

A Bit of Bite

by Cynthia Eden, ...

Published: 2013
in »Entangled Collection«

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 6

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

Chapter 1

Two days until Halloween, or, as the not-so-gentle folks in Crossroads, Mississippi, liked to say... two days until hell came calling.

Sheriff Ava Dushaine climbed slowly out of her patrol car. She could smell death in the air. It was a dank scent she'd grown used to since being appointed as a paranormal liaison in the Crossroads area just over six months ago.

Liaison, my ass. More like watch dog. She straightened her shoulders, checked her gun, then walked toward the dead body that had been tossed right in the middle of the road. A deliberate position, one that placed half of the body in the territory marked by the werewolves and half in the territory claimed by the vampires.

The deputy who'd followed beside her began to gag as soon as he got a good look at the vic.

"Suck it up, Billings," she told the young guy, making her voice snap. Ken Billings was too green for this scene. A new transfer in her department, he obviously wasn't accustomed to the stiffs. If he stayed with her, he would be soon enough.

But this kill... it was particularly brutal. She wanted to recoil from the sight, too, but Ava knew that wasn't an option for her. Putting on the brave face, yeah, that was her bit. "Call for backup and tell the team we need them out here ASAP."

Not that backup would do any good for the poor stiff on the ground. His throat had been torn out. His eyes stared in frozen horror, and his lips were parted in a soundless scream of terror.

There'd be no helping him.

Blood soaked the ground beneath his body. There were scratches and deep gouges all along his face and arms. This guy—he'd fought back. Death hadn't been easy for him.

Jaw clenching, she paced a few feet away. The rising sun looked like a ball of fire in the distance, with streaks of red skating along the sky.

Those streaks looked just like blood in the sky. Blood followed her everywhere these days.

Dammit, this job was getting *old*.

She knew the deal. The werewolves waited to the left. The vampires to the right. She'd been doing her best to keep peace between the two factions, and they'd been pretending to follow the rules that the government set up for them when the supernaturals had thrown their big coming out party ten years before.

Stay on your designated land.

Don't kill humans.

Enjoy only willing prey.

But someone was breaking the rules. This was the third dead body she'd found in a month, and Ava was tired of humans dying on her watch.

She was also tired of having the folks in Crossroads talking almost constantly about the destruction that was waiting for everyone. According to them and their good old gossip mill, the town would be facing a freaking apocalypse come All Hallow's Eve.

Just what she needed. An impending apocalypse *and* a dead journalist. Because, yeah, she'd recognized the mangled human on the ground. Kyle Powell, investigative journalist. A guy who'd been digging for the wrong story—a guy who *hadn't* listened to her warnings.

A twig snapped a few feet away from her. Ava didn't jump and spin toward the sound, but her right hand did rise slowly to curl around the butt of her gun. The problem with all the supernaturals was that they could just move too fast—

"Easy." His deep, dark voice washed over her and, just like that, werewolf alpha Julian Kasey stood in front of her. The light, woodsy scent that marked his kind clung to him as he towered over her.

But this wasn't her first ball game. Or monster hunt. Even as Julian closed that last bit of space between them, she shoved the barrel of her gun right at his heart.

Ava offered the handsome wolf a smile. "Do I need to remind you that these bullets are made of silver?" Like she'd really carry anything else.

His face—hard, square jaw, cheekbones sharp enough to cut, and lips that hinted at both cruelty and sensuality—lowered toward hers. "Would you really shoot me, baby?" Doubt cloaked his whisper.

Ava risked a fast glance at the deputy. Right. Figured Ken hadn't even heard the wolf's approach. He was too busy talking on his phone and trying to keep his lunch down. "Don't test me," she snapped back to the wolf. Sure, they might have been lovers once—*once*—but that was over. She had a job to do.

She'd do it. A sexy werewolf wouldn't stop her.

Julian cocked a dark brow, but he also stepped back. Good.

"Now put your hands up," she ordered him.

Smiling a bit, he raised his hands. In the early light, she didn't see any blood beneath his nails. Nails, not claws. The claws would only come out when he shifted.

"Want to tell me what you're doing here?" Ava asked.

He shrugged but kept his hands up. "I just followed the scent of blood."

Supernaturals enjoyed the scent of blood far too much.

So she had a dead human, one who'd had his throat ripped open, and a werewolf, right at the scene of the crime. She also knew for a fact that said dead human had been planning to interview Julian last night.

Things weren't looking good for the wolf right then.

And it wasn't like she had a whole lot of options. Sighing, Ava pulled out her cuffs. "These are gonna sting," she warned him. Silver cuffs. Because of their enhanced strength, werewolves could break free of almost anything else instantly.

He dropped his hands. "You aren't serious."

She was. Did it look like she was joking? "I need you to come to the station with me. You can either come willingly..." Then she'd leave the cuffs off, at least for the time being. "Or I can take you in the same way I do other paranormal suspects." She had a little more freedom than the sheriffs who only patrolled human counties and captured mortal criminals.

When the monsters you hunted could kill with claws and fangs, new rules had to be made.

The blood had drawn out a werewolf, but, even though the smell was like pure ambrosia to a vampire, she knew none of the undead would be coming to join their little party. Everyone knew vamps and sunlight didn't mix.

She'd get to them, though, soon enough.

Julian glanced toward her patrol car. "You don't want to make a mistake here, Sheriff."

Oh, wait, she wasn't "baby" anymore? If the big wolf wasn't careful, he'd hurt her feelings. "I know claw marks when I see them," she told him, still holding tight to her cuffs. "As far as I know, there's only one wolf pack in Mississippi." Nothing happened in that pack without his approval. *Nothing*.

His gaze, bright blue, came back to her.

"Now, *Alpha*," if he was gonna be all formal, then she could be, too. "Will you play nice and get in the car, or do I have to cuff you?"

Sirens wailed in the distance. Had to be her back-up racing toward them. The deputies always responded quickly when it was a supernatural call. Humans had to stick together.

"When have I ever played nice?" Julian growled the words.

Right. Of course, the guy wouldn't make this easy.

She locked one cuff around his wrist. There was a slight sizzle as the silver burned his flesh. His gaze held hers. "You don't want me as an enemy," he warned.

She reached for his right hand. She wouldn't put the cuffs behind him. Ava figured she owed him that much. "Sometimes it doesn't matter what we want." Since that night they'd shared, she'd learned that bitter lesson. Her hand curled around his wrist. Staring into his eyes, she snapped the other cuff onto his wrist. "Alpha Julian Kasey," she'd do the legal bit to make sure she covered her ass, "you're a paranormal person of interest in a murder and, as such, you're now in supervised custody."

His lips curled in a very slow, wicked smile. A smile that showed the sharp edge of his canines. "Later, when you look back, this is the moment you'll regret."

Maybe.

But... "Right now, looking back," she shouldn't say this, she *shouldn't*, but the words and anger couldn't be held back, "the moment I regret was hooking up with you at that godforsaken bar."

The faint lines around his eyes tightened.

"And if I find out that you're behind these killings..." She shook her head. "Then what happened between us won't matter at all. I'll still lock you up." She had a job to do. People who counted on her. A hard case of lust and need for a dangerous werewolf couldn't distract her.

Not when human lives were on the line.

* * * * *

She'd put him in the backseat, behind the cage barrier that was supposed to keep suspects held captive. Julian narrowed his eyes as he stared at the back of Ava's blond head. She was driving the small patrol car, looking straight ahead, and ignoring him as he curled his fingers along the metal frame.

He barely felt the sting of silver on his wrists. Julian was too aware of the fire of fury in his gut.

She was actually taking him in? Ava thought he'd been the one to slaughter that ass of a human? Tempting, but no.

"I know he was out there to interview you." Her voice came, slow and sweet, gently rolling on the waves of the South that he'd learned to like. "That dead guy was Kyle Powell, the newest hire at the *Jackson Sentinel*."

Yeah, Kyle had been a prick who was looking to make a name for himself by trashing the wolves. "I didn't talk to him."

Her shoulders stiffened. "So you admit seeing him?"

"I saw him. The guy came to my place." When the wind was right, wolves could smell humans from miles away. "I also kicked his ass out because I didn't want another story on how savage and animalistic my pack is."

There was a beat of silence in the car. A beat that lasted too long. "Well," she said finally, "you can turn into animals."

Claws burst from his fingertips. Unlike other wolves, he could control the shift. Let just a bit of the beast out when he wanted to play. "And here I thought you liked my wild side."

He heard the sharp inhalation of her breath. Wolf senses were damn enhanced. So enhanced that it was ridiculously easy for him to catch her muttered, "Jerk."

If he hadn't been so pissed, he would have smiled. "My pack is being set-up."

"Three dead bodies." Ava's fingers tapped on the wheel as her gaze darted to the rearview mirror. "Three bodies, and all the vics had their throats ripped open. All were found on your land."

"It's a set-up."

Her fingers stopped tapping. "I know claw marks when I see them," she said once again.

He thought of the raised scars that he'd kissed on her stomach. Yeah, Ava knew all about the marks that wolves could leave behind. "Then we've got a new wolf in town. Some asshole who's trying to cause trouble for me and my pack. We didn't do this."

"You'd smell a new wolf the instant he stepped foot in Crossroads."

Yeah, he would.

"The humans are panicking. It's all I can do to keep them from launching after you."

Like humans could hurt him.

The patrol car slid into a curve, nice and easy. Ava was taking her time. And her scent—sweet vanilla—was driving him crazy.

"I didn't kill the guy," he said again as he sucked in a deep breath and tasted her. He'd prove his innocence, one way or another, and then... *I'll have her again*. "Now it's my turn for questions."

Her gaze darted to the rearview mirror once more. Just for an instant of time. They cleared the curve. She accelerated, driving down the long, lonely stretch of road that led back to the human-occupied portion of Crossroads.

"What questions do you have?" Suspicion underscored her words.

He let his claws scrape over the cage. “Really just one question.” He inhaled more vanilla. “Why the hell did you just screw me and walk away?” *I wanted more. Not just a taste.*

“Julian—”

A black pick-up truck slammed into the side of the patrol car.

“*Ava!*” Her name was ripped from him as the car tumbled through the air. Metal screamed. Glass crunched.

The scent of blood—*her blood*—filled his nose.

“*Ava!*”

Chapter 2

The car trapped him. Twisted metal bit into his flesh and shards of glass covered Julian’s clothing.

The patrol car had stopped rolling. Finally. They’d made it all the way down the sloping hill that led to Myer’s Swamp. Now, if they didn’t get their asses out of there soon, they’d have to worry about the scent of blood drawing in the predators that waited in the swamp.

“Ava?” He shoved away the remains of the cage that had once separated them and kicked free of the metal. “Baby, answer me.”

But she wasn’t answering. He touched her shoulder, and her head sagged forward. Blood dripped from her forehead, and she barely seemed to breathe.

No.

He yanked apart the cuffs in a heartbeat—even Ava had never understood how strong he was—and his hands ran quickly over her body. No broken bones, just that gash that was bleeding like a bitch. His fingers brushed over her cheek. “It’s gonna be okay,” he told her softly. “I’ll get you—”

A door slammed.

“Think she’s dead?” The voice came to him, an excited whisper, and Julian finally stopped focusing on the scent of her blood long enough to realize that he didn’t need to worry about the four-legged predators waiting in Myer’s Swamp.

Humans were closing in on them. He inhaled deeply, trying to catch their scents. Once he had the scent, he’d have *them*. But... there was no scent.

None at all. The bastards were using blockers—special chemicals Uncle Sam had made for hunting paranormals. Chemicals that damn well weren’t supposed to be in the hands of anyone but licensed government officials.

“If she ain’t,” another man said, his voice heavier with a rough drawl, “she will be by the time we’re done with her.”

Oh, the hell, *no*.

Julian glanced around quickly. The passenger side door had been all but ripped away. They could get out that way. Fast and—

“J-Julian?” Ava’s voice. Dazed. Lost. “What—”

He put his finger to her lips. “Trust me.”

She blinked, then nodded.

Well, well...

“Company’s coming,” Julian said as he kept his voice whisper quiet. He didn’t know what kind of weapons those bastards were packing, so he couldn’t take a chance on fighting them. Not now.

Not with Ava hurt.

He pulled her against him and eased from the car. She stumbled when he tried to guide her toward the thick, sloping trees near the edge of the swamp, so Julian just bent and lifted her into his arms.

They’d almost made it to the shelter of those trees—*almost*—when the first gunshot rang out.

The hard crack of thunder was followed immediately by the blast of pain in his shoulder.

Sonofa—

Another shot. This one missed. Julian rushed forward and sank into the shelter of the trees. The instant he freed Ava, she scrambled away from him and drew her gun. “Shift!” She told him, voice tight. “*Shift, Julian!*”

He blinked. She was bloody, pale, and—

“Drop your weapons!” Ava screamed her words at the shooters. “I’m Sheriff—”

They fired again.

So did she. A fast succession of bullets erupted from her gun. She didn’t even spare him a glance as she ordered once more, “Shift, Julian! You know you have to heal, so... *shift.*”

He didn’t normally shift around humans. They tended to freak at the transformation, but when a man had a bullet digging into his shoulder...

Julian dropped to the ground. The wolf within was clawing to get free. Furious, maddened, it wanted to attack. To kill.

To rip out the throats of the men who’d come after Ava.

Fur burst from his flesh. His claws dug into the earth as his bones stretched and his body reshaped. The shift shoved the bullet out of his body, and it fell to the ground. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. The smell of blood teased his nostrils and—

The wolf broke free. The broken silver cuffs hit the dirt as they slipped fully from him.

A growl built in his throat.

“I think... they’re gone,” Ava managed.

They were. Even as he’d shifted, Julian had heard the bastards’ retreating footsteps, and the snarl of a truck’s engine.

She turned toward him. Julian saw her eyes widen. There was no fear in her green gaze. Ava had never been afraid of his wolf. As far as he knew, the woman had never been afraid of anything.

Or anyone.

He stalked toward her. She swiped at her forehead, trying to wipe away the blood.

“Is this the part where I say... My, Julian, what very big teeth you have...?”

The fire of the shift swept over him once more. Faster now, because the transformation back to man was always easier. In mere seconds, he was a man again. Naked, he strode toward her.

The gun was still in her hand. He ignored it and trapped her against the tree. “They were here to kill you.”

No one else had eyes like hers. So deep. So green. So beautiful.

“Doubtful,” she told him, “it’s more likely they were after you. I told you before, the humans in Crossroads are—”

“They were coming to kill *you*.” Screw it. He’d had enough. Enough pretending. Enough playing by the rules that he hated.

Humans had just tried to kill her. Tried to actually take her away from him.

No one was ever gonna take Ava Dushaine from him.

No one.

His mouth crashed down onto hers. He should have been easier. Should have used some gentleness, but werewolves didn’t exactly know much about tenderness.

The only things he knew... she’d taught him.

Her lips were parted, and his tongue pushed inside her mouth. He tasted her, and her kiss was better than he remembered. No dream to haunt him, she was real now.

Her body pressed against his, her lush lips opened to his, and Julian realized how truly dangerous Ava was.

Not just a human. To him, she was so much more.

A woman he’d gladly kill to protect.

He held the kiss. Savored her. Didn’t let her go, not yet. He couldn’t. So he took and he tasted and he knew that, later, he’d have more of her.

Ava’s mistake had been letting him get close that first time, at old Billy’s bar on the edge of Crossroads. You couldn’t offer a wolf a taste of heaven and then just walk away and expect him to go back to living in hell.

Didn’t work that way.

Not even in Crossroads.

Slowly, Julian lifted his head. Ava’s breath sighed out softly as her thick lashes rose. He didn’t speak at first. Just stared at her.

Even bleeding, hurt, with her blond hair tangled around her, she was still the prettiest thing he’d ever seen.

Heart-shaped face, wide eyes, lips made for—

“We’ve got fools trying to kill us,” she said, then cleared her throat. “Right now, we need to focus on—”

“I’m not going to lose you.” The words were pulled from him.

Her bottom lip trembled, a crack in the strong mask that she presented to the world, but, in the next second, she was lifting her chin. “Of course, you’re not. I’ll hunt these jerks after me, and I’ll—”

“When *I* find them,” he said, voice flat, “they’re dead.”

* * * * *

Being prey hadn’t exactly been on Ava’s agenda for the week. But, since some jerkoffs had run her off the road and followed up their attack with a blast of gunfire, she knew that the game had changed for her.

And if she didn’t find the killers out there—and it was killers, two of them... according to Julian—then hell would *really* be coming to Crossroads.

The darkness skated slowly across the sky as the sun set in a blaze of red. Chill bumps rose on Ava's arms as she strode across the clearing and headed for the vampire stronghold.

With each step she took, Ava was aware of the hulking shadow beside her, a shadow that was literally her personal bodyguard.

Since the attack, Julian hadn't left her side. If anyone came too close to her, the wolf started to growl.

Seeing as how she was supposed to be long arm of the law in the town—the strong arm—having a big wolf as her guard dog was a bit... ah...

"They're gonna smell your blood." Julian reached for her hand and pulled her to a stop. "You shouldn't have come out here. You don't need to do—"

"My job?" Ava asked as she lifted a brow. Yes, the vamps would smell her blood. Thanks to the car wreck, she had scratches all over her. But if the fanged folks couldn't keep their teeth off her, she'd fry them with some holy water.

She never left home without her handy supply. Some girls carried pepper spray. Ava liked to stay stocked with holy water.

As they approached the thick gates at the edge of the vampires' property, Ava realized that the place was quiet.

Too quiet.

She pulled out her gun—and her holy water.

"They're not here." Julian's quiet but certain voice.

She used her elbow to push against the metal gate. It slid open easily. "They're not here, and they left the place unlocked?" Ava shook her head. "I've never met a trusting vamp in my life. Usually, those guys triple check the locks." Because they were always worried about the little matter of getting staked in their sleep.

Together, they entered the courtyard. Ava didn't drop her gun or her holy water as she scanned the scene. No sign of the vamps, and at least half a dozen of the undead were stationed there.

Either they'd all gone out to play or...

Her nostrils flared. "That's ash I smell, isn't it." Not a question.

But Julian nodded.

Her eyes closed for an instant. "Can you tell... was it a regular fire or—"

"I smell vampire."

There were three main ways to kill vampires. Stake them. Behead them. Or—
Burn them.

Her eyes opened. She could see light pieces of ash drifting in the breeze. Ava swallowed. *Keep the shield up. Don't let anyone see past the mask.*

That had been her mantra for years. Ever since she'd come face to face with the first real monster she'd ever met—her high school boyfriend.

He'd been a shifter with a serious psychotic side. A side she'd only found out about when she tried to walk away from him.

Her shoulders straightened. "I have to search all the rooms." But she knew, dammit, she *knew* that she wouldn't find any vamps there tonight. Someone had beaten her to the vampire lair.

And that same someone had torched all the vamps in the area, leaving only ash to float in the breeze and to coat the ground.

Some days, her job just sucked.

Chapter 3

For a Friday night, Billy's Backroad Bar was way too empty. Usually, the place was packed with dancing and drinking humans. Not tonight.

Tonight, Ava waltzed right in—no line, no wait—and stepped toward the bar top.

Billy turned toward her, the light glinting off the top of his bald head. "Something I can do for you, Sheriff?"

Ah, same old Billy. Trying to look innocent when the guy had probably never experienced a single innocent day in his forty years. Billy was too wise on the supernatural score in this town. Ava knew all about the private parties he threw for the wolves and vamps. Sly Billy knew just how to find the right humans who would... cater... to the darker needs of the supernaturals.

"A few nights ago," she said, sliding out a picture of Kyle Powell. "This reporter came to see you."

Billy didn't glance at the picture. He just continued drying the glass in his hand. "You know the blood moon's coming."

She slapped her hand on the counter. "*Look at him.*"

He looked.

"Kyle Powell had his throat ripped out. His body was tossed aside like garbage." Ava leaned across the bar. "Tell me why he came to you."

He glanced back up at her, his light blue eyes seeming to freeze her. "I just did, Sheriff."

The blood moon. Her eyes narrowed. "That's only a story."

"Is it? Then why has half the town already left? And why will every other human be out of here by dawn tomorrow?"

Tomorrow... Halloween. "Because they're letting a bunch of crazy old legends scare them. The blood moon is bullshit." She picked up the picture of Kyle. "Right now, I want to know about him. He's real—real dead."

Billy put down the glass. "It's not bullshit." Now the guy actually sounded offended. "That moon is gonna bleed tomorrow night, and when it does, the wolves and the vamps—"

What vamps? As far as she could tell, they were all ash.

"They can take over then," Billy told her. "New werewolves can be created. The vamps can feast until no humans stand. They have the power." Billy gave a low whistle. "It's gonna be so beautiful."

Billy had never been exactly sane. Not exactly insane, either. "You told Kyle about your blood moon ideas, didn't you?" *The only time to make new werewolves.* Most shifters were actually born with werewolf blood. They just... *became* the beasts as they grew older. But some stories, some old whispers, said that a new werewolf could be created under the power of a blood-red moon on Halloween.

"He already knew. Dang fool... he thought the wolves would just gift him with their bite and its magic."

Ava stilled. Okay, now she was getting somewhere with Billy. The floor squeaked behind her, and she looked back to see that Deputy Billings had followed her

inside. So much for Ken keeping watch in the parking lot. She turned back to Billy and lowered her voice, "That's why the reporter went to see Julian? Because he wanted the bite?"

Billy leaned toward her. "That alpha won't be biting no one, though, will he?" His gaze trekked over her face. "Except for... you."

She jerked back.

Billy laughed. "Alpha's got plans. We all know it."

Ava shoved the picture into her pocket. "Julian doesn't have any plans. He and his pack aren't going to hurt anyone." She spun back toward the deputy. "Ken, we're done here, let's—"

"He'd hurt anyone who came after you." Billy's quiet voice froze her.

Ken frowned. "What's he—"

"You're wrong." She spoke the words without looking back. "The alpha and I have no—"

"He marked you that first night. Alpha's just been biding his time since then. Every supernatural can see the truth."

What?

Now she looked back. Was this just more crazy bullshit? But...Billy's eyes were shining. No, glowing, and she knew that her instincts about the bartender had been right all along. Billy wasn't just a normal human. Far from it. She just wasn't sure exactly *what* he was.

Then some of the puzzle pieces clicked for her. "You're the one who started all the talk about Halloween. About how hell would be coming to Crossroads." Gossip that said blood would fill the streets and every man and woman would start howling at the red moon.

Hello, Halloween. Hello, hell.

"I just warned folks." The glow faded from his eyes. "Now those that are left...well, whatever happens, they chose it."

Hardly no one was left. Her. Emergency personnel. The wolves.

And vampires? Not that she could find. "Your stories have made some assholes go crazy. They've killed humans. They torched the vampire houses, they—"

"Wolves and vampires never get along." Billy picked up the glass. Began drying it again. "They like to battle under the moon."

Her eyes narrowed. "Just where are you planning to be tomorrow night, Billy?"

"I'll have me a good seat, Sheriff. Up close, so I can see all the action."

Just great. Ava glanced back at Ken. His mouth gaped open, and he stared at Billy like the guy had two heads. Maybe he did. That news wouldn't really surprise her then. She hurried forward and grabbed Ken's arm. "Come on, we've got work to do."

Ava pushed him outside. The deputy didn't even wait until they'd cleared the door before he started asking, "I—is it true? Tomorrow, are them wolves really goin' to—"

"The wolves aren't going to do anything." No cars drove on the road. The streetlights glinted off the black pavement. "I want you to get back to the station and help Charlie man the base for the rest of the night."

"But what about—"

Her hand lifted to rest on the butt of her gun. “I want to finish questioning Billy.” Without the avid eyes and ears of the deputy. The kid wasn’t ready for the details that would be coming. She also didn’t want him learning any more about her and the alpha. *Billy knows too much.* Ava exhaled. “After I finish questioning him, I’ve got patrols to do.” Patrols in an empty city. “You hear about any trouble, you let me know ASAP, got it?”

Ken’s Adam’s Apple bobbed, but he nodded.

Ava watched the guy drive away. A little too fast, but she knew adrenaline had to be spiking his blood. Too fast, too eager—that was the story of that Ken’s life. But, luckily, he didn’t have far to go before reaching the station with his over-eager driving. A few miles.

Her newest recruit was in over his head, and she wanted to make sure that he—and everyone else under her guard—survived whatever Halloween horror was coming.

She headed toward her vehicle, another patrol car. Just as a precaution, she wanted a back-up. A girl could never have too many guns. Her hand lifted and started to open the car door, but Goosebumps rose on her arms. A quick shiver of awareness that told Ava she wasn’t alone.

Then Julian’s image appeared in the glass of the driver’s side window. He stalked forward, coming up quickly behind her.

This time, Ava didn’t draw her gun as she turned to confront him. Julian’s face was hard, tense, and she could see the edge of his sharpening canines.

He marked you that first night.

The side of her neck seemed to burn. That night, that wild night when she’d lost control and lust had reigned, Julian had bit her on the neck. A light nip. Nearly forgotten once the heat of the moment had passed.

He hadn’t even broken the skin. Just given her a small love bite.

Right?

Every supernatural can see the truth.

“What have you done?” Ava whispered.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone.” Anger hummed in his words. “After what happened to you before—”

“I’m not alone, am I? I’ve got the wolf alpha shadowing me.”

His gaze swept the dark streets. “Do you have a death wish?”

No, she didn’t, but she did want answers. “Tell me about the blood moon.” Maybe it wasn’t such bullshit after all. She’d asked her superiors about it when she first heard the stories, but as far as the government was concerned... there was *no* way for humans to become werewolves. Werewolves were born, a whole different race. Humans simply couldn’t become—

His hands wrapped around her waist, and he lifted her up against him. “You should know better than to ask such a dangerous question,” he whispered near her lips as his hands tightened on her, “out in public.”

“No one’s here.” She wasn’t afraid. Not of him or the answer that her gut was telling her would come. “Folks in this town went running scared. They won’t be back until the blood moon is gone.”

Or until the monsters were. But the vamps had vanished already, and that just left...

“Humans always fear what they don’t understand.” His eyes glittered in the darkness. “Why?”

She pushed her hands between them. Felt the hot, hard strength of his chest beneath her touch. “Because they don’t have the power to match the supernaturals.” A human was sure no match for a werewolf. Not in hand-to-claw combat.

“When they know our weakness...” His lips feathered over her cheek, and Ava fought to hold herself perfectly still. “They’re more than a match for us.”

“Silver is—”

“Not talking about silver.” His head lifted. “Some things burn even deeper than that.”

Her neck still seemed to burn. “What did you do?” she asked again.

His lips parted to answer, but in the next instant, Julian’s head jerked up. He glanced toward the bar, and she saw his nostrils flare.

Then he threw her back. Ava slammed into the pavement, stunned, breath lost as—

Julian’s body crashed down on top of hers. He covered her, holding her down as she fought against him. *No match in hand-to-claw combat.*

An explosion shook the night. A ball of flames lit up the sky and the heat of the blaze seemed to lance her skin. Debris from the blazing bar shot into the air and then struck the ground around them.

Billy.

The heat stole her breath for an instant. Heat, fury.

Julian slowly lifted his body from hers. “Are you hurt?”

The fire blazed behind him. Glass covered the ground. The windows had broken, busted, from the force of the fire.

She shoved away from Julian and ran for the building. “*Billy!*” He’d been the only one inside. He—

Julian grabbed her and yanked her back against him. “He’s dead.”

No, no, she had to go in and find him. It was her job to protect—

“He’s *dead*, baby. There’s nothing you can do for him now.”

She knew... looking at that blaze... *she knew*. The building was a hollow shell. The flames eating everything in sight.

In the distance, sirens blared. Like the deputies, the firefighters had stayed in town. They hadn’t been run off. Yet.

Someone had to stay around to pick up the pieces.

Only... it looked like there weren’t gonna be any pieces of Billy left to pick up.

“I heard it when he died,” Julian told her, and her head bowed.

I’m sorry, Billy.

“He’s gone, and if you go into those flames, you’ll just burn, too.”

Ava blinked away the tears in her eyes, tears that weren’t just caused by the flames. She grabbed Julian’s arm as the rage flared hotter inside her. *Too many dead bodies.* “Tell me you got the bastard’s scent.” He must have caught a whiff of—

He stared at her a moment, then nodded. Very, very slowly.

Ava pulled her gun from the holster on her hip. “Then let’s chase that asshole down.”

A fast smile, one that showed off Julian's strong, white teeth, was his response. Then they were running through the streets. Twisting, turning, as Julian tracked the killer. As they hunted, he shifted, and soon a wolf was at her side.

Ava's breath heaved in her chest, but she ran with him as her legs pumped. Faster, faster.

The killer wasn't getting away from her. This hell would end... before Halloween.

Chapter 4

Julian followed the mixed scent. Gasoline. Sweat. Fear. He tracked that stench all the way through Crossroads... and back to the sheriff's station.

"What?" Ava's voice, out of breath as she paused beside him. "Why are we stopping here?"

The wolf growled even as the man within seethed with rage. Ava didn't understand—she was caught in a deadly game that wouldn't end well for her. Couldn't. Too many wanted power. Too many wanted blood.

She couldn't even trust her own men.

Ava began to stride forward, toward the warm lights that glowed in the station. Julian turned and shoved his body against her.

No way.

She tried to walk around him. A snarl broke from him, and Ava stilled.

He saw the understanding on her face even as she shook her head and said, "No. You're wrong, they're not—"

The shift swept back over him. Brutal. Fast. The wolf left him with a wrenching burst of pain, and the man rose to stand before her. His hands curled around her arms, and he pulled her close. Since he was naked after the shift, her being close felt good. Better than good. Later. "They knew you were at the bar, didn't they?"

She licked her lips. "Ken, he knew. He was with me just before—" She broke off and shook her head. "This is crazy. Those are my men, okay?"

"And they weren't as careful as they should have been. Not this time." He pushed her back into the shadows. "The jerks who ran us off the road were smart enough to use a scent blocker, but tonight, hell, I guess they figured I was far enough away that I wouldn't even realize what was happening in town."

But he hadn't been able to stay away. Not when he knew that Ava was in danger. So he'd watched her. Stalked unnoticed through the shadows to make sure that she was safe.

And she'd nearly died.

If she'd been closer to that building... If he hadn't covered her with his body...

The fire had torn the flesh from his back. He hadn't let Ava see the damage. No point. He'd sucked up the pain, and gotten her clear of those flames. The shift had healed him, for the most part.

If the fire had gotten to her, Ava wouldn't have been so lucky.

Two times. That made two damn times that someone had tried to kill her. Those assholes wouldn't get a third shot at her.

“They set you up to die. They thought you were defenseless. Alone. And they just waited for you to burn.”

Her eyes were so big. So... lost. “Those are my men. My team.”

She had traitors on her team.

“Cops and deputies have access to the blocking chemical, don’t they?” He knew they did. A special spray could cover them, for a little while.

And a little while would be all the time they needed.

She nodded.

“Deputies could also cross right into vampire territory without raising suspicion.” Cross in... and burn those undead bastards with a fire just like the one that had taken out the bar tonight. A fire—a bomb.

Ava glanced back at her station.

“You haven’t reported in.” This was the delicate part. He narrowed his eyes and willed her to just *trust him*. “As far as those guys in there know, you didn’t make it out of that fire. You’re dead.”

Her breath rasped out. “And you want me to stay that way?”

Her death was the last thing he wanted. “I want you to stay with me. I want you to stay alive, until we can take these guys down.”

With the power of the blood moon coming, his pack could take out anyone dumb enough to get in their way.

But her gaze was returning to the station. “You’re *sure* the scent goes back...”

Just then, the station door burst open. Two deputies ran out. He recognized them both instantly—the young guy, Ken Billings was shadowed by Tom McGee, a guy who’d been patrolling since before Ava ever signed on board.

They both froze when they caught sight of Ava and Julian. But after that shocked second, McGee reached for his gun.

As McGee’s finger tightened around the trigger, Julian shoved Ava to the side, making sure that bullet didn’t hit her. But more footsteps pounded out of that station. More bullets began to rain down on them, and he knew he had to get her out of there.

Julian grabbed Ava, kept right on dodging those bullets, and fled back through the night. The deputies would follow—*let ‘em*. He’d get Ava to a safety, and then he’d rip those traitors apart.

* * * * *

Ava paced the confines of the bedroom—Julian’s bedroom—and wondered how she could have been so blind. She’d worked with those men. Day in and day out. And never once realized that they were gunning for her.

The door squeaked behind her. Ava turned around to find Julian standing in the doorway. He’d brought her to wolf land, taken her into his house and into his pack. Protection, for now. The deputies would come, they’d keep hunting, but she and Julian would be ready for them.

Come and get us, assholes.

Julian had put on jeans, a pair of old, faded jeans that clung loosely to his hips. His stride was slow, stalking, as he headed for her.

“Wolves are stationed at all the entrances to the property. If those humans so much as *think* about coming on my land tonight, they’ll find a war waiting.”

She didn't doubt it.

He kept closing in on her. "You'll be safe here."

Ah, now Ava knew he was lying. She'd never been safe with Julian. That was the problem. "Tell me about the mark."

That didn't stop him. A few more seconds, and he stood before her. His hand lifted, and his fingertips trailed over her neck. Right over the skin that still seemed to burn from a bite mark she'd never been able to see. "What mark?" His voice had deepened, and Ava recognized lust when she heard it.

The lust had always been there between them. Flaring between them, demanding release. She'd given in once, then realized too late just how high the price was for the pleasure that Julian could give to her.

The price was her heart. Her life.

He bent and his lips feathered over her throat. Her pulse raced faster beneath his mouth. Faster still, when his tongue slid over her skin.

Her eyes wanted to close, and she had to hold back the moan that rose in her throat. Ava's hands lifted and curled around Julian's broad shoulders. Not to push him away, but she should have. *She should have.*

"You're like me." That same dark voice whispered from him as his hand slid down the front of her shirt. Eased right down between her breasts. "You've got the same wildness inside, begging to be set free."

That wildness had driven her away from home when she was eighteen. It had driven her to work for the government. To grow addicted to the adrenaline rush that came from the jobs they gave her. Hunting. Fighting.

Even killing.

You're like me.

His truth scared her.

Julian's fingers, warm, rough, slid under her shirt, and caressed her flesh. "Why did you run from me?" Those hands kept caressing, sliding down ever lower.

"You knew I couldn't..." In a flash, he'd undone the snap of her pants. *Shifters move so fast.* She swallowed and said, "You knew we couldn't keep seeing each other. Not with me being the one who—"

"Kept the paranormals on their leashes?" Now his voice roughened. "You realized what I was from the first moment, and that didn't stop you from screwing me."

No, it hadn't. Her fingers curled around his wrist and stilled his hand. She'd known he was angry with her. Most guys probably would have been happy with a night of no-strings sex.

Julian was far from most guys.

"That night..." She drew in a breath. Confession time. "I thought I was just in Crossroads to train the local officers. A few weeks, then I'd walk away." So she'd let down her guard—*just once*—and she'd taken what she wanted.

His eyes, so bright and swirling with emotion, held hers.

"I got the call at 5 a.m. that morning. My boss had new orders. They wanted me to start running things because they were worried the paranormals weren't being treated fairly down here." Looked like they'd been spot-on with their worries. The deputies had just been biding their time, waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

A moment right before the blood moon.

“When I agreed to become sheriff, I knew I couldn’t stay with you.” Talk about conflict of interest. How was she supposed to mediate between the wolves and vampires if she was sleeping with the werewolf alpha? Ava forced her gaze to hold his. “So I walked away.”

His eyes seemed to harden. “You didn’t walk. You ran—because you were scared of me.”

“No, I—”

He kissed her. Not easy. Not soft. Werewolves didn’t mate that way. The kiss was as wild as he was. Hungry. Hot. Lips met. Tongues touched, and the need that was always between them ignited.

There was no reason to hold back any longer. Her allegiance—there was no allegiance any longer. Her deputies wanted her dead. The vampires—they were all gone to ash.

There was only Julian. Only the hunger. The need.

For just a few moments, she wanted to forget the death that stalked her in Crossroads. She wanted him.

Pleasure. Life.

They moved in a blur of limbs, stripping, backing toward the bed. In seconds, they were flesh to flesh. Bodies eager. The back of her knees hit the mattress, and Ava slipped onto his bed. Julian came down on top of her. She reached for him, and her nails scored his flesh.

Wolves enjoyed a little roughness. Good. So did she.

His touch was hard, so hungry, and he had her gasping as she rose to meet him. He licked her breasts, sucked her nipples, even as his fingers slipped between her legs.

Julian knew exactly how to touch her. Only one night, but he knew. The first orgasm hit her, caught her totally off-guard, and she could only choke out his name. It was a fast pop of pleasure, a taste of what would come.

His fingers thrust into her. Her hips arched because she wanted so much more.

Everything.

And she’d have it.

Her legs parted more for him even as she arched up and kissed his chest. Such a strong chest. Rippling with muscles and power.

“Ava.”

He positioned his hips between her spread thighs. His gaze glittered, a combination of man and beast staring back at her from those bright blue eyes. His hands rose, gripped hers, and held on as he thrust.

He filled her in one drive, and it was even better than she remembered. The bed squeaked beneath them. The rhythm became faster. Even harder.

Her legs wrapped around him. His lips took hers as he thrust. So good. She could only feel then, no more thinking. Feel him. Power. Man. Pleasure.

He kissed her cheek. Licked the curve of her ear. His mouth moved down her neck, hitting all the sweet spots that made her moan and twist beneath him.

His thrusts sent tremors of pleasure spiking through her. Ava’s release was so close. Just out of reach.

“No running this time...” His teeth raked over her throat. Not a bite, just a rough rasp that felt—

“Not one night.” Anger whispered in his words, but his thrusts never slowed. “Forever.”

He bit her as the climax poured over her, burning through her, consuming her.

And Julian was with her. His body tensed, then shuddered against her, and she held him as tight as she could... almost as fiercely as he held her.

She fought to catch her breath as the pleasure slowly faded. The thunder of Ava’s heartbeat filled her ears. So fast and desperate. Julian rose above her, his eyes too bright in the darkness.

“There’ll be no running away this time.” His voice was deep, an animal’s rumble.

“I’m not planning on running.” Her voice came out husky. “Not from you, not from those jerks out there.”

He was still in her. Getting stronger, harder, by the second.

“I want forever.”

His words made her breath lodge in her throat. Forever...with a werewolf. That could be a very long, long time. Werewolves, unless they were put down by silver, could live hundreds of years.

His hand slid down her throat. “But I’ll start with right now.”

The breath she’d held slipped from her lips. Now sounded good. Better than good.

Even though now was a blood-soaked moment in time. Killers after them, betrayed by her own unit...

“I watched you for all these months. I waited for you to come back to me.”

Now the words that he spoke held a ragged edge, and they made her ache. She’d watched him, too. Waited, wished for a different life. A different end, for them.

“I’m not going to let anyone take you away from me now.”

She wasn’t about to let those traitors take her out. Not now, not when she’d just realized...

A werewolf might just hold her heart in his claw-tipped hands.

Chapter 5

It was the screams that woke her on the morning of Halloween. No, not screams. Sirens—coming closer.

Sirens—and the thunder of gunfire.

Ava’s eyes flew open.

They were coming.

She shoved up in the bed and realized that Julian wasn’t with her. The spot beside her was cold to the touch. Just how long had the wolf been gone?

With his hearing, he would have heard those cars coming from far away, even without the snarl of those sirens. So why the hell hadn’t he woken her up?

Ava grabbed her clothes and dressed as quickly as she could. She sprang for the door—

Locked.

Blinking, she twisted the knob. Nothing. She pounded against the door. “Julian! Dammit, Julian, open the door!”

No response.

She ran to the window. Shoved aside the curtains. Second floor. No nice cushion below for her. If she hit the ground wrong, she'd break a leg. At the very least.

Damn him.

Did he really think he was going to leave her behind when the danger came? She wasn't that kind of girl.

Her gun was on the nightstand. She grabbed it. Checked her clip. Locked and loaded. This wasn't a fight that Ava planned to sit out. It was *her* battle, her town and—

And cars were screeching to a stop outside. Crap. If she jumped out that window now, she'd make a perfect freaking target as she fell.

So Ava crouched low and made sure no one had a body to aim at as she risked a glimpse out that window.

"Sheriff!" It was Ken's desperate yell. Two patrol cars were out there. Only two? Where were the rest of them? "Sheriff, we're here to help you!" he shouted.

Uh, help her? How? By giving her a fast pass to a fiery hell?

"The wolves are gone. We lured them away."

Her fingers tightened around the gun.

"Come out, Sheriff, it's safe now!" Ken sounded desperate. "That bastard alpha is gonna kill you if you don't escape now!"

She risked another glance out the window. Ken's face was white. His gun trembled in his hand, and the deputies behind him were glancing back over their shoulders. She could practically smell their fear.

They should be afraid. They'd come into wolf territory, and they might not get out alive.

"They set the fire at the bar! They wanted you to burn."

No, Julian had saved her then. Without him, she would have died.

"That alpha... Sheriff, he's been following you for months. We got a tip from one of his men—he's planning to make you like them! The alpha's gonna force the change on you as soon as the blood moon rises." Fear thickened Ken's voice. "Please, I know you're up there... *come with us.*"

Ava didn't move. *Where are you, Julian?* Her position was good. The deputies didn't have a solid shot at her as long as she stayed down. "Is there a reason," she called out, keeping her voice flat and holding all the emotion back with an iron chain, "why you and the boys tried to kill me back at the station?"

"*Not you!*" Was Ken's immediate denial. "Him! Julian Kasey! He's gone rogue. He killed the vamps, he killed the reporter, *and* the other humans who were dumb enough to come onto his land."

Dumb... like the deputies were being dumb then? To just race right up to the werewolf compound... like lambs to a slaughter...

"We all know he's... been with you." Ken's voice faded a bit. "The vamps—they could see the mark he left on you. One of 'em told Viki Thomas—"

Viki Thomas... the first victim they'd found slaughtered and staked out right between vampire and werewolf land.

“Word got back to me,” Ken said. Strange, the guy was sounding less afraid and more too-damn-confident. “I knew you wouldn’t believe anything I had to say about the wolves turning bad, not when—”

Not when you were screwing the alpha. Yeah, she could finish the guy’s sentence for him.

“But with the blood moon coming, there was no time to waste! I had to get the others ready to fight.”

The others... the other deputies that Ken must have brought over to his side. The others in town who’d been all too willing to believe that the big, bad wolves were killers who had to be put down.

How many folks from Crossroads were helping him? How many believed this crap he was trying to sell her?

“Come to me!” Ken cried out.

Really? This was the kid who’d vomited at the Powell crime scene? The guy was a good actor, she’d give him that. He must have shoved his finger down his throat at that scene. Must have made himself sick when she hadn’t been looking because Ava would lay odds he’d been involved in that brutal kill.

“I can save you!” he promised her.

Ava laughed. “Funny thing there, Ken... I don’t want to be saved.”

Silence.

Then... gunfire. One shot. Two. Three.

Ava risked another glance just in time to see three of her deputies—Jonathan, Lyle, and Pat—hit the ground. Ken, with his gun still up and aimed, glanced to her window.

“Hope you’re happy,” he snarled at her. “Cause you just blew the whole fuckin’ bit about us being here to rescue you.”

Pat’s arm was trembling. *Still alive.* Oh, jeez, all the deputies hadn’t turned against her. They’d bought into Ken’s lies but—

He brought his arm around and fired up at her.

Ava slammed onto the floor even as glass shattered from the window pane. The glass cut into her, drawing blood, and that just pissed her off.

Ava rolled, knocked off the glass, and brought her own weapon up. She looked down for Ken—

Gone.

In the distance, wolves were howling. Whatever distraction Ken had planned, well, looked like it was over and the cavalry was coming home.

But... coming home to what? Ken was down there, armed, and all her deputies always used silver in their guns.

No.

“*Julian, stay back!*” She screamed. He’d hear her. She knew it. Hear her, but probably still charge right into danger and ignore the warning.

No way. That wolf wasn’t dying on her watch.

She glanced down again. No sign of Ken now. Had he gone into the house? Or was he just waiting for her to climb down?

“H-help...” Pat’s voice. So weak. Full of pain. Blood was pooling beneath him. If he was alive, maybe one of other deputies was, too.

But how long could they last?

“Pl-please...” Pat’s voice.

A trap. She realized that. Ken had just tossed out live bait to pull her in. She could stay in the bedroom, nice and safe, until the wolves arrived or—

Or she could help those dying.

More howls. Coming too close now. Coming fast because the scent of blood would lure in their beasts.

Death was here. The showdown wouldn’t occur with the darkness of Halloween. It had come at dawn, and it bathed them in blood.

“Please... h-help...”

Her duty was to protect. To shield.

“Ken, you bastard,” she sucked in a deep breath, “come at me, and you’re dead.”

And Ava went through the window.

* * * * *

No! Julian saw her jump, saw Ava hit the ground, and even over the thud of racing paws, he heard the snap of her bone break.

But that didn’t slow down his Ava. She staggered to her feet, lifted her weapon, and swept the area.

The scent of blood filled his nose. So fresh. The beast liked that smell, wanted more.

Wanted the throat of the man who’d set this battle into motion.

The wolves had been pulled away. The men on the south side of his property had been attacked. Shot with silver. Left to die. He’d gone to their aid...

Even as Ava now went to the aid of her fallen men. Same lure. Same trick.

The guards he’d left for Ava had all been shot. He passed their bodies. Saw that they lived, but were fighting the silver in their blood. The deputies must have taken them out as they rushed onto the property. *Bastards.*

Ava crouched over a moaning human. She put her hands on the deputy’s chest, and he saw the blood thicken beneath her fingertips.

Julian pushed himself to run faster. *Get to her. Get to—*

The young deputy rose from behind a patrol car. He was smiling—and he had a gun pointed right at the back of Ava’s head.

Julia howled a warning.

She spun around, with her gun up.

A blast of gunfire broke the night. A fast, hard crack that stopped his world.

Because a circle of red bloomed on Ava’s chest. She staggered back. Ken rushed toward her and grabbed her before she could hit the ground.

Then Ken made the last mistake of his life. He put his gun to Ava’s temple.

Chapter 6

The bullet had torn through her chest. Ava couldn’t seem to suck in a full breath, and her whole body trembled.

“Tell your men to stand down!” Ken shouted now as he shoved a gun into her temple. “Or I will blow her brains out.”

Her chest hurt. No, more than hurt. It seemed like it was on fire, and as soon as she could get control of that pain and force some strength into her limbs, she'd kill the bastard.

"If you..." Okay, talking was *very* hard. "If you... kill me... won't get... what you... want..."

The wolves had closed in. At least half a dozen of them. They weren't attacking. The pack stood behind Julian. Julian—the big, black wolf with a body poised to lunge forward.

Ken's gun jabbed harder against her. "You don't know a damn thing about what I want," Ken snapped.

She did. "The... bite..." That's what it was all about. He'd set up the scene. Made the humans doubt the supernaturals. Eliminated the threats against him. Used the other deputies. Used her. All so he could get—

"I want to make a trade," Ken said as he pulled her closer to his body. She'd dropped her gun when the bullet hit her. The only weapon she had was her hands, but she'd sure do as much damage as she could against the guy. "You want her so much, Alpha, will you trade yourself for her?"

"No," Ava managed. Talking was getting even harder, but at least her chest had stopped hurting. Not fire anymore. Ice.

"Because I'm not an idiot," Ken said, grunting. "I did my research. Talked to that reporter. Made the vampires tell me all they knew. Only the alpha can transform a human. Only you can give me what I want."

Power. Strength. Near immortality.

Same story she'd heard before. Same story, different soon-to-be dead guy.

But...but Julian was shifting before her. Brutal, quick, and—

"Let her go." Naked, strong, he stood before them. Only he hadn't shifted completely. His claws were still out. Razor sharp. Ready to slice and kill. "Let her go, or I'll cut your head off before you can even get the breath to scream."

Oh, that was good. Reminded her why she'd gone with him that first night. He'd been tall, strong, and she'd taken one look at him and realized—

The kind of man who never fears. A man who fights. Who wins.

A guy strong enough to face the dark with her.

"No!" Ken's shout. "You're gonna change me, you're gonna give me what I want or—

Ava let her body fall. Not too hard of a feat, since the blood loss had made her weak. She hit the ground and took Ken with her. He screamed and yanked her against him, determined to use her body as a shield from the death he'd probably seen in Julian's eyes.

But her fingers reached her gun. Her hand closed over the weapon, and she wrenched it up. "Go... to... hell, Billings," she managed and pulled the trigger.

This time, the bullet drove deep into *his* chest. The blast threw him back, knocking Ken away from her, and that precious distance was all that Julian needed.

He sprang forward. Ken tried to scream as Julian's claws flashed out.

Too late.

The other wolves closed in tight. Ava tried to push away. She needed to see about Pat, about—

Strong arms reached for her and pulled her up against Julian's chest. He stared down at her, and the sharp emotion in his eyes had her swallowing.

"I told you..." Julian growled, as he bent his head toward her, "I'm not losing you."

She tried to smile. Couldn't. Her body was too weak. Weak, but she still had a death-grip on the gun. *Can't let go.* "Get... get me to a hospital..." Ava promised him, "and you... won't."

Maybe.

The odds were probably fifty-fifty on that one.

Maybe seventy-thirty?

"Death can't take you." He pulled her closer. "I won't let him."

But even her werewolf couldn't stop death.

"Stay with me?" His voice, breaking. Julian never broke. Never.

"Stay?" he asked again.

And she nodded. She wasn't done with her wolf, not yet. Together, *together* they'd tell death to screw off.

His lips pressed against her throat. Darkness rose around her even as she felt the light bite on her skin.

Forever.

* * * * *

Halloween... and Crossroads was a ghost town. Ava drove slowly through the city. No humans around, but, maybe they'd be back.

Maybe.

Four of her deputies were still alive. In the hospital over in Jackson, they were hooked up to a dozen machines. Breathing, and, hopefully, getting stronger.

Ken had played them. Set them up to believe that the wolves were out to get them all. The conniving bastard had slipped his way right under the radar and done his level best to get immortality.

Better luck next time, jerk. Only there wouldn't be a next time for Ken. There would just be hell.

She drove the patrol car past the town and deep into werewolf territory. Above her, the blood moon hung heavy in the sky.

Trick or treat.

As a kid, she'd always loved Halloween. A magic night. A night when anything could happen. Monsters could be real. Magic could whisper in the air.

Anything could happen.

Even a human cheating death.

Her headlights cut through the night and fell on him. Julian stood in the middle of the road, his arms folded over his chest.

Waiting.

She'd known that he waited for her. She'd known since that first night.

Ava climbed from the car. No wound slowed her down. How could it? There was no wound, not anymore.

The stories that Ken had heard about the blood moon, well, they were *mostly* true. Only an alpha could transfer the power of a wolf with a bite. And it could *only* happen on Halloween.

But... the transfer didn't have to occur during the night. As long as the power of the blood moon was in the air, day or night didn't matter.

The sun rose bloody on Halloween morning. As bloody as the moon would set. The power stayed in the air during those long hours.

The power stayed.

The magic stayed.

Gravel crunched beneath her feet as she stalked to meet her wolf. He didn't speak.

That was okay. She had plenty to say.

"You changed me." That was her opening.

His jaw hardened. "If I hadn't, you never would have made it to the hospital."

Yes, she knew that. Those odds she'd calculated while she'd been in a pool of her own blood? Way too optimistic. More like one hundred percent chance of death.

"I... couldn't... let you go." The words seemed torn from him.

But they were also the words she'd known he'd speak. The big, bad alpha had a serious weakness.

Me.

"Lucky for you," Ava said as she closed the last bit of distance between them, "I'm not planning to go anywhere." Someone had to stay in Crossroads and set things right. Someone had to be strong enough to face whatever nightmare came next.

His hands closed around her. Tight. So tight. "You... agreed... you wanted the change."

"Yes." In the end, she had. "Because I wasn't ready to let you go, either." Finally, she'd take what she wanted.

Julian.

She rose onto her toes. The power of the wolf lived inside of her now. She could feel the wildness of the beast, telling her to *take*.

Take her pleasure. Take her man.

Take the happiness that could be hers.

Take all that waited for her this Halloween night. *Take all...*

She kissed him and knew that she'd take everything he had to give.

Ava had never been afraid of the big, bad wolf. She'd been too busy falling for him.

She did love a man with bite.
