untouched medieval air.

'With you.'

Hand in hand, we stepped out of the orchard lane and walked towards the house in the distance.

'Lenah!' My sister's voice carried over the trees, echoing on the air.

'Genevieve?' I called.

My sister turned the corner, her curls bouncing. Her eyes brightened and she jumped up and down, pointing at me. The sight of her brought me to my knees. The ground cooled my skin.

'Mama! Lenah is back and she has someone with her!'

'Genevieve,' I croaked. 'Genevieve! Come to me!' I opened my arms.

I swept her to my chest. My father and mother burst out of the house and ran towards Rhode and me. My father, with his beard and great belly, held open his arms. And I knew, as they shook Rhode's hand and led us down the row, that I was no longer a night wanderer. *That* life was over. I even searched for the orange path but I didn't see it.

Rhode squeezed my hand. 'I love you,' he said one more time. There was no word for what we had. Anam Cara. Soulmate. Love. It didn't matter, the label.

Because I was Lenah Beaudonte.

Girl. Lover. Sister. Daughter. Queen, to some . . .

And I was free.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Margaret Riley and the whole WME family, who have supported Lenah's story from the beginning.

To the VCFA community, especially A.M. Jenkins, Franny Billingsley, Hannah Moderow and Kristin Derwich.

To the CCW's, the classiest and most wonderful collection of women I have ever had the pleasure to know. Thank you for the time we have spent on Lenah's story and for helping me to craft this story. I am so grateful for you and for all we have accomplished together.

To my editors over the years in the UK: Claire Creek, Polly Nolan, Emma Young, Ruth Alltimes and Rebecca McNally. Your belief in this story and Lenah's character has been crucial in my growth not only as a writer, but as an artist. I'm a better writer having worked with you.

ETERNAL DAWN

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Books by Rebecca Maizel

Infinite Days
Stolen Night
Eternal Dawn

Praise for Infinite Days*:*

‘*Infinite Days* is a grab-you-by-the-throat, ignore-the-world-around-you, fall-completely-in-love-with kind of book, the kind I haven’t really read since *Twilight*. Yep. I just used the T-word’ AllThingsUrbanFantasy

‘*Infinite Days* builds to an exciting conclusion, and leaves the door wide open for a kick-ass sequel’ WondrousReads

‘There is no other vampire book like it and if you have a love for immortals but are fed up with reading more or less the same story over and over again, then *Infinite Days* is the ideal book to pick up . . . Maizel’s writing is beautiful . . . Her voice is very unique and has an eloquence to it that I wish we could see more of in young adult fiction’ YABookReads

‘I found myself thinking about this novel long after I’d put it down . . . It plays around but still retains the haunting and tortured tone of all the best vampire stories’ Amazon

Praise for Stolen Night*:*

‘I can’t wait to see where the author takes Lenah next. With thoughtful notions, intriguing mystery and compelling characters, *Stolen Night* makes the Vampire Queen Series a must-read’ TheYoungFolks

‘Be prepared to be blown away by *Stolen Night* because it’s not one you want to miss!’ BookPassionForLife



First published 2014 by Macmillan Children's Books

This electronic edition published 2014 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-1779-4

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Vampire language created by Megan Reilly

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Ellipses Digital Limited, Glasgow

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