

# **Isle of Wolves**

## **We Witches Three, #2**

**by Humphrey Quinn, ...**

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Charlie Howard could not sleep. His brain felt stuck in the *on* position.

Just hours before, he and his family had discovered their father, Jack, was possibly still alive. This, topped with an impending full moon, didn't leave room in his mind for sleep.

He hopped out of bed, slipped off his boxer shorts and turned on his shower. When the water was cool to the touch, he got in and let it spray away his thoughts. For a few minutes his mind cleared, questions and doubts disappearing down the drain.

But it didn't last.

Where was his father? Was he a prisoner somewhere? Had he been held captive these last four years? Was he really still alive as his mother believed?

Would they be able to locate and properly bury their mother's body? They knew where it should be, but accessing it might not be easy.

He found comfort in the fact that his sister, Melinda, showed great signs of improvement, and hoped she would start building a life for herself.

That relief disappeared however, when he remembered the approaching full moon. He still didn't understand why this moon seemed to be affecting him more so than any other. It tugged at his insides as if toying with him. Daring him to transform.

Why? Why after nearly ten years would this moon be so different? He was always tense and easily prone to overreaction during the full moon, but this time, he could practically feel the wolf inside him, moving just under his skin. Like a secret passenger just waiting for its moment to appear. And its moment was this full moon.

He didn't even want to think about Eva Jordan; a woman he'd met only one time, but antagonized his wolf to levels he never knew possible. Dangerous levels. Potentially fatal levels.

Charlie huffed and turned off the shower, the cool water no longer offering any solace. He wasn't going to get any sleep tonight. And the thoughts and questions racing through his mind were not just going to go away.

He dried off, wrapping a towel around his waist, making his way to an open bedroom window. He peered through it, checking the grounds below. From the second story of the Howard Mansion, he could see the entire area behind their home.

Manicured gardens that wrapped around perfectly defined pathways. A six-tree apple orchard that produced the most perfectly crunchy, sweet McIntosh apples; perfect for cider every fall. A small grove of maple trees lined the backside. Charlie himself tapped the trees each spring, enjoying the process of collecting the sap and hauling it to the family sugar shack, boiling it down to a syrupy perfection.

There was greenhouse hidden amongst shrubs and trees of various shapes and sizes, which they used to grow a few of the specialty plants and herbs required to make potions.

And in the center of the yard, surrounded by a maze of moss covered granite, stood a life-size gargoyle. It was supposed to ward off evil; however, it didn't work. More than once, they had been caught unawares by some supernatural creature or another, attacking or approaching them at their home.

A silvery shadow captured his attention. His gaze followed it upward. "There you are," he muttered, peering at the moon. It had materialized from behind a cloud.

*I'll be full tomorrow night,* it warned him silently.

It vanished again, a dark cloud covering its taunting light.

A new movement grabbed Charlie's attention. Something buzzing just outside his bedroom window; a firefly sized golden light, hovering in the air. Except unlike fireflies, the light was continuous, rather than blinking on and off every few seconds.

He grinned coolly. "You always have such perfect timing."

He tossed aside the towel, threw on a tank top, khaki shorts and sandals, suddenly deciding a stroll in the moonlight was exactly what he needed.

He left the house, jogged through his backyard using a pathway that snaked through to the woods at the back, stepping onto a well-beaten path that came out a street close to the beach. He walked down that street about a block and turned right, down a short lane, which ended at a beachfront cottage.

He leapt up the porch stairs pausing by an open window, spying on the woman inside. Her dark skin accentuated the brightness of her white tee shirt even in the dim lighting of her kitchen.

*Nina.*

Her curled hair bounced playfully as she took a swig from a tequila bottle while swaying to an intense track of a metal band. Not his favorite, but if it came attached to *her*, it was music to his ears.

Watching her dance brought a smile to his face. She'd danced her way up to him on a beach a few summers' ago, coming out of the darkness and into his life, like fate. He was half way down his own bottle of tequila that night; it wasn't long after his parents had disappeared, presumed dead. Oddly, he'd never once had a single doubt about Nina. Or her intentions. But look at who she was...

He growled softly. Tonight, she was a non-human woman who could protect herself from his wolfy advances. His bite. Someone to lose all control with without consequence.

For some reason Eva Jordan flitted into his mind. His trust in Nina only reaffirmed his doubts of Eva. Gut instinct. First instinct. Wolf instinct. Witch instinct. It all told him there was something he needed to be cautious of when it came to the white-haired woman who percolated his wolf to a dangerously wicked brew. Just what was it about Eva that made him think this? He had no idea.

And tonight, it did not matter. Charlie narrowed his gaze in on the window and let an enticing growl push through his teeth, which echoed, "*I got your message, Nina.*"

The woman named Nina stopped, disappearing into another room. A moment later, the front door opened; she leaned against it, her eyes expectant as she dangled the bottle of tequila seductively.

They exchanged no words.

Charlie stepped through the door, closing it behind him. He grabbed the tequila bottle with his left hand and the woman's waist with his right. After taking a swig from the bottle he set it down with a thud and smashed the woman against the wall. "Welcome back to The Demon Isle." He whispered the greeting, lips brushing down her neck.

Her reply was a rushed inhale as Charlie's hand left her waist, reached down the back of her thigh, and lifted her, so her face was equal height to his own.

The desire in Nina's eyes pulled Charlie in like a drug he needed a hit of, his chest heaving with strained breaths.

Nina urged him, her voice a hoarse whisper. "You know you can't hurt me, Charlie." She cupped his face in her hands. "Let me take control." Her hands were warm and soft against the rough skin of his face, the hairs of which darkened thickly as she caressed him.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours." He grazed his bared teeth across Nina's luminescent skin, threatening to sink his teeth into her shoulder.

"There's my big bad wolf," she uttered darkly.

A warm, golden glow started to emanate from a black ring Nina wore on her finger, spreading over her body like a protective shield. It extended out from her own body, ensnaring Charlie.

It spread a feeling of security over every inch of him.

The warmth willing him to surrender to her completely.

He definitely wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight.

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Eva Jordan jogged on a pathway through the woods, her stark white hair bounced behind her in a loose ponytail. She grinned coolly, wondering how the Howard Witches would react to the not so subtle message she'd left them in White Pines National Park last night.

"It should get Charlie good and riled," she hoped desperately. She needed him to let his guard down so he would transform into a werewolf. If she didn't succeed tonight, she'd have to wait another month until the next full moon to try again. She didn't have that kind of time.

The sun was just rising, peeking over the densely grown forest that surrounded the path. The sun didn't reach the ground though, giving it the appearance of being dusk.

Even with this dusk-like setting, Eva had no trouble seeing where she was going. She never missed a jutting root or rock, jumping over them with ease. Her gaze tightened suddenly, her head whipping abruptly as she ran, staring into the woods.

Something was running alongside her.

She ran faster.

Faster than a normal human should be able to run. Then again, she wasn't completely human.

Whatever gave chase kept up her pace.

Eva lunged into the woods without hesitation, landing on, and immobilizing her opponent in a single, smooth motion. She flipped over the body revealing a misshapen face. Upon seeing it, she rolled her eyes in annoyed apathy.

The man let loose a growl, baring his jagged teeth at her.

"Caleb," she spoke dryly, releasing him.

He jumped up, his misshapen facial features changing as he did so. Thick hair on his face thinned and then vanished completely, and his jagged teeth shortened, his mouth transforming into a beguiling smile. "Hello, Eva," he greeted.

"What are you doing here? I told you not to come."

"You have no control over me, Eva," the man named Caleb retorted. "I am a bit sad you're not happier to see me."

"I'm on a job, Caleb. You know I work alone."

"Ah, heck. I got bored, hopped the ferry and decided to look you up."

"I don't need your kind of trouble, Caleb. You should leave, now. The full moon's tonight."

"C'mon now. Don't you want to have a little fun, like the old days?"

"No, Caleb. I don't! Did you not just hear me say, I'm on a job?"

"What happened to you anyway? You used to be so much fun." He performed what was supposed to be a sultry dance to lure her instantly into his arms.

"Give it up, Caleb." Eva worked back to the path, returning to her run.

"You know, Eva, since you hooked back up with dear old daddy, you're plain old boring. And kind of a bitch."

"I know." She tossed a reviling smile. *Alpha in charge, Queen B, come tonight.*

Eva tried to ignore Caleb as she ran towards home, but he followed like an obedient dog, begging for a belly rub. Another thought arose quite suddenly, a possible solution to a problem she had not worked out yet. A hidden smile crossed her face, and she stopped abruptly. "You know what, Caleb, I changed my mind. I am in the mood for a little fun." A devilish twinkle crept into her eyes.

Caleb returned her mischievous gaze with one of his own. "What did you have in mind, Eva baby?"

"Follow me and find out," she enticed him wickedly.

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Melinda knocked gently on William Wakefield's locked iron door, in the basement of the Howard Mansion. "Can I get you anything?" She peeked through a grate in the door.

"No. Thank you, Melinda. It's nearly over now." He kept his gaze down, staring into the pages of a book.

The human blood he had drunk to help Emily just a day before still lingered in his body. Melinda knew William would not allow his self-made prison to be unlocked until he felt it was completely safe to do so.

Not that he wasn't comfortable. He had created a mini version of his study in the cell, for when he needed to spend time inside.

She was just grateful she'd gotten some sleep last night. More importantly, dreamless sleep, both in the prophetic and steamy departments. Her head felt a tiny bit more on straight today. Worked-up-level down ever so slightly to, *I might not implode any second, but it wouldn't take much to get back there*, level.

William sighed. So quietly she did not hear him. *There's that flutter*, the one still plaguing his thoughts with its meaning. And his attraction to it.

"I'm heading out," she told him sounding uncertain.

"On your own?" He kept his gaze down.

"Yeah. Thought I'd grab a coffee. Maybe take in some sea air."

"That's good," he encouraged. "Perhaps tomorrow, I will join you."

"I'm always up for your company, William."

He instantly regretted the offer. She would be fine going out on her own, and should be doing this more often. He wanted Melinda to spend more time with humans her own age. Actually, he needed her to.

Her infatuation with him was becoming difficult for him to handle, especially after indulging in human blood, which now dried up leaving him craving more. And Melinda's smelled far too enticing. Even with many practiced years of being around humans, he dared not take any chances. At least not until he'd gotten to the bottom of this new, frustrating heart flutter of hers that drove him mad, and

surfaced thoughts that were inappropriate for him to have toward any human, most of all, Melinda.

It was his duty to protect her. As he did with all Howards. His thoughts were not those of the protecting kind.

"I'm leaving some animal blood for you, just in case you change your mind." She slid the blood pack through the bars of his door and let it slide down to the floor.

He shot her a grateful nod, his eyes never leaving the book.

"Wish me luck," she said uneasily.

William listened closely as she turned to leave. Her heart strummed and her breaths tightened. "You'll do fine," he called out, encouraging her. "I have complete faith in you, Melinda."

"I just don't have it in myself," she muttered, realizing she'd said it loud enough for William to hear. She hastened away, not giving him a chance to reply.

He waited until the sound of her footsteps were out of earshot.

His gaze tore away from the book he gripped tightly, solid black eyes hammering at the door. Having Melinda so close sent his blood craving into overdrive. He did not understand what had changed, why he suddenly found her blood so much more appealing than usual. Whenever he had human blood in any amount, there was a period of craving and withdrawal to suffer through.

More concerning, however, was if there had not been a locked iron door between them, he might not have kept his control. It took everything he had to remain calm and act as if everything was normal.

He'd lived over four-hundred years and suddenly now, out of the blue, he was faced with something new. Something he had never experienced before. A feeling deep in his core he did not understand and could not put a name to.

Yes, Melinda spending time with others would be good for them both.

His hungry eyes peered longingly at the animal blood pack. Before he could stop himself, he dragged his body across the floor ripping it open with his teeth, sucking it dry.

He licked his lips, tearing it open wide enough to lap at the lining, needing every single drop. William closed his eyes, relishing the thick slick coating his throat.

A horrified gurgle erupted from his lips.

Screw his vile need for blood! His lust for it!

He tossed the empty bag aside. Disgusted.

Blood would not, and could not, control him.

It was sustenance, simply that and nothing more.

The Howards trusted him. He could not do anything to break that trust. They were his only connection to a human existence. Without them, he was nothing. Just a thing. A thing that had lived much longer than any *thing* should.

They gave him purpose. Without them, he had no reason to continue going on.

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Melinda left the mansion, unsure where she was headed. The town already bustled with tourists. She stepped onto the cobblestone walkway, sucked in the salty sea air, and soon found herself at the Wicked Muddy Café. Grace, the gruff woman that owned the café stood behind the counter.

"Well looky here," she reveled, upon seeing Melinda enter. "Twice in one week. I might just have to start givin' you the locals' discount if this'n becomes a habit."

The woman seemed in a good mood, so Melinda tried her best to make small talk.

"Good morning, *Grace*." She was sure to emphasize that she remembered her name. "I think I do plan on visiting more often." For some reason, her voice sounded awkward, coming out like she was talking with someone who could not understand her. Melinda forced a smile, but as she reached into her pocket for cash, she accidentally swiped a pyramid of coffee gift packs, which went flying all over the floor.

She sighed, shaking her head. "I can't even get a stupid cup of coffee without," she mumbled the rest under her breath, bending down to pick up the mess.

Grace came around the corner.

"Look now. Don't worry none about it. Been tellin' myself for days that was gonna happen. Shouldn't a put'em so darn close to the register."

Grace watched Melinda's poor attempts at picking up the mug gift packs and replacing them, without success.

"Why don't you let me handle that?" Grace urged after a moment.

Melinda handed her the boxed mug she held, taking an embarrassed huff.

"You okay there?"

Melinda hadn't expected her question and wasn't sure how to respond. Seeing she wasn't going to, Grace continued.

"You know, I knew your parents. Good folk. Took real good care of the people on this Isle." She winked, with special meaning.

Melinda cocked her head to the side, taken aback. It had not dawned on her that Grace was a long time local that new about the Isle's supernatural side.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you *knew* them."

Grace headed back behind the counter. "They helped me out on more than one occasion," she admitted quietly.

"Oh, well I'm glad they could help."

"See, you're relaxin' already." Grace smile broadened.

"Huh?"

"You're a nervous wreck, Dearie. Just relax, you're amongst friends here."

Melinda just stared, unsure what to say.

"Look now, I can come off a bit harsh," Grace explained. "Frankly though, once I like someone, well that's just it. I like'em from that day on. And I like you. You just need a little practice at bein' out and about again."

The way she said it indicated Melinda had been the topic of conversation previously. She suddenly felt as if every eye in the room was watching her. They really had been talking about her these last few years; that weird girl that never comes out of the house.

Melinda sucked in deeply. Her body wanted to run back home and lock herself away, alongside William. But her brain tried to reason. *Just give it some time. You can't be that weird girl forever.*

"Tell you what I'm gonna do," Grace continued. "You pick yourself out a mug and write your name on it. Put it on that shelf over there, and whenever you come

in, it'll be there, waitin' for you." She returned to helping another customer that had walked up to the counter.

Melinda looked over the collection of unclaimed mugs. "A simple, normal, local kind of thing. Pick out a mug." She finally decided on a skinny, handle-free style mug, and grabbed the marker on the shelf. *Melinda Howard*, she wrote on it.

"Good pick," Grace mouthed. "Very sleek." She motioned for Melinda to hand it over to her. She rinsed it out and filled it with coffee. "I'll still let you add your own cream. But one of these days, I'll figure out just how you like it."

After Melinda added the cream, she had to decide where to sit. Grace didn't give her the chance.

"Outside," she ordered. "Too nice a weather for a young, pretty girl like you to be hangin' inside with a bunch of old cooks." The locals sitting inside just laughed and nodded; there was no one relaxing inside the Wicked Muddy under sixty-five. "Go find yourself a nice young man to talk to," Grace encouraged with a wink.

Melinda decided she liked Grace. It also made her wonder how many other things she had been missing these last four years. How many other people in The Demon Isle would she come to like?

She stepped outside and found a seat in the sun. She recognized some of the locals, but was surprised at how many she did not. Had they changed that much in the four years she'd kept herself hidden away? Or when she was a teenager, had she just not paid attention?

Melinda hoped that amongst the locals and tourists she might happen across the dark haired motorcycle man she'd run into previously. Instead, she caught Michael and Emily headed her direction.

"Hey guys," Melinda shouted, waving them over.

"Hey, Sis." Michael grinned widely. "What are you doing here?" He held up his hand as if to say, don't answer. "You know what, why don't we grab a coffee and join you?"

Melinda nodded yes eagerly. It would be nice not to sit alone, or explain herself again.

"I'll grab yours, Emily," Michael offered.

"Thanks," she said, sucking on her top lip, barely able to contain her smile. She took the seat next to Melinda.

"You look like you're about to burst," Melinda laughed. "What's going on?"

"I'm just... happy. It's a beautiful day and my day off. Michael's not leaving, and, well, we're officially dating," Emily revealed with a quiet squeal.

"Well, it's about time. He's been in love with you for years." She could not help but smile, Emily's happiness radiated out of her infecting anything within reach.

"We spent the night just walking on the beach. Sitting under the moon. Holding hands." Her tone indicated it was pure bliss.

Melinda imagined a few other things had happened, but was glad Emily kept those to herself. Even with the task of locating their father looming over their heads, Melinda did not remember a recent day when she felt this good. That good feeling also had a little something to do with motorcycle man; she kept glancing, hoping to catch him wandering by.

"Looking for someone in particular?" Emily asked, taking notice.

"Guess I need practice if I'm being that obvious."

"It's a guy, isn't it? Tell me everything!"

"He's probably a tourist and I doubt I'll run into him again. Which is what I did last night when I was on my way home from your place, quite literally ran into him."

"What's he like?"

"Taller than me. Dark scruffy hair. Molasses eyes. And," Melinda trailed off remembering his hands running down her back. It shot fiery pulses up her spine just thinking about it.

"And?" prodded Emily.

"Just this intense feeling. Like we were supposed to meet. That sounds crazy to say about a total stranger."

"No. To be honest, that's how I felt when I first met your brother."

"Really?"

"Yup. I think it's a good thing. I think it's like your souls somehow know you'll be a good match for each other. Even if it takes one of those souls a ridiculously long time to come around and admit how he feels."

"You really shouldn't go easy on my brother," Melinda laughed. "Make him suffer a little. But I never thought about it like that, souls, knowing they're right for each other. But like I said, probably won't see him again. Did I mention he drives a motorcycle?"

"Oh. A bad boy," Emily replied wickedly. "Don't tell your brothers."

"Too late. Michael caught me gawking at him, more like drooling, while walking through town yesterday. And I didn't really get a bad boy vibe." Melinda scrunched her nose. "Okay, maybe just a little bit."

Michael returned with two steaming mugs, unable to control the smile on his face from widening when he saw his girlfriend and his sister deep in conversation, and laughing happily. He noticed Melinda's personalized mug as she took a sip of coffee. He'd never thought such a mundane thing could bring him such joy and relief. It was starting to feel like she was herself again.

Perhaps if the time came that he did leave the Isle, she would be all right. This was a good place for her. A simple place, minus the job as witches and protectors of the Isle, of course. And things didn't change much on the Isle. But his desire to leave had subsided. He still wanted to travel and explore the world. But it didn't have to be today, or tomorrow. He had lost that urgency for it to be now.

He handed Emily her coffee and took a seat next to her. His hand fell to her knee, and she grabbed hold of it entangling her fingers with his, having no desire to let go. Just the touch of her hand sent a yearning thrum up his arm. Or maybe his empathy was picking that up from her. Their emotions were starting to meld in his mind. It was getting harder to see where his ended and hers started. He also found that he liked this. Possibly the first time he enjoyed anything about his magical inheritance of empathy.

Moreover, if he hadn't been the largest jerk in the world, he could have been enjoying all of this, years ago.

*I'm such a stubborn idiot!*

*The luckiest stubborn idiot.*

He squeezed her fingers tighter, needing to let some of the overabundance of emotion out of him. She squeezed back, understanding, her gaze never leaving Melinda.

Even with the task of finding their father still looming overhead, life today seemed better than it had in a very long time.

A bit later, coffee mugs emptied, refilled by Grace and almost empty again, a familiar voice called out. "Howards!" It was Mack, The Demon Isle sheriff.

"Hiya, Mack," said Michael. "Would you care to join us?" He had his arm around Emily as he spoke, but winked at the sheriff in their usual playful manner.

"Afraid not. Funny thing is I was just about to call you guys."

Michael and Melinda were surprised when she did not return Michael's flirtatious gesture. She rarely missed an opportunity to hassle him about his ridiculously good looks.

"Perhaps we should move somewhere a little less full of people," Melinda suggested.

"Actually, I hate to break up your party, but if you don't mind, I'll just follow you home. I'm afraid I'm gonna need Charlie on this one." The tone of Mack's voice dampened their good moods.

"We could just call him," Melinda offered. "To be honest, I'm not even sure he's home."

"His summer fling must be back in town," Michael mumbled under his breath. Emily let out a short giggle and Melinda just nodded in agreement, not wanting to think about her brother's love life.

Mack inhaled, exhaled, and then shook her head, looking torn.

"Sorry, but I think this is better discussed in person, and I need Charlie present."

Melinda grabbed the new cell phone she'd gotten that morning, to replace the one she'd broken a day earlier, and tried Charlie's number. William had left the phone in the kitchen for her before locking himself in his luxury dungeon.

"Voicemail," she whispered to Mack. "Hey, um, Charlie, when you're awake and um, whatever, we need you home, okay. Mack needs our help."

Melinda hung up and headed into the coffee shop. Michael and Emily followed. Upon seeing them enter with the sheriff at their heels, Grace's smile dropped a little, but she nodded politely.

"Mornin' to you too, Grace." Mack gave her a curt nod.

"I'll take care of those mugs," Grace said, grabbing them. "I can see you've got business to attend to. You don't be a stranger now, Melinda. I expect to see you back here real soon."

"I definitely will." Melinda paused. "Thank you, Grace." She needed to say it. It was nice not to be treated like the local freak.

Grace nodded kindly and went about her work.

Melinda, Michael, and Emily walked in tense silence toward the Howard Mansion, the sheriff not far behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie lay sprawled across the floor; a sheet partially covered his nakedness. The woman, Nina, shared the sheet, sleeping soundly just inches away. Slowly,

the morning sun crept in, warming their bodies and bringing them out of their contented slumber. Charlie gently pulled her body closer, her head on his chest.

"You could come back tonight," she suggested. She lifted her head, to see his response.

"You know I can't. It's the full moon. I know you don't think I can hurt you, Nina, but I can't take the chance. Not tonight. The ring makes you strong, but I can't trust that it makes you unbreakable."

"You can't blame a girl for trying," she spoke softly, sitting up to face him. "But the ring is stronger than you think. And it doesn't come off unless I take it off, voluntarily. A well designed safety feature."

He pulled her body up, so she faced him. "You're right, that is a smart design. And I'm sure you're right that I can't hurt you, Nina. But I don't dare chance it. I will be back tomorrow night," he reminded, as much for her benefit as his own.

He pushed her backwards, the weight of him pinning her to the floor. A mouth invasion and a pulse pounding moan later, his body ached to stay all day and night. Screw the full moon. Screw his life. *Screw everything.*

Charlie pulled back, letting out a disappointed groan. He freed her and sat up, searching for his clothes. Nina laughed and located her tee shirt. A second later, she was on her feet and in the kitchen.

"You want coffee?" she called out.

"That, and maybe a cold shower," he mumbled, watching her grab for a coffee can just barely within her reach. She was doing it on purpose and he knew it. He threw on his tank and shorts, walking up behind her. His arms easily stretched over her head to grab the can, keeping it teasingly out of her reach.

She let out a devilish breath and turned her head to look at him. "Either you stay, Charlie Howard, or you let me make my coffee. You know how I get when I don't get my coffee."

"All right, all right," he caved, handing her the can. He backed away with hands in the air as if to surrender. He took a seat on a tall stool at the bar in the kitchen.

"So, how are you anyway?"

"Now you ask?" Nina replied, eyebrows turned upward. "Eh. Same old, same old. You know the game... nothing but work, work, work. But I'm on vacation now. I don't need anything but coffee in the morning, a bottle of tequila in the evening, and my wolfman every night."

Charlie was tempted to break his own rule and come back tonight, regardless of the full moon.

"So how's life on the Isle?" she asked him in return.

"Actually, to be honest, things are pretty equally incredible and terrible."

Small talk was about all Charlie and Nina ever got into. They preferred to keep any serious details out of their three summer long relationship. A mutual understanding of what they both wanted. Fun. No strings attached. No complications.

"So it's life as usual." Nina handed him the first cup from the coffee pot.

"Yeah, life as usual."

"If you want me to be honest, Charlie, there's something different about you."

Nina was always keen on seeing the small changes that took place in Charlie. Then again, that was part of her job when she wasn't vacationing on The Demon Isle.

"Just a full moon thing," he insisted, acting as if it was nothing of importance.

"Actually, I think you're right. The wolf is much more *present* than usual."

He shook his head, wearing a grin. This was true. Although she certainly hadn't minded last night.

She chuckled, poured herself a coffee and joined him at the island. "It's sort of like the moon is demanding you transform, Charlie. Almost like it's saying you've avoided me long enough, you're out of time."

He stared in bewilderment. Nina was correct, as usual.

"It frightens you, doesn't it?" She reached out and stroked his stubble covered cheek.

"It does." There was no point in hiding the truth. "But I'll deal with it, just like I do every full moon." He tossed her a smile that said not to worry about it. His phone buzzed indicating he had voicemail. He had turned the ringer off before arriving at Nina's the night before.

"And duty calls," he said in a disappointed tone after listening to Melinda's message. He really was going to have to leave and go back to reality.

"You witches, always on the job." Nina cracked an understanding smile.

"Says the gal who's on the clock twenty-four-seven, except for six weeks every summer."

"Ah, but I love my job. And look at how I get to spend my vacation."

She pulled him in, begging one last kiss out of him before allowing him to leave.

Something about the kiss felt different to Charlie. Deeper. Fuller. Tinged with hidden meaning he didn't have time to decipher.

She pulled away. He groaned again.

"Tomorrow night, Nina. You'd better be ready for me."

She sucked in. Her head filled with a delighted haze as she escorted him to the front porch and watched him disappear down the road.

"Oh, my big bad wolfman." Nina's voice trembled, riddled with emotion. "I'm afraid there won't be a tomorrow night. My duty calls as well."

She stepped back into the house, slipped the protection ring off her finger, and walked into the bedroom gently placing the ring in the center of the sea of white covering her unused bed.

She lovingly ran her hands over the sheets, erasing any creases or wrinkles.

She stood, taking a deep, certain breath. "Well that's that," she spoke to no one.

Nina got dressed and slipped out of the cottage, following a pathway alongside the back of the beach, which veered off into the dark woods of The Demon Isle.

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Upon arrival at the Howard Mansion, Michael and Emily headed into the kitchen. From the look on Michael's face, his empathic abilities were picking up some very disturbing feelings from the sheriff. Melinda went down to let William out of his prison, whether he was ready to come out or not.

He smelled her blood before she'd gotten down the first stair. He breathed it in. It was tolerable now, but as she got closer, that tolerance lowered.

"William," she called out. "You probably already heard her in the kitchen, but if not, Mack's here and she needs our help with something." Melinda's tone shoved his cravings back in their place. He heard the fearful inflection.

"Very well." He exited his cell after she unlocked it for him.

Cravings in their rightful place or not, William kept to the opposite side of the kitchen near an open window, as far from Melinda as he could get without raising suspicions over his actions.

Michael asked Mack if she'd like a cup of coffee.

"Can't ever turn down a good cup." She nodded thanks as he filled a mug from the freshly brewing pot. Michael grabbed the cream and sugar, adding just a touch of cream and three heaping teaspoons of sugar.

"Darn my sweet tooth," Mack joked uneasily when he handed her the cup.

"Charlie called," Michael announced, for Melinda and William's sake. "He'll be here any minute."

Mack hadn't taken more than a few sips when Charlie sauntered through the back kitchen door.

"Morning everyone," he called out, upon seeing them. "I'll take a cup of that," he told Michael. He grabbed a mug, filled it and handed it to Charlie.

"Thanks," he said, taking a big gulp.

"You looked *relaxed* considering what day it is," Michael noted with a smirk.

Charlie just shook his head and scrunched his face. It was his look of, *yeah, we're so not going there*. Instead, he made a quick change of the subject. "What's up?"

They all turned to Mack.

She set down her cup, clearing her throat.

"There's something I need your help with, and more importantly, Charlie, you need to hear what I have to say."

Charlie's relaxed demeanor morphed into tension. "You know you can count on us for anything, Mack, supernatural or otherwise."

"Truth is," she continued, "I just came back into town from a crime scene, out in White Pines National Park." She paused after, seeming apprehensive to continue.

"Do you need help figuring out how someone died?" Michael questioned.

She shook her head no. "No death readin' needed. Coroner already has a cause of death." She aimed her next words at Charlie. "Wolf bite. Although I'd say it was more like wolf *shred*."

Charlie pounded his mug onto the counter, splashing the coffee and nearly breaking the mug. He stood up, his body fully aware of what Mack was telling him, but his mind refused to believe it. "There are no wolves on the Isle," he insisted, knowing full well there had been at least one wolf on the Isle previously.

"Yeah, just like there weren't any dang wolves on the Isle ten years ago when you got bit." Mack spoke like she had read his thoughts.

"What does this mean?" Melinda asked faintly.

Michael, already realizing what it meant, wrapped his arms around Emily, pulling her as close to him as possible.

"It means there's a werewolf on The Demon Isle," Charlie revealed darkly.

"But I thought werewolves could only change during a full moon," Emily said, confused, as she did not know the entirety of Charlie's story. "How did a werewolf kill someone the night before a full moon?"

"That's how it happened when Charlie," Melinda stopped, covering her mouth. Beginning to understand why Mack had needed to speak with Charlie. And what Michael had already caught on to.

"The coroner discovered a very unique thing about the wolf's bite. It's missin' a tooth, Charlie."

Charlie's nostrils flared a flurry of emotion raging through him.

It wasn't just any werewolf.

It was *the* werewolf.

The very one that had bitten him ten years prior and had left a tooth embedded in Charlie's shoulder after its hideous attack.

"I guess you can consider yourself lucky you survived, Charlie. The body we found this mornin'..." Mack couldn't finish, and she'd witnessed plenty of bloody attacks during her time as sheriff.

Melinda stared at Charlie, but he didn't see her. Only the wolf that bit him.

Panic rose inside her chest. What would this mean for her brother? And what was going on in his head? She couldn't even imagine, but wondered if maybe they would need to subdue or calm him in some way. Emotions brought out his wolfy side, not always in the best way, and this, this was a massive test of his willpower.

It wasn't like they had a doggy shock collar they could put on him or something. And it was daytime. Not night. No full moon right now to worry about. Good thing. And currently he was just staring into nothing. Blinking. Blinking. Blinking. Not quite present in the room, even though physically he was taking up so much space.

Michael's empathic ability sensed Melinda's anxiety mounting to a threatening to overwhelm level, and he grabbed for her hand. She barely felt him holding onto it. Her skin went numb.

William took a few quick paces around the room, blood lust, no longer a concern, the look of comprehension dawning in his emerald green eyes. "Yes," he mumbled, as if answering his own silent question.

The rest turned and waited breathlessly for him to explain.

"It is extremely likely that this wolf's return is behind your heightened tension these last few days, Charlie. Even though you have never permitted the full transformation to take place, you still have your werewolf senses. I believe this wolf's arrival may have triggered the connection between you."

"How do I break it, William? I want nothing to do with it," Charlie pleaded, his voice charged with shaken control. "Unless..." His eyes brightened with a new possibility.

"Don't even think about it, Charlie," exclaimed Michael, already understanding what Charlie was thinking. "You cannot use yourself as bait to capture this thing!"

"I am afraid Michael is quite right, Charlie," William agreed. "You cannot confront this wolf without an almost certain chance of transforming completely. I am sure you remember what happens then?"

"You mean other than a murderous rampage across the Isle?" Melinda muttered in a sickly sarcastic tone.

Charlie covered his face with his hands, looking pained as he forced himself to sit back down. He looked up, dropped his hands, staring into the eyes of Melinda and Michael. They shuddered at the same moment.

Melinda because she saw true fear in Charlie's eyes and this frightened her above all else. And Michael because his empathic abilities sensed Melinda losing the battle to keep her own fears from crushing her.

Charlie stood up, pacing back and forth, stopping every few steps to speak, but nothing would come out. He gulped, his throat feeling like a pile of dry ash as he searched for the courage to say what he needed to say.

"There's something I never told you guys," he finally pushed out. "And don't get mad at William, I forced him to swear to secrecy."

"What did you keep from us, Charlie?" Melinda barely controlled the panic ensnaring her heart.

He took another moment to answer. Thinking it over carefully first.

"If I transform, fully surrendering to my wolf, and the one that created me is still alive... it becomes my alpha. I will no longer have control over my actions, whether it's a full moon, or not."

"What!?" breathed out Michael.

"Charlie. This is *huge!*" Melinda had many choice words and thoughts about the revelation, but none would reach her lips. Captured and imprisoned by her thickening throat and befuddled brain.

"I have to agree with your siblings on this one, Charlie." Mack shook her head. "This situation is turnin' into a much larger problem than even I expected."

"And William isn't going to be much help," stammered Melinda. "Or have you forgotten that a werewolf bite is poisonous to him?"

William ignored Melinda's remark, realizing it was misplaced anger, and knowing he would do whatever was necessary to save Charlie.

"I'm sorry I never told you guys. I guess I hoped it would never come to this. I hoped the thing would never come back here. I didn't want to burden you with what I thought would be unnecessary worry."

"Turns out it was necessary, Charlie!" Melinda retorted in a huff. Her heart was beating at a much faster pace than it should, and she sucked in unsteady air trying to calm the panic attack bubbling its way to the surface. Tears stung at her eyes. She sucked the side of her cheek, trying to control them.

No one replied. No one knew what to say, or do, with this information. After another long moment of tense silence, Michael did his best to bring everyone out of their stupor.

"And here I thought Charlie's *edginess* was just over the new girl in town."

"Ha. So much for the Eva Jordan theory," Melinda sniffled.

Charlie sighed, deeply regretful as he witnessed his sister crumbling before his eyes. He stepped over to her, forcing her to hug him.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," she sobbed. "I can't lose you too. I just can't."

"I know, Kiddo. I'm sorry I never told you. I really am. But everything's going to be okay. This full moon will come and go, just like any other. I promise."

Just then, the sheriff's radio started chirping.

"Looks like I am being called away, Howards. You all talk amongst yourselves and let me know what you figure out. I'll be in touch."

She showed herself out, but before she let the door close, she gave another warning.

"Be careful, all of you. I don't want to be losin' any of you either. That put out there Charlie, if you transform and can't be controlled, you know what I'll have to do." She patted her upper pocket. "I've still got the bullets you gave me."

"I expect you to do your job, Mack. Nothing less," he agreed firmly. "I'm supposed to protect the Isle, not be the thing it needs protection from."

She nodded stoically and let the door slam shut.

Melinda's nostrils flared and her eyes began to tear up again.

"You gave her bullets!? To kill you with!"

"It's going to be okay, Melinda," Charlie insisted.

"You can't know that!"

She turned to Michael and William for support, but neither spoke.

Michael, grasping Emily, but now as if his life depended on it, could not reply to Melinda because he could barely keep himself together as her anguish washed out of her body like a flood.

William's face turned to stone, but not before she saw the struggle there; he was trying to hide it from her. They didn't want to admit they might be in more trouble than they could handle. Or they were just trying to protect her from the truth, afraid she couldn't handle it.

They were right.

Melinda's throat closed up and she gasped for air. Black splotches burst into her vision. The room started to spin and her mind shouted for her to run and hide, to disappear completely.

Charlie and Michael reached out but she batted them away, heading for the door. "I can't be here," she choked out in a pained voice. "I can't watch my brother basically die." She ran out of the house as fast as possible.

Charlie stepped out after her, shouting, but she did not hear what he said.

She just kept running, blocking everything from her mind. She needed to get away. She'd suffocate and die if she went back inside that house.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What perfect timing!" Charlie rumbled angrily. "Just when I was starting not to worry about her, every waking moment."

"Just let her go," William advised. "At least she is out of the house and not locked in her room." Although even as he said this, it was everything he could do not to go after her himself.

"Great! Out there, who knows where, with a werewolf on the prowl."

"She is stronger than you think, Charlie. Give her time to sort out her feelings. I think it might be good to let her do this." *It might also be good to have a little space from her*, William realized. He needed to have a clear head, something that was proving impossible when he was near Melinda now.

"Maybe I should go after her?" suggested Emily. "Maybe she wouldn't mind talking to me, being I'm a girl, and a friend, and not a brother."

Michael tossed her an appreciative smile. "Maybe it's just better if Melinda sits this one out. Give her some space like William said. We can handle this one ourselves. We just need to come up with some kind of plan that doesn't involve you turning into a werewolf, or using yourself as bait, Charlie."

"Yes, let's not have it come to that, shall we?" agreed William. "Perhaps, the best place to start is..."

"Research," both Charlie and Michael finished in dry sarcasm.

William lifted an eyebrow. "Actually, yes. I want to know what allows this wolf to change without the moon being full."

"You've researched this before," Charlie said. "You found nothing."

"Perhaps I missed something. Perhaps, what I need is not in my own library, but on that confounded machine Emily calls a laptop." He glanced at Emily expectantly.

"Oh, come with me, William. The internet is really not that scary." She grabbed her bag and dug out her laptop. She and William retreated into his study to see what they could find.

This left Charlie and Michael alone in the kitchen.

"I'm impressed," Michael suddenly told his brother.

"By what?"

"How calm you stayed during all of that. Your wolfy thing didn't even surface."

"I think it's just shock, actually."

"Still, if you can stay that calm, with all of this going on, maybe everything really will be just fine. Or maybe, whatever happened last night..." he trailed off, waiting expectantly for a reply.

Charlie said nothing, but Michael didn't give up.

"C'mon, we all know you got some secret gal you hook up with every summer. What's the big deal?"

"It isn't a big deal. It's just a relationship of, *convenience*," he stalled. "It works great for her and it works *really* great for me." He couldn't help but grin, thinking of Nina dancing around her kitchen.

"Do you like her?"

"Sure. She's a..." Charlie thought hard how to explain a complex woman like Nina. However, he could not do so properly without giving away too much about her. "She's an incredible woman. Not a human woman, of course. But if you're asking if I'm in love with her, she's not *the one*, or anything like that. She's not the settling down type."

"Okay," nodded Michael, dropping the subject. "So what's our next move then? How are we going to find this alpha?"

"I need to keep busy for one thing. I may appear to be holding it together, but if I allow myself to disappear into my brain right now, this whole alpha thing will consume me. *Finding it?*" Charlie let out a sigh that exclaimed *I have no idea*.

Michael saw it again. True fear in his brother's eyes. It wasn't a sight he enjoyed, and it wasn't like Charlie to let it leak out.

"The only thing I can come up with, is find the alpha before it finds me."

"Maybe we should visit the crime scene," Michael suggested. "Maybe we can find something the investigators overlooked."

"They certainly would miss any supernatural clues it left behind," agreed Charlie.

"Sounds like we have a place to start at least. Let's go tell William and Emily."

\* \* \* \*

Melinda huffed her way down the street. It had been sunny earlier, but now clouds rolled in layering a salty mist over every surface. This did not deter the tourists though. They still hustled about, mindless of the weather. Of course, everyone knew the old saying, 'If you don't like the weather, just wait a minute.'

"Damn you, Charlie Howard," she spat at the cobblestone walkway. "And William. My William, keeping a secret that big from me! Ugh," she snorted.

A tourist made to step around her, in a wide, obvious motion.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm talking to myself," she spoke crazily, at the same time eying the man, as if to say, *Yeah, I'm a freak, deal with it!*

At that same moment, her foot hooked the edge of a crevice and she tripped, falling forward. "Son of a..." Her hands dutifully flew up to protect her face.

Someone caught her though, holding on tightly, not allowing her to fall.

"Are you okay?" It was a male voice, sounding both amused and concerned.

"Yes. I'm fine," she responded with mock gratitude as her savior helped her stand upright. She picked up her head and inhaled, losing her breath again. "Oh, you," she squeaked out.

"Is that good, or bad?" His molasses eyes danced in delighted bemusement. It was her dark haired motorcycle man. *And he'd have to pick now to happen across my path.* She could not hide her tear stained face. Or tangled hair, turning into ringlets as the humidity and mist claimed its control for its own. But her fury lessened, replaced with an intense need to disappear. To feel anything other than panic and pain.

He could not believe he'd found her again. More like that *feeling* he got sometimes, led him to her again. His heart soared, but also cracked just a little. He didn't know why, or what had caused it, but his little blue eyed beauty was broken. Maybe whoever, or whatever sent him these feelings of where he needed to be, really had sent him to her because she needed him.

But he'd never found himself helping someone that kicked his heart into overdrive. No woman who instantly made him want to wrap himself around and protect her from all the horrors in the world.

He shrugged and shook his head. "You know, that's the second time I've saved you from falling. Do you do that a lot? Or am I just lucky?"

"No, I don't fall a lot," she replied, clearing her throat. "And you just happen to be in the right place, at the wrong time," she told him, keeping her chin held high.

"Don't you mean in the right place at the right time?"

"However you want to see it. Look, *thank you* for your help. *Again.* But I'm fine now... just having a really terrible day," she rambled in a haughty mumble, turning away.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he called after her. "I mean that your day is bad, not that you're okay."

She just waved her hand as if none of it mattered and stormed off. She still had a brother to be angry with.

"Hey, wait a minute," motorcycle man shouted, catching up to her. "Bad day or not, can I at least know your name?"

She stopped mid-street and stared at him, nearly laughing out loud in nervous response. *He must think I'm an inconsiderate jerk. But what's new?*

"Melinda," she found herself telling him. "My name is Melinda."

Just then, a car screeched to a stop, honking its horn. "Yeah, yeah, keep your knickers on! I'm moving."

Her dark haired hero then did something quite unexpected.

He grabbed her hand and sauntered alongside her, seeing her safely to the sidewalk across the street. He let go once she was safely off the road. Melinda shot him a questioning look. Why was this total stranger being so nice to her?

"I couldn't well save you from falling, and then let some impatient driver run you over now, could I?"

She guessed that made sense. He was just being nice. Helpful. She knew a few local island boys that could take a lesson or two. Jerkface came to mind. *Forget him! Pissed off enough already.*

They were near his motorcycle. She stepped closer to take a look. She'd never really looked at one up close. It had clearly seen some mileage, but its solid black steel construction called out *you can trust me. I won't let you down.*

"Best way to travel," her savior winked, grabbing his helmet.

Melinda noticed an extra helmet hooked to the bike.

He noticed her staring at it.

"You wanna go for a ride? I'm a safe driver. Promise."

There were so many reasons to say no. Charlie is in serious trouble. This guy is a total stranger. She had no idea where she would be going, and no one else would know where she was going.

*Nobody will know where I am.* The thought suddenly filled her with exhilaration.

She grabbed the extra helmet and straddled the bike. The young man hopped on and she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Get me the heck outta here!" she breathed out with an air of defiance.

"Your wish is my command." He kick-started the motorcycle to life. Something about that motion, that sound, shot ribbons of excitement through Melinda. She squeezed her arms around him, unknowingly. She didn't see his grin beaming down after her arms wrapped around him as if her life depended on it.

He made a sharp U-turn and headed out of the town, speeding his way through the winding roads of The Demon Isle.

Melinda closed her eyes taking in every smell, breathing in the fast moving air as if she had never breathed properly before.

"What's your name?" she shouted over the roar of the engine.

"Riley," he shouted back.

"It's nice to meet you, Riley," she responded with a squeal as Riley took a sharp turn at a very high speed.

He laughed at her, amused by her behavior. "You're going to cut off my circulation if you hold on any tighter."

She eased her grip. "Sorry, I've never been on a motorcycle before," she admitted.

"Well then, Melinda. I'd better make sure I give you the ride of your life."

She averted her eyes, feeling her cheeks heat up. A flutter floated through her stomach sending butterflies plucking at her nerves. She wanted to pinch herself and make sure she wasn't dreaming. That this was real and happening, right now.

Just this morning she had been perfectly content knowing her future would be spent working alongside her brothers to find their father. Michael and Emily had been the epitome of happiness and now, it had all gone to the crapper!

William was still stuck at the forefront of her thoughts, to a haunting level, and still very much off limits.

And by this time tomorrow, Charlie might not belong to himself. She could not think about this. She could not handle losing a brother. Not after everything else she'd already lost in this life. She could not think about what would become of him if this alpha took control. He'd probably kill himself before allowing anyone to control him.

She let out a trembling breath.

*Screw all of this!*

*I'm sick of worrying about everything. And everyone.*

*What's right, what's wrong.*

*What's waiting around the corner.*

*If I'll have another dream of someone I know, dying, or about a vampire I can't have.*

*Sick of being in that house a single minute longer.*

*What the heck am I doing? Doubt crept in, just like it always did.*

*I should be helping Charlie. I should be with my family.*

*They're used to handling things without me, her inner voice argued. Probably better if I'm not there. I'd just get in the way.*

*But I should be there.*

She felt sick and almost asked Riley to pull over.

*I can't. I can't go back. I can't think about losing Char...* Melinda closed her eyes and let it slip away with the wind, leaving it behind in the motorcycle's wake. Suppressing her deepest fears.

She had to loosen her grip on Riley again, having been grabbing him too tightly.

*Just be in the moment. Screw everything else.*

Once out of the town, Riley sped up the bike even faster. Melinda felt a rush of adrenaline kick in and squealed as the wind slapped against her skin. This was the only place she wanted to be. It felt just right.

At least she hadn't worn her ankle length summer dress today. Not that she was dressed much better than the previous day. But she had at least found a well-fitting pair of cutoff jeans to go with her tank top and sweater. She glanced down at her flip flop covered feet, not that they covered anything. And definitely not the smartest choice for a motorcycle ride. She toyed with throwing them off and just going barefoot, but decided against it.

"I love this!" she shouted, unable to contain her giddiness over this feeling growing inside of her.

Riley peered around his shoulder and cast a brilliant smile upon seeing her.

She had never understood why people rode motorcycles until just this moment. There was something freeing about it. The air whipped by and yet she could see everything flying past as though in slow motion, almost like seeing it for the first

time. With every rotation of the tires, she flew away from her life, farther and farther from every worry, doubt or fear.

She liked this feeling.

And she liked this molasses-eyed stranger named Riley.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie and Michael stepped into the study.

“You two find anything useful?” Michael asked.

“No,” William answered without lifting his head from the laptop. He squinted at the screen and looked at the keypad, typing a letter. “Look at that. You type it here and then it shows up,” his eyes rolled over to the brothers, staring at him in momentary delight.

“My gosh, William,” Emily blurted, shaking her head in well-meaning humor. “For a vampire who moves at speeds I can’t even fathom, you are the worst typist I have ever laid eyes on!” She marched over and motioned for him to move.

William frowned and rolled his chair out of her way.

“Okay, let’s see here. What question do you want answered, William?”

“What allows a werewolf to transform on a night that is not a full moon, at the same time allowing it to pass on its curse, as if it is a full moon?”

“Um, that’s what you want the internet to answer for you? I don’t think that answer is just going to pop up, William. I mean, it’s a bit, *huh*.”

“Huh, what?” Michael leaned over her shoulder to look.

“Well, I don’t really know if this is at all helpful, as this is a chat forum for a popular fantasy series, so fiction, but this one guy, his name is RadWolfman- hey, Charlie, maybe you should pick up a nickname,” she sputtered, getting sidetracked. “That would be way cool.”

Michael just rolled his eyes.

“Not such a bad idea,” said Charlie. “I’ve been called a few things over the years,” he let his sentence trail off.

William rolled back over to read the screen. Emily shot him a steely look and he retreated.

“As I was saying. This one guy, RadWolfman, he’s on here a lot, and a few months back he posted about our very topic. Apparently, there’s some heated debate surrounding a werewolf character in a book that can only change into an actual werewolf during a full moon, but,” she kept reading, “it can also transform into a regular wolf, *oh*,” she said, surprised. “This werewolf is also a shapeshifter. Are those real?”

William leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed as he thought on the subject.

“Yes,” Michael told her. “Shifters are real. But even if that happens to be what we’re looking for, if it was shifted into a wolf form, but not transformed into an actual werewolf, how did you get infected?” he aimed at Charlie.

“Because it is still werewolf blood,” William whispered. “The wolf still resides in those that are bitten whether transformed or not. A shapeshifter taking on the form of a wolf could still pass on the curse. A weakened form, possibly, which could explain your wolfish nature, but why you have never fully transformed.”

William bounded out of his chair, sending it rolling across the floor behind him.

"That said, this is all conjecture. I do not pretend to know all the ins and outs of werewolfdom. It could be that the witch's blood that courses through your veins is keeping the full transformation at bay. It could be that nothing, in the end, can keep you from a full transformation, if the right trigger is used against you. More importantly, if it is a shapeshifter we are searching for..."

"It could be *anyone*," Michael finished, glumly.

"Oh my." Emily cleared her throat, attempting to sound upbeat. "I'll keep searching. There's bound to be other possibilities."

While she returned to searching, Charlie held up his phone. "Going to try to reach Melinda." He ignored the subject of the shapeshifter theory and stepped out of the study.

Before making the call, he leaned his back against the hallway wall.

"Keep it together, Charlie. Keep it together." He closed his eyes, bursts of dark lights forming under his eyelids, thoughts swimming through his brain threatening to overwhelm him. He wondered if this is what Melinda felt like when she was getting a panic attack. He opened his eyes and dialed her cell phone number, confused when he heard her phone ringing inside the house. He followed the sound into the kitchen.

"Seriously!" he groaned in frustration, picking her phone up off the floor. "She probably doesn't even know she dropped it." He leaned into the counter, thinking he could really use a shot or two of Nina's tequila.

He had assumed Melinda would return after a few minutes. More importantly, he was beginning to doubt he was going to be able to keep his promise.

Nothing was right with this situation.

If he did transform and the alpha took over, if he did not transform but got himself killed trying to get rid of this thing. Or say they did kill the alpha werewolf, then what?

*I'm still stuck with this monster I don't know how long I can control. It's never going to just go away. It is always going to be inside of me.*

\* \* \* \*

Michael explained to William about their plan to visit the crime scene while Emily typed away on her laptop.

"Do you think it's safe for us to venture into the park?" asked Michael. "We don't know where this alpha could be lurking."

"Logic tells me it is safe. The crime scene will be busy with police and such, scouring the area for evidence. The park itself is likely to be filled with tourists."

"If tradition holds, lots of people would mean no supernatural creatures wanting to expose themselves," Michael agreed. He let slip out, "I think Charlie's losing the battle, William. I've never seen him like this before. He's trying so hard to keep it together, but there is this fear drowning him. He doesn't think he's going to make it."

"Which is why I am coming with you today." He held up his hand before Michael could argue. "I know the risks of coming into contact with a werewolf."

"I hate to admit it, but I'd feel better if you were with us, William. If something happens and Charlie loses it, I don't think..." Emily let out an exasperated moan. "Something new?" Michael asked, hopeful.

"No. Nothing. Nothing at all!" she exclaimed. "Either it's a shapeshifter, or it's something none of us, *including a four-hundred-year-old vampire*, have ever heard of, read about, or dealt with before."

Michael cast a glance at William.

He wore his usual emotionless face.

Michael wished his empathic abilities worked on William. However, the vampire had always said that this was a good thing, as his emotions were more intense than a human mind could handle.

"Let's get this trip underway," Michael suggested, seeing as William would give away no more about how he truly felt about their current predicament. "Maybe we'll get lucky and find something." He didn't hold out much hope for that to happen.

They stepped into the kitchen to find Charlie.

"William's coming with us," Michael informed him.

"Yeah, okay." There wasn't even a threat of argument in his tone. He held up Melinda's cell phone. "She dropped it when she stormed out of here earlier."

"She's probably sitting down at the Wicked Muddy," Michael said. "Grace took a liking to her. I think Melinda felt comfortable there. You know she isn't going to stray too far. This is Melinda we're talking about."

"Yeah, you're right," he agreed. "Sorry, I'm having a hard time controlling the paranoia. The wolf really drags it out of me."

Emily saddled into the kitchen. "Why don't I look for her? If she's in town, I'll find her."

Michael grabbed hold of her, brushing his hand against her hair and kissed her affectionately. "Thanks, Em. I know we said we'd give her some space, but we'd feel a lot better if we just knew she was okay." He walked her to the front door.

Emily moved to leave, but he grabbed her again planting another kiss. "I just can't get enough of that," he mumbled in between their lips tugging at each other.

"You could have been getting that a long time ago if you weren't so stubborn."

"Don't remind me."

"I'll see you later," she mouthed with a grin, pulling away. She grabbed her bag and flitted out the door.

Michael rejoined Charlie and William.

Charlie leaned hesitantly against the countertop.

"I was thinking, since we're heading into White Pines anyway, maybe we should take a side trip to the old tree. I had wanted us all to go together and pay our respects to Mom, and search for clues about Dad, but since we're going to be so close..."

"What do you think, William?" asked Michael, glad that Charlie had brought it up. He'd had the thought himself, but couldn't decide if it was appropriate considering the circumstances for their visit into White Pines.

"I don't see the harm," the vampire conceded after a moment. "It is just minutes from the crime scene."

"Um, that's kind of coincidental, don't you think, William?" said Charlie, that fact just dawning on him.

"It had not occurred to me." William pondered this new quandary worried it was some vital clue he had overlooked. It seemed ridiculously obvious, definitely

something he should have seen before now. Especially since Melinda wasn't close, clouding his thoughts.

"William?" questioned Charlie.

"Sorry. Not sure why I didn't catch the possibility sooner. I think we would be remiss to call it mere coincidence, and if we are going to add a trip to the old tree to our itinerary, I think we'd better bring along a few precautionary items."

"I'll go grab some potions," said Charlie. "We'll be careful with them," he aimed at Michael. "We still need to use them, regardless of what happened to Mom."

"I know. Like you said though, we'll be more careful. I'll go grab a crystal." He took off to get it.

"And I will grab a snack, just in case," William intimated.

"So much human blood in one week?" jested Charlie, understanding what *lunch* meant. "Maybe one out-of-control supernatural monster in the house is enough?" His voice reeked with sarcasm.

William's mouth turned up into the slightest of smiles. "Ah, but I can handle my poison." Although after his Melinda blood cravings in the last twenty-four hours, he wasn't so sure about that anymore.

Charlie could not help but laugh. It felt good to joke with William, even in the face of the dangers they likely faced in the upcoming hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melinda told Riley to slow down and take the next right. It was a sharp turn, and he nearly had to come to a complete stop to do it safely.

"Where's it go?"

She just smiled and nodded for him to pay attention.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied.

If Melinda hadn't pointed out the turn, Riley would never have seen it. The trail was unmarked and just wide enough for a small car to fit through. The ground was smoothed over from years of use, so the motorcycle had no trouble even though it was unpaved. The trees and bushes surrounding the sides of the road grew tall, threatening to reclaim the road to its natural wild state.

Soon, they came to a blockade of granite rock about three feet in height, and he parked the bike. A look of awe spread across his face.

"What is this place?"

"It's where we locals like to get our kicks," she answered, dismounting the bike and taking off her helmet. He did the same, grabbing hers and hanging them both on the bike.

"I've never seen anything like it. Are we still in Maine?" he joked.

"Neat, huh? It's a quarry, been here since long before I was born. To be completely honest though, I haven't been here in years, but things don't really change much on the Isle. C'mon." She grabbed his hand daringly, dragging him along to the edge.

There was no other person in sight.

Melinda shouted into the quarry. Her echo carried to the other side, repeating her shout until the last echo finally faded into the distance.

"Wicked," Riley chuckled.

"I don't know why I did that," she blurted out, her cheeks blushing. "Haven't screamed into the quarry since I was a kid." It was a silly childish thing to do.

"I don't think any less of you," he responded with a chuckle.

She swept her gaze away from him, peering back into the quarry. She missed her visits here. Which seemed stupid seeing as it was just a short drive from her home. She hadn't been here once in the last four years. *Funny*, she could not help but think. What an odd thing to have such a sudden desire to be outdoors and free, the thought of being stuck inside her house suddenly squeezing her heart and lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

The quarry resembled a steep granite staircase, leading down to open water below. Except that you could only catch glimpses of the water as drifting fog rolled across the surface where the summer heat hit the damp granite, warming it. The warmed air rose up out of the quarry giving the place an almost sauna-esque feel. Off to the right, a river poured into the quarry, creating a long waterfall that splashed far below.

Melinda sat down, kicked off her flip-flops and dangled her feet over the edge of the quarry. Riley joined her, sitting so close he could have easily leaned in and nibbled on her ear. She didn't know why that picture came into her mind but her cheeks flushed at the thought of him doing so.

She turned to Riley. "So where are you visiting from?"

"Portland. Oregon, not Maine."

She nodded, letting out a timid breath. She couldn't think of anything else to say other than, "It's like a little slice of paradise here. I'd forgotten how beautiful the quarry is in the summer." *Really! Boring small talk. He's going to ditch you here for being so dull.*

"I can't disagree," Riley responded. "I think the view is stunning."

Melinda glanced in his direction and her cheeks turned even rosier when she realized he was looking directly at her when he spoke. Air suddenly seemed impossible to suck into her lungs. She let her bangs hide her face, hoping he could not see her reaction. A flurry of fiery tingles ran all over her skin, causing her to shudder.

"You cold?"

"No. Fine," she breathed out. "It's actually kind of, hot. I don't know why I shivered."

He grinned, wearing a look that said he knew why.

"This place does have a tropical sort of feel to it." He leaned onto his back, gazing up into the sky. "A person could come here and completely forget they were stuck on an island off the coast of Maine."

"Do you feel stuck, being here on the Isle?"

"Thought I did."

She shoved her bangs behind her ear and twisted her body to peer down and toss him a questioning gaze.

"I just mean, maybe it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

"So you're not just visiting?"

"Nope. Not a tourist. My brother talked me into moving here with him. We just arrived a couple days ago. He's a few years older than me, been wanting to move

here for a couple years now. I wasn't really into it myself, but now, I think my mind is changing."

Melinda leaned back, the sun making an appearance again, warming her skin. It was also an excuse to look away from Riley and find her breath. He wasn't just a tourist. He was sticking around. She hoped her excitement over that fact wasn't too obvious.

It was just before noon she thought, squinting into the sky. Plenty of time to discover more about motorcycle man. *And long before the moon rises and Charlie*-she stopped herself, pushing the thought deeply into the recesses of her mind.

"How old are you?" she asked him, distracting herself.

"Just turned twenty-two a month ago."

"Do you and your brother get along?"

"Sure, for the most part. He's always on me about this and that, and basically getting my act together and growing up and being more serious, like him."

"Sounds familiar," she replied dryly.

"You've got siblings too then?"

"Couple older brothers." *Well, maybe tomorrow only one brother that matters*, she thought dreadfully. Another uncertainty she pushed out of her mind.

Riley pulled himself up to his side, facing her. "So, will you bite my head off if I ask how old *you* are, Melinda?"

She turned her head and stared at him as if debating the question. "Nah, I'm too comfortable for biting right now."

He pouted, waiting for an answer.

"If you must know, I'm a mere baby of twenty-one."

"That's hardly a mere baby." There was a devilish innuendo in his tone.

"Not what my brothers think." Her thoughts added, *not like I've given them reason to think otherwise the last few years*.

"Are you seeing anyone?" he blurted it out as if he'd just gotten up the nerve. His voice held a tinge of apprehension.

She didn't answer right away. Her throat clammed up. It wasn't a question she'd been expecting. And did bad dates, steamy dreams, or off limit vampires count?

No. Definitely not.

"I'm taking that's a yes," he said glumly.

"Oh, sorry. Um. No. Actually that's a very big no."

"Am I bringing up a bad subject?"

"Not really. It's just kind of a loaded question. I've had a series of very disastrous dates." She shook her head, unable to explain further. And did three dates in the last two years even count as a series?

"Well, I'm sorry they went badly." Riley didn't sound sorry. "It's their loss." And my gain, Melinda could practically hear him add.

She leaned down onto her back again, soaking in the sun, glad it had reappeared. She could not think up any response to what he'd said. Only that she really liked everything he said. Almost as if he knew every perfect thing to say to her. Everything she wanted to hear.

*Geesh. He probably says the same thing to every girl.*

*Then why am I soaking it up like a sponge? Am I this desperate for male attention? Dang. Maybe I am, but he can't be any worse than Jerkface.*

*Oh. My. God. Shut the heck up!*

*This guy, Riley, is nothing like Jerkface.*

The ease with which she could talk to Riley alone was ten times better than her attempts to converse with Jerkface.

Frustration mounted. Between still be worked up over the William dreams, she was falling way too easy for a complete stranger.

She sucked in a restorative breath, letting her cares go with her exhale. *You're hanging out with a hot guy, lying in the sun, just shut up and enjoy it!*

Mists from the quarry lifted, leaving a moist layer on her face and neck. She let out a low, satisfied groan. "I miss the feel of the sun on my skin. I can't remember the last time I did this."

"It's been a sunny summer so far. You have fair skin though. You probably prefer the shade, huh?"

"I actually really don't." She rolled onto her side to face him again. "I just haven't seen much sun recently."

"You're an odd girl," he said, inching closer to her. "I don't mean in a bad way," he added quickly. "The way you talk though, it's like you just got out of prison or something."

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

"Oh, man. Did you? I didn't mean," she put her hand over his mouth.

"I've never been in prison, Riley." *Maybe a prison of my own design.*

He grabbed her hand before she could pull it away and held it in his own hand, stroking her fingers. She was glad right then that he was human and not a vampire like William. Although, as hard as her heart was pounding, she didn't think he'd need extraordinary hearing to hear, see, or feel the thudding against her chest.

"I didn't think you looked like the been in prison type. But I'd like to know all your secrets, Melinda, even if you were in prison."

She thought about that for a minute. Would he really want to know all her secrets? Being a witch came with a lot of responsibility. It also came with a lot of danger. She looked into Riley's molasses eyes. She did not think he would mind a little danger.

"What are you thinking right now?" he asked. "You just got this reckless sparkle in your eyes."

"Has anyone ever told you that you read people really well?"

"Actually, I've been told that more than once. And more than once it's gotten me into a bit of trouble."

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, I've never been in prison, either, if that's what you mean," he raised his eyebrows humorously, allowing her hand to slide back to her side.

She bit her lip, trying to contain herself. Her previous bad dates, or Jerkface, could not hold a candle to Riley. Not in looks or charm. Even if he was just filling her with crap. At least he was giving it some effort.

It took everything she had not to reach out and stroke Riley's face, or neck, or chest. Melinda let out an exasperated groan and jumped up onto her feet. He might be good to look at and charming, but he was still a total stranger no matter how comfortable she felt around him.

"There's something else I haven't done in a really long time," she told him, a warning tone shooting at him.

"And what would that be?" he asked, rolling onto his back, gazing up at her.

Her body blocked the sun from stinging his eyes. It left a golden halo around her head. *Fitting*, he thought.

*An angel.*

*How is it she's not taken?*

Something dawned on him. *Bad dates... some guy must have been a total jerk to her.*

How would this even be possible? Every part of her being shouted at him, *would it be too much to ask if someone just loved me, for me?* And for reasons he did not understand, this was all he wanted to do.

She stared down at him, a vexing twinkle in her eyes.

"Do you trust me?" There was menace in her tone. She stepped closer to the edge of the quarry.

"Trust you? Hmm..." He got to his feet, facing her as if trying to read her thoughts. "I guess this means I do." His voice inflected maybe, maybe not, but I'm game either way.

"You're probably going to want to take your clothes off then." Melinda proceeded to peel off a sweater and lift her tank top over her head.

"What are you doing?" he breathed out through puckered cheeks. *Oh, wow! So perfectly curvy in all the right places.* He wanted to reach out and slide his arms around her. Had to stop himself from acting on that thought.

Melinda shot him a look that said undress already.

"Okay, okay. Your wish, my command," he surrendered hastily.

A nervous pit expanded in her chest. *What the heck am I doing?* Standing half-naked next to a perfect stranger. *Yeah, this isn't the stupidest thing you've ever done.* She unbuttoned her jean shorts, slinking out of them, allowing them to slither down her legs to the ground. She swore she heard a hungry groan from Riley's direction but didn't dare look his way. If she did, she'd lose her nerve.

Thank God, she'd at least worn a matching bra and panties set today. Bright pink, making her skin look the color of cream. She worked hard to keep her hands by her sides, rather than letting them enclose around herself. He'd already seen what she looked like. He either liked it, or didn't.

*Dumb dumb dumb*, she repeated to herself. *I didn't even suck in my pooch. Ugh! Dreaming about this is so much easier.* Melinda sucked in and thought, *Screw it! I'm not doing anything like I would normally today.* Her eye caught him staring at her; he was looking right at her, licking his lips like she looked, *yummy*.

She jerked her head forward, worked-up-level threatening to boil her blood at any second. Accept this time, it wasn't a dream. Motorcycle man was just a few feet away. Undressing. Because she'd asked him to.

She didn't know why she felt so comfortable and daring around Riley. Maybe it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her. Still, she had a gut instinct that she could trust him. But that instinct had led her into the arms of Jerkface. *Screw him.* And that wasn't her, just her under-utilized hormone levels that didn't want to hold the title, virgin, any longer. Maybe she could just pretend Jerkface didn't happen. It hardly counted as real anyway.

Regardless of her past choices, there was something different about Riley. She wondered how many naive women had said that same thing right before a serial killer took them and snuffed out their lives.

Melinda didn't want to lose her nerve. She moved to the edge of the quarry, her toes dangling precariously over the edge of the granite. She glanced over, unable to see the bottom as steam and fog rolled lazily across the surface.

Riley stepped up alongside her, just inches away, taking a safe peek over the edge.

Her gaze wandered to his nearly naked body. He wore just a pair of form fitting knit boxers. A sudden urge to reach out and stroke the tanned skin of his magnificently shaped chest nearly broke her balance, sending her plummeting over the granite cliff.

She sucked in a deep pocket of air and ordered him to take hold of her hand.

"Um, why?" he asked, with slight trepidation. "You're not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you?" he backed away a few steps.

"Are you afraid of heights?"

"Not really, but, you can hardly see the water. How do you know what's down there?"

"I could jump anywhere in this quarry with my eyes closed. Do you trust me?" she asked him again.

Riley eyed her, his look one of uncertainty. Was this some test of bravery? Meant for him, or her? He supposed if this test were something she needed, he'd oblige. He rejoined her, standing so close that their bodies were practically touching.

Melinda had no idea where this newfound bravery was coming from, but she refused to question it. Adrenaline surged through her body and she didn't want it to stop. It felt like she had been asleep for a very long time and had just awakened and remembered she had a life to live.

"Take my hand," she whispered with a hard swallow.

He did so.

Melinda jumped, taking Riley with her.

She didn't even know if he screamed on the way down. All she could hear was the rush of air flying by, and the waterfall crashing onto the water's surface below. Cool water bit at her sun-warmed skin as she hit the surface. She plunged underneath, fully submerged, moments later kicking upward, her head popping out of the water.

She'd lost her grip on motorcycle man.

"Riley," she called out. He didn't answer and she couldn't see him.

Her heart raced, blood pumping through veins that had been sedentary for years, each pulse surging with an intoxicating rush she wanted to repeat.

She'd left the old Melinda Howard up on the ledge. She spun around in the water, looking for Riley to surface. Her heart thudded hard when she didn't see him. Had she messed up? Had he been injured during the jump?

It was difficult to see; the mist was thicker than she had expected.

She gasped, suddenly grabbed from behind and spun around. Riley's moist lips charged her own. The sting of the cold water and the rushing of blood through her

veins was nothing to the electrifying thrum the touch of his lips shot through each nerve. All thought, all reason, dissolved into lips consuming each other.

When Riley pulled away, his breath came out in a frantic push. "That was such a rush... I've never done anything like it before."

"The jump, or the kiss?" she asked breathlessly.

He swam closer, looking like he was going to kiss her again.

Melinda's willpower sank, and drowned. She wanted a lot more than another kiss.

His eyes widened in surprised delight when she reached behind her back and unclasped her bra. She wiggled out of it, and it floated away with the churning whirlpools created by the waterfall. She left no question as to what she wanted.

Riley got her message loud and clear.

"Your wish is my command."

She swam backwards; he kept pace until she slowed down, granite sweeping across the bottom of her feet. She stopped when cool granite caressed her back. The water reached her chest, hiding most of her from the shoulders down.

Riley grabbed the top of the granite wall, drawing his body closer to hers. His lips trailed down her cheek, her neck, nibbling on her ear. It was heavenly as she thought it would be.

"I've never met anyone like you, Melinda."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"There haven't been that many," he returned. "But they were just that. Girls." The way he said the word was like describing her as the epitome of womankind.

Heavenly puffs of white steam enclosed around them.

His lips found hers again, but it wasn't a full invasion. He seemed to be holding back. Or maybe he wasn't, Melinda had no idea. She only knew she was falling hard. And fast. Too fast, she was certain most any sane person would say.

*Shoot. Shoot. Shoot.* A surge of doubt swept through her. *What am I doing?*

He pulled away gently, almost as if he sensed her tension. He was far too perceptive.

"I feel like I've known you forever, Melinda. Like we were destined to meet. Wow, sorry," he said with a hint of disbelief. "Even to me that sounded like a really lame pick up line." He let out a frustrated chuckle.

She recalled feeling the same way when she'd run into him the evening before. Like destiny had knocked on her door. "Well, since we're being lame and cliché, you should know I don't normally do this sort of thing. It's so *not* me."

"And not to meet, or beat, your cliché, but I usually do like to date, first," he said. "If you want to stop, Melinda, we can. The truth is," he let out a timid breath. "The truth is, from the moment I ran into you last night I haven't stopped thinking about you. I don't understand it exactly, but when I looked into your eyes they begged me to love you. To wrap you up in my arms and protect you. I've had an urge to do just that ever since and that's not going to change if you want to slow down." He looked directly into her eyes to be sure there was no doubt.

She glanced down into the water and smirked.

"I didn't say it would be easy to stop."

Riley was a stranger and yet she looked into his eyes and all doubt swept away.

"I won't ever do anything you don't want me to," he whispered, a slight tremble in his voice. "I want you to know you can trust me, Melinda. However long that takes."

Could he be anything but perfect? Could he say anything that wasn't exactly what she wanted to hear? Warning bells should have sounded in her mind. Instead, they were drowned out by the pulsing of her heart and belief in what he was saying even if it was naïve, and replaced by a need she had to have satisfied before she lost her mind. She was done not living her life anymore. Finished wasting away the days without taking a chance. A risk. Everything required risk. It was time she took one without worrying about the consequences.

"I want to take you out of the water, Melinda."

Excitement fizzled, her breath caught.

She didn't answer him right away. There'd still be steam hiding them from onlookers, but there would be nothing hiding her from Riley. He'd see every part of her. There would be no way to hide anything.

"I may have given you the impression I'm a confident person, Riley, but I'm not," she admitted painfully. "I don't... it's very... exposed."

"Then I'll make you see why you should be confident."

"There you go again, saying every right thing. How do you do that?" She almost felt tears welling up. *Seriously? Tears? He did call me hot. Forget the Jerkface! He can take his adorable and shove it!*

Riley shook his head. "It's all you, Melinda. You make me say things, think things, I've never thought before. Never imagined saying to anyone before."

"Okay," she whispered. "Take me out of," he didn't give her a chance to finish. He picked her up and carried her until they'd reached a granite surface he could sit her down on. Her feet dangled in the water.

"How about a partial compromise?" he said with a naughty grin. "I'll let you keep your toes in the water if you really want to."

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around him in reply.

"Will you tell me if I do something wrong? Or if you don't like it, will you tell me to stop?"

She nodded, unable to vocalize a yes.

"I may come across as confident as well, Melinda, but if I'm to be completely honest, I haven't done this a lot. And when I say a lot, I mean only once. I mean one girlfriend. We dated for over a year. Broke up. Months ago. And I can't believe I'm talking about this." *Okay, you can shut the heck up now if you haven't already ruined the moment.*

However, he felt Melinda melting into him. As if his admittance calmed her, was exactly what she needed to hear. Knowing Riley was inexperienced as she was, changed everything. And maybe he was lying, she didn't care. His show of vulnerability broke down any barriers of doubt she might have had.

Steam rose from the heat of the sun and the watery spray hitting the granite. The world disappeared, seeming to roll away with the mists. The only two people in existence were she and Riley, now lost to the world, blanketed by heavenly puffs of white.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melinda had no words.

Why couldn't she have met Riley months ago? Before she'd gone out with Jerkface.

"I had no idea it could be like this." Riley beamed, unable to take his eyes off her. "You're so beautiful, Melinda."

A strange feeling grew in the pit of her stomach, drowning the perfect bliss she'd been bathed in. What was it?

Shame? Fear? Was it too much, too fast?

Was she feeling guilty because part of what had drawn her into a stranger's arms, was William? And now this stranger was suddenly claiming every part of her being for his own. For a moment, she had completely forgotten they were naked in a quarry. The rest of the world washed away. All her problems and concerns just *vamoose*.

So why did this pit suddenly open, threatening to swallow her whole?

"I..." she didn't know how to express her feelings.

Riley got to his knees, bringing her up with him. He adjusted himself so they sat facing each other.

"What just happened?" He tapped her head gently. He wasn't angry or harsh, but curious.

"Far too perceptive," she said, lowering her head. "I'm letting old issues get into my brain, that's all."

"So, you're okay with everything?" he grinned confidently, already knowing her answer. But she wanted to give him the affirmation he deserved. Melinda grabbed his lips in hers. No shame. No guilt.

He grabbed her and slid across the granite, leaning against a wall and tucked her onto his lap. Sun shined down, warming them. Mist and steam still hid them from view. She placed her head on his chest, running circles with her fingers across his skin.

"Thank you." He didn't respond. She looked up to a confused look on his face. "For caring about what I wanted. For asking, not pushing me. For not leaving me right after." She tore her gaze away. She shouldn't have said it. It was needy. Too serious.

"Why would I leave you?"

She shrugged. Old inhibitions returning.

It took him a second, but he finally heard what she didn't say. *Thanks for not making it all about you.*

"Hey," he picked up her chin. "Any guy who would treat you like that is an idiot who doesn't deserve a minute of your thoughts. Especially thoughts that make you feel bad about yourself." Which had happened, he expected. "You're perfect, Melinda. No. Strike that. Perfect hardly cuts it. You are a queen."

"There you go again, saying all the right things."

"And there you go again making me say things I've never said to anyone, ever."

She let out a nervous exhale and rested her head against him. "Riley." She said it so timidly she wasn't even sure he'd heard her.

"Yeah."

She raised her head to face him. "I, um..." she lost her nerve.

"What?" he asked softly.

She scrunched her nose, biting her lip.

"Now you have me curious," he said, nipping at her nose.

Her cheeks got pink and she had to look away from him.

"Okay, now I'm intrigued. You're going to have to tell me."

"Why is this so hard?"

"Now, you're just killing me. Do I have to force it out of you?" he teased.

She sucked on her bottom lip and closed her eyes. "There was this guy. Well, I told you I went on a series of bad dates. But the last guy, I call him Jerkface, he really took the cake, and well, I was starting to think there was something wrong with me. So thank you for making me believe otherwise." She sighed. "I wish I'd met you first. It would have been a much more pleasant memory." Melinda could not believe she was telling him all this.

"Maybe, considering our disastrous starts, we could just pretend our previous relationships didn't happen? I know I'd like to forget about mine. You're a much more pleasurable memory for me too."

Melinda grinned, resting her head against his chest. It was an appealing idea.

Even if this did turn out to be a one night (or middle of the day) stand, it had been worth it. Her angst from all the William dreams was gone. Her worries and fears had flown into the wind. She wanted to wrap herself in this moment and remember how it felt, forever.

Riley had given her everything she needed. Her eyes fluttered closed, feeling sleepy.

He let their bodies slide down onto the granite, bringing her head onto his chest. He stroked her hair, listening to her breaths slowing as she drifted off.

Melinda trusted him enough to open up to him, but also sleep next to him, a total stranger. What had he ever done in his life to deserve such a magnificent creature?

He despised whoever had treated her so poorly that she thought so little of herself. He'd be content to spend the rest of his life making sure that never happened again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie sat behind the wheel of the jeep, driving, while Michael chatted on the phone with Mack, filling the sheriff in on the shapeshifter theory. William sat like a stone in the back seat, focused, deep in thought. He was also using his enhanced hearing and sight to track any unusual sounds or movement as they wound their way through the narrow roads of White Pines National Park.

"Hey, ask Mack if she happened to see Melinda while she was out today?" Charlie told Michael. He nodded and relayed the question.

"No. Okay. We haven't seen her since this morning and she left her phone at home. Emily went looking for her, but she just called and said she didn't find her. We're getting a bit worried. K, thanks, Mack. See you in a few."

"She seen her?"

"Nope."

"So help me, if something's happened to her..."

William inched forward and touched his shoulder. "Focus on the task at hand, Charlie. Control your emotions."

Charlie nodded. William was right. He could not afford to lose control. But of all the days for Melinda to run off.

"Here's the turn," Michael pointed out.

Charlie pulled the jeep off the road and parked. "Mack said she'd meet us just over the hill."

"How is she planning to explain our arrival at a crime scene?" asked William.

"It's Mack, she'll think up something," said Michael.

Just then, an exhaust backfired as a hefty cargo van pulled up alongside them. The man behind the wheel waved, smiled and kept driving up the road.

"Police vehicle?" asked Michael.

"I smell human food," William told them.

"Mack," the brothers said simultaneously.

Sure enough, as they approached the hill, they saw the driver get out and prop open a door, proceeding to set up a few tables. They heard Mack shout "Lunch" and watched as everyone at the crime scene eagerly made their way to the truck. As they gathered, Mack gave a short speech.

"I just want to thank all of you for your hard work today. I know this hasn't been an easy one. So let's all take a much needed break, have some food, some coffee, and then we'll get back at it, okay?"

Mack walked to the other side of the van where Charlie, Michael, and William waited just in the woods, out of sight.

"Keep hidden as much as possible. You've safely got twenty, maybe thirty minutes. My guys get antsy to get back to work pretty quickly," she added proudly.

Charlie tossed her a half-hearted salute, and they headed toward the crime scene. They kept to the edges of the wood line until out of sight of Mack's team.

They saw the body, a bloody sheet wrapped over it.

William suddenly gagged, a low hiss echoing in his throat, his fangs dropping.

Horrified by his reaction he spun around, trying to hide it. But the brothers had already seen. "Too much blood," he admitted, forcing his fangs to retract.

"Maybe there's more than one monster in the house that cannot handle his poison, after all," Charlie mumbled sardonically.

"I'll go do a perimeter sweep and check the out-skirting areas," William retorted flatly.

"We'll meet you back at the jeep," Michael said as the vampire sped off in a daze, leaving behind a whirlwind of dried leaves and forest debris. "Does William seem a little off his game lately?"

"Have any of us been *on our game* lately?" Charlie countered.

Michael could not argue the sentiment and supposed the vampire was allowed to have a bad day now and then, too.

Charlie and Michael proceeded to creep around the crime scene, looking for anything the werewolf, and possible shapeshifter, might have left behind.

"Why don't I just do a death reading?" suggested Michael.

"I don't know, it's going to be a vicious thing to watch, and chances are you won't see anything more than we already know."

"Believe me! I don't like the idea either but what if I can see something helpful? I think it's worth trying. We're running out of options. And time."

"Okay," Charlie relented. "But if it gets too intense, just stop."

Michael sat next to the body and reached out his arm. He flexed his hand, preparing himself.

Charlie didn't like it. Michael's ability could come in handy, but what a terrible magical inheritance. A witness to death. Sometimes he thought he understood how magic worked and sometimes he felt like he didn't understand anything. His parents had always told him that magic worked in mysterious ways, and would provide the gifts it saw fit for the times ahead. And that those gifts could grow and change with time and need.

Charlie himself had never been bestowed any extra magical gifts. He assumed this was due to the extra passenger he already carried, that somehow the wolf negated a need, or perhaps didn't allow the space for anything extra.

Michael touched the body.

Charlie tensed, watching his brother's eyes rolling behind closed lids.

The reading ended abruptly when Michael pulled his hand away from the body.

"Too much?" asked Charlie.

"No. Too little." Michael furrowed his brow, perplexed.

"What do you mean?"

"This guy didn't die at the hands of a wolf. He died after being in a coma for a year. Just slipped away, peacefully."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No. It doesn't." Michael got up and paced for a minute. "I think this was a setup, Charlie."

"Why do you say that?"

"The man was in the hospital when he died. I couldn't see anyone else around. No family or friends. But I recognized his face."

"Who was he?"

"A John Doe. Remember that tourist who fell off a cliff last summer? Was here alone and Mack couldn't track down his identity, and no missing persons reports were ever filed."

"This is him?"

"Yeah. He never woke up from the coma. Which means someone did this to him after he died. His face is so torn up, Mack wouldn't have recognized him."

Charlie let out a frustrated growl. "It's a message for me. The alpha wolf wanted me to know he was here."

Michael nodded. "I'd wager you're right."

Charlie didn't know what to make of it other than, sadistic. "What if it wasn't just a message, but a distraction?" The idea hit his mind forcefully.

"That's a disturbing thought."

"Yeah. And probably wrong. But," Charlie trailed off, a terrible feeling nagging at his insides.

"I'll go talk to Mack," offered Michael. "You find William."

"Okay. Meet you at the jeep in a few."

Charlie found William already waiting by the jeep.

"Anything?" the vampire asked.

"Yes, and how about you?"

"Nothing of any value. A few wolf hairs, but we already know a wolf was here. What did you find out?"

"That a wolf might have been here, but the body was dead before it was brought here." Charlie went on, explaining what Michael had seen.

"Interesting. A message telling you that he, the alpha wolf, is on the Isle, but possibly also a distraction, bringing us here. Away from what?"

"Melinda?" This was Charlie's only concern.

William's face turned stoic, getting that deep in thought look.

"I do not think so," he said after a moment.

"Can you be sure?"

The vampire hesitated in answering. He wanted to be correct, but he didn't know if he could trust his instincts today. He felt off. And if he wasn't so afraid to leave Charlie on his own, he'd be scouring the Isle searching for Melinda to be sure she was safe.

Michael appeared.

"Told Mack. No idea how she's going to handle this one. But now that she knows what happened she can sort all that out. Did you find anything William?"

"No. And Charlie filled me in on your findings."

"We were just discussing possible motives." Charlie shifted on his feet.

"If it was a distraction, and not just a message, you mean?" confirmed Michael.

"Yes. My thoughts were Melinda."

"You think it's keeping us out here and away from her?" Michael's heart dropped to his stomach.

Charlie puffed out his cheeks. "William doesn't think so and I guess... I guess I don't think that either. It wouldn't make any sense. How would the wolf even be aware she wasn't with us today?"

"Yeah, I don't think that's it either. But it would be awfully nice to figure out where the heck she is."

"Let's just take a step back for a minute," suggested Charlie. "The wolf left me a message, that much is clear. But it didn't kill someone to do it."

"You think this alpha is not a killer?" suggested William.

"It attacked you, after trying to attack our father," reminded Michael. "And from what I remember, it looked poised to kill when it bit you ten years ago."

Charlie could not argue. "Obviously, there's something we're missing. Question right now is, do we continue into White Pines and the old tree, or just leave and get home?"

Michael opened his mouth but then closed it. After a second he said, "I'd still like to go."

William agreed. "Yes. We should attempt to retrieve your mother's body. If at all possible. I also think a thorough search of the area might be required just to be certain the *something* we might be missing in this scenario, isn't somehow connected to the old tree. Or the power source."

"You're right, William. Let's get moving." Charlie got into the jeep, letting Michael drive.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun dipped behind a cloud and the park suddenly appeared much darker than it should for being afternoon, and usually the brightest and warmest time of

day. The old tree was at the edge of a riverbank, and as they drove closer, fog started to roll across the road. Michael stopped and parked.

"Do you hear anything nearby, William?" Michael asked.

William closed his eyes and allowed his ears to listen for any abnormal sounds.

Birds, the river, fish jumping in the river, bugs and insects buzzing, and footsteps.

"There is someone close," he warned, trying to better tune into the sound. "Humming. A woman. I think just a hiker walking through."

"Let's go then," decided Charlie. Michael and William followed.

They approached the area apprehensively.

"It's too bad I couldn't see or hear how Mom and Dad opened the tunnel," Michael mentioned to Charlie and William.

"Can't deny that would be helpful," agreed Charlie. "But we'll manage."

They came over the crest of a hill and stopped, searching the ravine below.

To their right, jammed against the riverbank was the old tree. It stood no taller than the surrounding trees, but was easily twice as wide and had many roots that shot out of the ground, winding around the base.

The embankment they stood on continued far to the left, dipping down into the river.

"I remember coming here," Charlie muttered. "I was so little. I think the last time we came here I couldn't have been older than..."

"Eight," William answered for him. "You were but eight years old. Michael was five, and Melinda was but a toddler of three." He looked at them, then. "I have many fond memories of this place."

"It's a shame they've been ruined now by bad ones," said Charlie.

"Yes, well. Shall we?" William sauntered down, standing in front of the tree, investigating the tangled mess of roots. Charlie and Michael came up alongside him.

"How will we get in?" Michael looked ready to start digging if necessary.

"We will do as your parents did. Try one spell at a time. One attempt at a time. Until something works and the doorway opens."

They spent the next few minutes meandering around the area, looking for any obvious magical clues. Things that a non-magical person would mistake for an odd or ancient symbol, some kind of artwork, but again, they struck out.

There was to be no easy way to get inside.

In fact, there was nothing remotely magical or supernatural surrounding the tree at all. It just looked like an old tree with a mess of roots at the base.

Michael took out his crystal, hoping against hope that it would at least point them in the right direction, pick up some secret magical spot, or energy, find something. He let the crystal spin in his hand but it never stopped and never lit up. He frustratingly threw the crystal to the ground.

William dashed and picked it up, gently placing it back in his hand. "Michael, if this is truly the doorway to the Isle's power source, it will take more than a crystal to access such a place."

"I didn't really think it would be easy, it's just, our mother's bones are right inside that cave. And to stand here this close and not be able to get in."

"Maybe we are searching too close?" Charlie suggested, understanding his brother's frustration. "Maybe we need to broaden our search a little. We should separate, do a quick probe of the area and meet back here in thirty minutes. We wanted to scour the place for signs of the alpha wolf anyway."

William was at first apprehensive about separating, but after a moment agreed, when the only sound he heard was the lady-hiker, humming. She had stopped somewhere nearby. "Be careful," he reminded the brothers.

"You too, William," said Charlie. "There is a wolf out there."

"I can handle myself. If you have forgotten, I'm toxic to wolves as well." He let his fangs drop and chomped his teeth at them. The brothers rolled their eyes, but knew he was right. His bite would end the life of a werewolf in minutes. Very long agonizing minutes for the wolf. But wolves knew vampires could kill them and didn't typically choose to pick a fight.

They each took off and began combing the area in search of any clues.

Michael took out his crystal and placed it in the center of his palm. He'd cast a spell on it to search for signs of magic. To seek out things like magical energy from spells used recently, or nearby. He stepped cautiously, letting it spin in his palm. It found nothing. This comforted his nerves only in the aspect that it didn't appear any magic had been performed in the area recently, therefore, most likely it was coincidence that the alpha had been in White Pines. But it was maddening that it picked up nothing at all. Nothing that led him to believe this was really the location of the Isle's power source. Surely, the crystal would be picking up some magical signal. But with each step, nothing.

William dashed a great distance, covering a larger circumference around the brothers. But had no luck finding anything, and was pleased that he did not come across any scents he did not recognize as either animal, plant or human. No scent of a wolf. Nothing to indicate the alpha had come anywhere near the tree. At least, not in its wolf form.

About fifteen minutes into his search, Charlie whipped his head around peering into the woods after hearing what sounded like an animal, growling. He sniffed into the air, but did not smell anything unusual. And when he saw or heard nothing else, he shook it off and continued.

After a few more steps, he froze again. The crisp snap of a branch breaking somewhere close by cracked through the air.

"Michael? William?" he called out in a loud whisper. There was no reply. It's possible Michael could not hear him, but William would have.

His eyes widened. A spot of what looked like gray fur moving between two trees. He sniffed, but didn't smell a wolf.

Flowers. He smelled flowers. Pine from the trees. Decaying brush and ground debris.

Another movement.

Charlie eyes narrowed in on the target, the wolf transforming him into a hunter now stalking his prey. He crouched, aiming his silver spheres into the woods, searching for the gray fur. A growl formed in his throat. He swallowed it, keeping silent.

His head flicked to the side. Gray fur. Bending up and down as if leaning over and picking something up off the ground. Charlie crept forward, attention on his target.

With each step, his head grew hazier, memory of what he hunted, fading. Legs faltered, knees buckled, and he fell to the ground.

An intoxicating smell filled his nostrils, overwhelming all his wolf senses. The monster lurking inside him couldn't care less about searching for the alpha. It wanted whatever made that smell.

It took everything he had to get back onto his feet. He shook his head trying to remain coherent. There was something familiar about this scent.

*Never mind the smell.*

*Find the wolf.*

*But that smell*, his mind argued.

A growl flitted through his lips. He needed to find out what created that smell. He wanted more of it.

*The wolf. The wolf. The wolf.* His human mind shouted somewhere deep in his brain.

Gray fur, just in front of him.

He lunged toward it, stopping himself just before landing on it.

*Just a gray fuzzy sweater*, his human mind warned.

*The hiker.*

The hiker turned around. "Eval!" Charlie's voice came out in a sinister growl.

"Holy crap! Charlie Howard! You scared me half to death!"

Seeing a familiar face did not tame his wild side. His wolf senses tingled. He stepped closer, a menacing stance shouting silent threats at her.

"What are you doing out here?" His demand was unkind.

Eva stepped back, pointing apprehensively to a basket on the ground. "I've been collecting flower specimen for my father. What's wrong with you, Charlie?" Her feet moved backwards in an attempt to put some space between them. But with each step she took back, he took one forward.

"Why are you here?" he asked again, disbelieving her explanation about picking flowers. Silver slits bore into Eva's wide hazel eyes, each look he cast a warning for her to tell the truth. She swallowed a stammered response he didn't hear.

The intoxicating smell filtered through his nostrils, seeping into his throat and nothing else mattered at that moment. He needed to find the source of the smell. He needed to possess whatever caused it.

He crouched down and sniffed the flowers she'd been picking. He swept the basket away with his hand spilling out the contents within. He stood up, stalking closer to Eva. She backed into a tree, her eyes taking quick swipes to each side, looking for an escape. Charlie could hear her heart, strumming faster and faster.

"They're medicinal," he heard Eva saying.

Her voice sounded distant to him.

He could only focus on the smell.

Eva kept talking. "My father uses them to make herbal ointments, like the one I'm using to heal my leg." She pointed at her still bandaged leg.

Charlie cast his gaze down for just a moment.

"I know they're illegal to pick, but I didn't think I'd be doing any real damage just picking a few," Eva continued rambling.

"Stop. Speaking." Charlie ordered severely. He moved so close to Eva she had no chance of escape. His muscular frame towered over her.

"What's wrong with you, Charlie?" she asked him, her voice purposely soothing.

Her sudden calmness sent a wave of awareness and clarity into his mind.

"Don't move, Eva," he pleaded.

He leaned his head against the tree just above her shoulder, the wolf and human sides of his brain in a battle for control.

Eva reined in her satisfied smile. So far, her experiment was working perfectly. She seemed to have found the perfect dose to do her damage. To make Charlie Howard lose control. To free the wolf. *When the moon rises tonight, I will own him.*

"It's you. Same as the cave," Charlie growled. The hunter returned, overpowering his human side. The smell winning the attention of his wolf. He stared into her eyes, blinking hard.

"What the," he didn't finish. Her eyes weren't a soft hazel any longer, more of a golden yellow. He shook his head again. Nothing looked right. Everything was blurry. Wrong.

His wolf sight had never failed him before. It was like his sense of smell was the only thing working.

Eva put her hand daringly onto his face, stroking his coarse whiskers. She didn't worry about her eyes changing color. Charlie's mind was so befuddled he'd never remember or think it real, later.

Charlie grabbed her hand meaning to push it away, but instead tore the sleeve of her sweater and laved his tongue up her arm, needing to see if the taste of her was as intoxicating as the smell.

She gasped, her body stiffening.

He grinned wickedly. Good. Eva hadn't expected that.

What she hadn't expected was her wolf's reaction to the act. It had happened in the cave as well, her wolf wanted to come out and play. She was tempted to let it. *No. Not yet. If he finds out too soon it will ruin everything.*

Charlie had never experienced anything like it before. A complete loss of control. His actions taken in and taken over by just one desire.

The tiniest bit of his human mind raced frantically, trying to regain the upper hand.

If it was night and the moon risen, he knew without a doubt he would surrender to the wolf. It waited, just under his skin as if counting down to the moon rising. He would not be able to stop the transformation.

*Stop it? Why would I want to stop it?* He'd never felt such need to allow the transformation to take place. To uncage the wolf.

Charlie's breath came out in deep pants, a feral snarl flitting through his parted lips. He tore the rest of the fuzzy sweater off Eva, leaving just a thin tank top to cover her. He forced her arms above her head, pinning them against the trunk of the tree.

He leaned in, threatening to connect his teeth with her skin. He licked the lengthening canines pushing out his lips. Eva exhaled, a shudder of fright sending Charlie into a frenzy.

"You should be afraid of me." His exposed teeth pinched across her neck. A sinister snarl plastered doom against her skin.

Eva held her breath. *Too far! Too far!*

Charlie wanted to bite into her flesh. Needed to tear skin off her body and rip her to shreds. Maybe he should let her go? Yes, *let her think she can get away from me. Give her a few minutes' head start.* This thought excited the wolf.

He loosened his grip and then changed his mind, tightening his grasp on her arms.

Eva swallowed hard, but did not fight him. *He's about to rip my throat out. I should be fighting this.* She was having all the wrong reactions to this experiment meant to test Charlie's defenses. Not hers.

She'd barely been able to get her yellow wolf eyes to change back to her human hazel. This test needed to end, now. It was an epic fail. When her wolf had surfaced just a little, in the cave, she'd not thought much of it. She'd almost told her father but decided against it. That might prove a fatal mistake now.

Even with these thoughts swimming through her brain, her wolf had a mind of its own, betraying her.

Charlie recognized this reaction. It wasn't fear.

*So she likes it.* He wanted to see the fear back in her eyes. A snarl swept through his teeth. His mouth widened in warning, his tongue caressing his teeth, his mouth watering just thinking of eating her.

Eva closed her eyes, bracing for the bite. *This isn't going to end well. Stupid wolf,* she berated her other half as it encouraged him. His tongue licked her skin from neck to cheek and she held her breath. Teeth clamped onto her shoulder. She was trapped unless she freed her wolf. She didn't have enough strength to fight him off her in human form. Her human half screamed silently to beg him to stop, but the wolf egged him on. She'd never had her two halves want the opposite thing.

His teeth tightened against her skin. He needed to taste her flesh. To have it on his tongue, in his teeth. Nothing else mattered. Just one, delicious bite.

"Charlie. Devin. Howard!" a hardened voice called out.

It was William.

Charlie ignored him.

"You must stop!"

Charlie whipped his head to look at William and let out a savage growl.

William rushed Charlie, slamming him to the ground. He reached down and grasped Charlie's throat, threatening to choke him.

"Do. Not. Make. Me. Hurt. You." William spat out venomously.

Charlie kicked and pulled at William's arm, unable to free himself. His only thoughts revolved around killing Eva Jordan. Sinking his teeth, ravaging her milky skin with globs of red.

He gnashed and chomped his teeth, aiming his bite at the vampire. If he didn't calm down, and accidentally bit William, the vampire would be dead in minutes. This didn't deter William from pinning Charlie to the ground, his icy grip holding firm around his neck.

Michael appeared, out of breath. *Holy crap.* His eyes were wide with confused dread as he witnessed William nearly strangling Charlie, his brother in a rage. Michael's eyes swept to Eva, her gaze frozen on Charlie.

Michael could feel uncontrolled fury and need pouring out of his brother; he tried to ignore it and ran to check on Eva. "Are you okay?"

She nodded yes, looking only slightly bewildered. To Michael's surprise, there was little fear in Eva's emotions. The smallest bit of confusion over what happened. This baffled him for a moment until he realized what emotions were pouring out of her... desire, excitement.

"Wow," Michael uttered, trying to ignore his empathic ability. Any normal person would have, and should have, been frightened near to death.

"Get her out of here," William demanded forcefully.

Eva didn't struggle when Michael grabbed hold of her arm and hastily departed the area. The farther away Michael took Eva Jordan, the more in control Charlie became. After just a minute of breathing Eva free air, a defeated, but normal looking Charlie Howard lay on the ground underneath William's grasp.

Upon seeing Charlie return, the vampire released his grip.

Charlie turned over, trying to get up, but fell back to his knees in complete disgust. He remembered everything. Everything he'd done. Said. Felt. Wanted. Almost taken.

"I nearly killed her, William. I wanted to kill her. If you hadn't stopped me..."

If William hadn't gotten there when he did.

If he hadn't stopped him.

At the very least, he would have bitten Eva, passing on his curse to her.

He couldn't even think about what he'd tried to do to William.

Charlie thought he might be sick.

William reached down and pulled Charlie off the ground, forcing him to stand and look at him, eye to eye. "I will not allow you to fail, Charlie. Do not give up now."

"What if it's something you can't stop, William? Whatever this was, *is...* I don't even remotely pretend to understand, but I don't think it had anything to do with the alpha. It felt more primal, like I happened upon something that triggered my wolf."

Charlie turned away from William, fearing he'd see disappointment in the vampire's eyes. "If it had been a full moon, William, I would *not* have been able to fight it. If something like this ever happens to me during a full moon, I won't be able to control it. I will transform and I will kill someone. *Many* someone's."

"Then we will do as we have always done," insisted William, dashing in front of Charlie, to speak at him directly. "We will not stop until we find a solution."

"And what if the only solution is to kill me? Can you do it, William? Can you kill me?"

William closed his eyes and dared not think about it.

"You can't let me hurt anyone." Charlie's voice sounded as though he'd already conceded that he was doomed.

"Let's go home," was all William replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael waited anxiously in the jeep. He took a relieved breath when he saw Charlie and William exit the woods. His brother said nothing as he slid into the

back seat. Michael threw a look at William, who tossed one back that said, *not now*.

He started the jeep and headed toward home. His gaze drifted to the mirror, keeping an eye on Charlie as he drove. His brother looked defeated, deflated. Like he'd already lost the battle and condemned himself.

He wasn't paying attention to the road and hit a pothole, sending the jeep bouncing into the air. It landed with a hard thud. "Sorry," apologized Michael. "We need new shocks." The jolt released Charlie from his silent stupor. "You okay?"

Charlie nodded a weak yes.

"Look, um, I don't really get what happened out there, but we'll figure it out, and deal with it." Michael looked to William for backup, but he seemed far away, deep in thought.

"What happened was I nearly killed Eva Jordan. No, not killed, more like ripped to shreds."

"Okay," choked Michael.

"It was some sort of smell," Charlie explained. "Intoxicating, like a drug. A very bad drug, with very bad side effects."

"Smell?" questioned William, joining the conversation.

"I can't even describe it other than completely overwhelming. It took over all control. I had none left. It happened when we were in the cave in Bloodsucker Bay as well."

"Is that what happened?" asked Michael. He hadn't brought it up again, although he had never seen his brother acting so strangely.

"It wasn't near as strong or as bad when it happened before, in the cave. But the same underlying feelings were all there. Just dampened. A lot."

"Perhaps this Eva Jordan's body releases some sort of chemical that attracts your wolf?" William suggested.

"With the horrible side effect being I'm so attracted, I want to tear the skin off her body, piece by piece." Charlie lifted his eyes in dark sarcasm.

"Something of the sort," William replied bleakly.

Charlie did recall being aroused and had no idea if William or his brother had witnessed that, but didn't bring it up, horrified by it. Horrified by what he'd wanted to do to her. What he *did* do to her.

It wasn't him. It didn't even feel like *his* wolf. His wolf had never acted like that before, ever. His wolf was physically stronger than his human side. Less controlled. Frisky... it was definitely that. Hence his time with Nina, however, she had the power and strength to handle him.

Most of what happened was getting hazy in his memory, like a dream slipping away after waking. But he remembered wanting to injure and kill. To bathe in pain and fear.

"How was she, Michael?" he finally dared ask. "I don't know how the heck I'm going to do it, but I need to find some way to apologize." Charlie shook his head and released a weary chuckle. "How the heck do you apologize to someone you threatened to tear to pieces?"

"Yeah, I don't think they make any cards for that," Michael jested lightly, attempting to brighten his brother's outlook. "But actually, she was okay all things considered. A little freaked I think, but to her benefit, she handles crazy well. Kind

of eerily well." It was something he and Charlie had noticed when they'd met her in the cave, but Michael was beginning to wonder if there wasn't something to Charlie's distrust of her. His brother had felt something was off. Maybe there was. Then again, maybe she was just a little crazy.

He shook his head, disbelieving he was once again being dragged into a sibling's love life. Although, this situation was a bit different and much more complicated.

He glanced through the mirror watching his brother's face. "It's actually too bad you want to kill her so badly, Charlie. Eva is," Michael stopped, searching for the right words. "She's very into you."

"Yeah. Too bad," he uttered in dry disgust.

Michael left out one little part. When he and Eva had gotten out of the woods, her emotions had just disappeared. He couldn't get a read on them any longer. He wondered maybe if it was shock. Perhaps the reality of what had just happened hit her more appropriately; the excitement washed away by an overwhelming dose of fear. This was the only explanation he could imagine behind the cause of her emotional shutdown. Regardless of why, he didn't want to burden his brother with this right now. He'd tell him later when things had calmed down.

"Charlie, it dawns on me," said William, from the front seat, "that we have never properly researched the subject of mating rituals between wolves, or werewolves."

"Mating rituals?" Charlie repeated, awkwardly.

"Yes. The smell that attracts you to Eva is obviously engaging your wolf. Perhaps this is because it sees her as a potential mate."

"Do wolves eat their mates?" Michael asked. "I've never heard of that."

"Me either." Charlie shifted uncomfortably, hoping they would move onto another topic.

"I could be wrong," William advised. "Perhaps your wolf senses something about Eva that you do not care for, and it sees her as a potential rival."

"Rival? Like she's into women? Not men?" clarified Charlie.

"That's one option I guess. We must look at all possibilities," William said.

Michael nodded. "She's *definitely* into men."

Charlie knew that to be true as well.

William shrugged. "It's all conjecture. Something to look into, at least."

Charlie had a questioning look on his face, aimed at Michael. "What exactly did Eva..."

"So not going there, Bro," Michael cut him off. He shot him a knowing smile through the mirror.

Charlie shifted in his seat again. This was sick and wrong and needed to end already! He had much more important things to deal with. The alpha running loose on the Isle. His missing still unaccounted for sister. And a father to find.

Charlie didn't know how to feel about the Eva situation other than, why her? Of all the people in the world he'd come into contact with, why did she bring out this sort of reaction? And of all the places for her to be? In the middle of White Pines, precariously close to a crime scene, and the old tree.

As horrified as he was by his actions, the nagging feeling in his gut would not relent. Something about her rubbed him the wrong way. His distrust of her had not changed, regardless of his actions today.

He let out an exasperated groan. She was just a woman. Not even that big or tall of a woman. This was beyond messed up. He would need to find some way to apologize and make it up to her. If Eva would even ever face him again. She should probably press charges. He'd attacked her! He definitely deserved to be locked up for what he'd done.

Charlie thought he might be sick for a minute and dropped his head, holding it in his hands in total disgust. His thoughts scrambled, unable to stay focused. He was everywhere and nowhere.

The sun was beginning to drop down to the tops of the trees. Afternoon was ending and evening was approaching. The full moon rising was not far behind.

The drive home seemed to take forever and when the jeep finally pulled into the Howard's driveway, there was only one conclusion he could come to.

"Michael, William," he started.

"Yeah," said Michael.

"When the moon rises tonight, I want you to lock me up."

"What?"

"You heard what I said, Michael."

"You really think it's that bad? That you might actually turn?"

Charlie could not speak the word aloud and just nodded a curt yes.

Michael looked to William, hoping he would say that Charlie would be okay, as usual. He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly thick when the vampire did not.

"I'll make sure the room is ready and secured, Charlie." William slipped out of the jeep and into the house without another word.

\* \* \* \*

Sun peeked through the clouds heating the granite rock, warming Melinda's skin as she lay on her stomach. Riley leaned alongside her, gently stroking her back with his fingers.

Neither spoke, but simply basked in the peaceful bliss that surrounded them. Melinda's life seemed miles away. She didn't want to return to it, ever.

She let out a low moan, feeling as though she was so relaxed she might melt into the granite and disappear. She could practically feel the grin on Riley's face as he stopped stroking her skin and lay down next to her. She rolled onto her side and draped a leg over him, sleep wanting to claim her again.

They'd already napped, awakened, and taken a swim to cool down. Only the water hadn't cooled them in the least. Melinda could not get enough of him. Her motorcycle man was too easy to fall asleep next to. Or on top of. Or tangled with.

Had it really only been a day? Not even a full day, and she'd spent it with Riley, without a care, or concern. *With a guy she'd just met.* It was so not like her. But he made her feel unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. Except for in her dreams.

She liked real. It was much more satisfying than dreams.

Sleep reeled her in, at first, her mind a blissful empty space.

And then quite suddenly she found herself awake, and no longer in the quarry.

She was fully dressed and standing in the middle of a forest clearing. She spun around, unfamiliar with her surroundings.

"What happened? Where am I?"

She realized a prophetic dream had found her. She pouted and huffed.

“Can’t I have one day off?”

Her eyes widened, a firefly sized golden glow stealing her attention. It floated through the trees toward her.

Melinda didn’t feel like she was dreaming. She didn’t look on like a stalker sneaking a peek into someone’s horrible demise. This was more like participating in the dream. “I am actually dreaming, right?”

She was surprised when a voice replied to her question. “Yes, Melinda. You are.”

Melinda gasped, the golden glow growing larger, taking on the shape of a person. The glow faded, leaving behind a woman. To say she was stunning would be an understatement. She dressed in white, which accentuated her smooth dark skin still bathed in a halo of the golden glow, casting serious eyes and a sympathetic bright smile at Melinda.

“Are you *talking to me?*” she asked, astonished.

The woman nodded yes.

“I’ve never talked to anyone in my dreams before. I see things. People usually. But I never interact with them. I only watch like a silent observer.”

“I had no choice but reach out to you in this manner, Melinda. But believe me when I say, your gifts will continue to grow with time, experience, and acceptance.”

“Acceptance?”

“Yes. Something you are finally doing.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Nina. And although I do know a lot about *you*, I’m here to help you save Charlie.”

*Shoot. Charlie...* the pit in Melinda’s gut opened wide. Guilt consuming it. She hadn’t even thought of him all afternoon. Too wrapped up in her own little world of pleasures.

Nina smiled, her grin turning into a majestic laugh.

“What?”

“Don’t feel guilty about how you spent your day, Melinda. It happened exactly as it was meant to. It opened you up, let your natural instincts take over, and allowed me to approach you in this manner.”

“Wait a minute, you’re a...” Melinda lost her breath, realizing what Nina was. “I can’t believe it!” She shook her head in disbelief. “Wait a minute though. Are you saying everything I did today was simply for this one moment to happen?”

“Yes, and no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Getting to this moment could have happened many different ways. The path was chosen by you. You were in control of your actions. But one way or another, you would have ended up right here, right now.”

“Oh. Okay.” Melinda still wasn’t sure she understood, but at least she’d actually had free will. She glanced at Nina suspiciously. Had she been watching them? Did her kind do that sort of thing? Surely, that was against the rules?

“Melinda, will you follow me?” Nina asked her, with a welcoming smile. “There’s something I need to show you.”

She followed the woman and what seemed like a blink later, Melinda's eyes popped open, this time for real. She sat up with a start, taking in her surroundings.

"Right, lying naked in the quarry," she mumbled under her breath.

She looked down at Riley. *This is going to get awkward fast.* Everything had been so perfect. And she was about to drive a stake into that perfection. She started searching for any sign of her underclothes, most likely lost to the waters in the quarry.

Riley stirred, waking. He sat up, leaning on his arms. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Just a, um, weird dream."

He looked skeptical. "You seem panicked all of a sudden."

"You're kind of freakishly perceptive," she told him. *Reminds me of Michael a little.* She proceeded with her search. "Drat, still in the water." She saw her bright pink underthings floating far away.

"You want me to jump in and grab'em for you?"

"No time. I, um," she sucked in nervously, "hate to bring an abrupt end to a really, really incredible day, but I..." What did she tell him? She needed an excuse to leave in such haste.

"What's going on?" He grabbed her shoulder gently. Her heart was thudding so hard he felt it against his palm. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh no, Riley. It's not that at all."

Relief washed over him.

"I just kind of, sort of, have a job I have to get to." She tugged at her lip with her teeth, hoping he wouldn't question further.

"Oh, okay. No problem. I can have you back in town pretty fast."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Jobs are jobs. You gotta do it." He grinned, tossing a glance around the quarry. "This couldn't last forever. Reality had to come slicing back in at some point." He didn't sound any more thrilled than she felt.

"Yeah, exactly," she agreed with a sigh. He helped her up, and they started the arduous climb to the top of the quarry. If she thought just lying around naked with him was exposed, it was nothing compared to the granite steps. And thank God they were cut like actual steps, or the journey to the top would have reached new levels of awkwardness.

At the top, Melinda peeked over the edge, just to be sure they were still alone, and that their outer clothes were where they had left them. They were strewn about on the ground, just at the cliff's edge.

"Thank God." She scurried to get dressed.

"Yeah, that would have been a pretty uncomfortable ride back into town," he conceded.

Riley tossed a helmet to her and they hopped onto the bike. "Where should I take you?"

"Harboring the Book," she told him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "The bookstore in town," she explained when his face went blank. She got the distinct impression that he'd never opened a book before. She rolled her eyes, bemused by his expression. "I'll show you where it is."

"To the bookstore it is then." He kick-started the engine and tossed her a quick smile. "Your wish is my command," he called out, speeding them off toward town.

\* \* \* \*

"The sun's going down, we still don't know where Melinda is, and we are no closer to finding the alpha werewolf," blasted Michael in frustration as they stood in the kitchen an hour later.

William glanced at Charlie. He was sitting at the kitchen counter, staring out the window watching what little sun remained near the base of the trees.

The Mack phone line rang loudly. Michael grabbed it. "Hey, Mack."

"We got a problem," she told him. "Get down to the morgue. Bring Charlie. We found another body. This one definitely died today, and I'm pretty sure by the wolf."

Michael just groaned, shaking his head. "Okay, Mack. We'll be right down. Hey, any Melinda sightings?"

"You still haven't found her?"

"No. Emily searched through town but no one's seen her."

"She's gonna have to be on her own for now, Michael. I hate to say it, but we got bigger problems."

"See you in a minute." Michael disconnected.

"What happened?" asked Charlie.

William answered. "No sign of Melinda and they found another body."

Charlie sat with his elbows on the counter, resting his forehead on his hands.

"Just this morning, everything was going so well," he mumbled. "We found out Dad might still be alive. Melinda was in the best mood I've ever seen her in. You and Emily were walking around so happy it was making everyone else around you giddy, and I was," he let the sentence dangle. He stood up and faced Michael and William. "How is it that in less than a day, everything can go so incredibly wrong? It's like everything is just falling to pieces again. We haven't even had time to sit down and make a plan of action as to how we're going to track Dad!"

"I don't know, Charlie. I don't know," said Michael. He was just glad he knew that Emily was safe and sound at her bookstore. She'd gone there to catch up on some work after searching unsuccessfully for Melinda. "Let's just focus on one thing at a time, okay? Mack needs our help. There's still time before you need to lock yourself up. C'mon."

"Yeah, you're right, Michael. Let's go."

"Coming William?" Michael asked as they headed for the door.

"I'll leave this one to you. There are a few things I want to check into."

They left him to do his research and walked down the cobblestone street heading to the morgue.

It was a tense walk, with no words passing between the brothers.

\* \* \* \*

Melinda and Riley pulled up in front of the bookstore. The sun was already on its way down and she hoped that even though it was her day off, Emily would be inside.

She got off the bike and handed Riley the helmet, turning to walk into the store. She had spent the very long ride back into town hoping that everything this woman named Nina had told her was true, and that she could save Charlie. *Of course it's true, look at the source!*

She stopped and spun back around. "Oh, um, sorry. Brain elsewhere." She stepped back over to Riley, still sitting on his bike. He slipped off his helmet.

"I can see that." His eyes danced in amusement.

"I really have to hurry, but, um," she bit her lip. She dreaded this part. The moment of truth. A one-day stand, or would she see him again? She steeled herself for whichever outcome, telling herself it didn't matter.

Riley got off his two-wheeled metal machine and removed his helmet, hanging it on the back of the seat. "I plan on being around later, if that's what you're wondering."

A look of relief spread across Melinda's face.

"You were afraid today might have been a one-time thing, weren't you?" he teased.

"The things you said... I loved every single word. But I thought maybe you were just saying them to," she paused, hoping she wasn't offending him. "I mean, it's like you said every single thing I wanted to hear. Needed to hear. It was *too* perfect."

"That is something I've never been called in my entire life."

She blushed.

"I meant every word I said, Melinda. I don't know if I've ever been more honest about anything." He gave his head a confounded shake. "You make me say such crazy things. I really don't normally say this kind of stuff. I think you've bewitched me."

She choked back a cough. She hadn't. But would he still find her as bewitching once he discovered she really was a witch? Until then, she'd just consider herself lucky, and him, utterly perfect.

"So, you do want to see me again, right?" Riley looked unsure.

Melinda answered by kissing him. He beamed, kissing her back, each touch of his lips relaying a message that he couldn't wait to see her again, and didn't want her to go. Each press, each tug, each pull brought her right back to the quarry.

*I should stop him.* She didn't.

There was a serious job she needed to do. A brother who needed saving.

Instead, hormones took over and she grabbed the back of his head, urging him not to stop. His mouth assaulted hers, his tongue tasting every nook and corner.

Tourists walking by shot them dirty looks.

Melinda forced herself to pull away. Reminding herself they were standing on a sidewalk. Words wouldn't form, her breaths uneven and needy.

"Wow. I didn't think that could get any better." Riley held her tight, unwilling to let go. They ignored the stares of the passersby. "Just imagine what they would've said if they'd seen us a few hours ago." He cast a devilish grin and released her, striding back to his motorcycle.

"I guess I'll see you later," Melinda said, a bit dazed. "Well actually, I can't tonight. Tonight is bad," she explained, disappointed she'd have to wait to see him again.

Riley glanced up at the sunset, now turning the sky deep reds and yellows.

"Tonight's a bad night for me too. How about tomorrow? Say a late morning coffee at that café across the street? The Wicked Muddy. And maybe after, I'll take you for another ride. On the bike." He winked.

Melinda's heart couldn't help but skip a beat at the thought of seeing Riley again.

"I'll take your speechlessness as a yes." He wore a confident smirk. "I love your smile. It's so kissable." He shook his head. "There I go again. Just can't keep my inner voice quiet today."

Melinda skipped over and kissed him one more time. She couldn't help it. "Tomorrow," she whispered, pulling back.

"Tomorrow seems weeks away." He shrugged, disbelieving what he'd just said again. "I'll see you tomorrow, Melinda." He almost looked pained over leaving her.

It sent a new surge of flutters raging through her. She'd never had that kind of effect on a guy before. She watched him speed away until he was out of sight, wishing she could have just gone with him.

"Ugh! Screw you and your sudden unbridled want want want!" she berated her uncontrolled hormones, loudly.

A young man walking by lifted his brow as if ready to take her challenge.

She gulped, eyes wide, her words choking in her throat.

*Brother to save! Get a move on.*

Was every guy on the Isle suddenly too hot for their own darn good? And suddenly interested in her? She turned and scurried into the bookstore.

"Emily!" she shouted expectantly.

Emily, upon hearing Melinda, popped out from behind a bookshelf.

*Wonderful, loveable, predictable Emily.*

"You're okay," she declared, rushing to hug Melinda.

"Um, yeah. I'm fine. Kind of great actually. Why?"

"Your brothers have been worried sick!" Emily explained. "Me too for that matter."

"Oh. Well. I did leave in a bit of a huff this morning. I was mad at Charlie but I'm over it now. They could've called me on my cell."

"Which you dropped in the kitchen," Emily informed her.

"Oh, dang. Sorry," she squeaked. *And like I would have answered.*

"Well, at least you're okay."

"Yeah, I am." She shook her head. "I am more than okay. But I'll explain about that later. Charlie on the other hand, is *not* okay." Melinda dragged Emily into a small office, shutting the door behind them. "But he will be okay if this plan goes right. Which it will."

"What's going on?" Emily was thrown off by Melinda's energetic confidence.

Melinda gulped hard, clasping her hands together, smiling forcefully. All her teeth were showing and her shoulders lifted in a *you're not gonna like what I have say*, manner.

"Melinda, what's going on?" Emily's tone turned suspicious.

"Emily, my dearest Emily. How do you feel about being captured by a werewolf?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mack met the brothers at the door and motioned for them to come in. Her new deputy threw them an odd look, but said nothing. Mack took them into a temporary holding cell.

"Exam room's already full," she explained, turning to Charlie. "I need to know if you can I.D. this body. This woman was a tourist. But I think you might have known her."

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie, confused. "I don't really know any tourists." Well, he knew a couple but few very well.

Mack sucked in a breath and upon exhaling explained, "This woman was still alive when she was found. Her throat was cut open, but she mumbled out two names before she died. Charlie. Howard."

Who could it be? He rarely got friendly enough with any tourists for them to know him by name. Never mind to have his name someone's final words.

He gazed down at the body. A sliver of dark skin not covered by the sheet.

Charlie tried to speak but stammered incoherently. He lunged forward tearing off the sheet. Nina's lifeless and bloodied body lay on the table.

"It can't be." *How could this happen?* He grasped the side of the table to keep from falling over. *How could this have happened? To her, to Nina. She's too strong for this. Protected by her ring.* His chest squeezed, his heart corkscrewed into a knot, air impossible to get enough of.

"Charlie," Michael called out, realizing instantly that bringing him had been a mistake.

Charlie didn't respond. He just stared at the dead body on the table. "Her name," he spoke with great effort, "is Nina."

"Does she have a last name?" Mack asked kindly. "I need to notify next of kin."

"She doesn't have a last name, and her kin will already know." He gently touched Nina's arm, stroking it fondly. "I'm so sorry." He gazed into her empty eyes. He reached up and closed them, running his hand down her arm, lifting her cold hand, shakily caressing her fingers. "Who did this to you?"

*Who could have done this to you? You can't be hurt like this.*

Michael huffed, confused. "What do you mean, *her kin*, Charlie? Who is she?"

Charlie could not answer.

Fury erupted inside him.

He grabbed Nina's other hand. She wasn't wearing her ring, the ring that should have protected her from such an injury. Why would she not be wearing it? Why would she have removed it?

He let go, backing away from the table. Chest heaving, a surge of emotion charging through him.

He exhaled with a pained cry, hands reaching up to grasp the sides of his head as if something was hurting him. A menacing echo forged into his thoughts.

"Come and find me," it growled. "I killed her, Charlie. I will kill everything you love until you bow down to me."

The alpha werewolf. It was in his mind.

It had done this to Nina.

It may not have killed the man left in the park the night before, but it was a killer. And it would pay for its crimes.

Charlie responded by pounding his fists into the brick walls lining the inside of the cell, shouting violently as he did. The wall shattered upon impact, sending brick and stone flying across the room.

"Get out!" Charlie spat at the walls. "Get out and lock the door!"

Michael grabbed the sheriff and bounded outside of the cell, locking it.

"Just give in," the alpha's voice lamented in Charlie's mind. "Give in and no one else will get hurt."

Charlie fell to the floor, doubling over as the desire to let out the wolf sent him into a rage. He shouted horrifically, begging his body not to give in.

The alpha echoed in his head, again.

"Just give in this one time," its voice enticed. "You won't ever have to fight it again."

Charlie could feel the moon's pull almost tearing the wolf out of his unwilling skin. *Breathe*, he repeated. *Just breathe. Ignore the voice*.

"I can still reach the body," he heard Michael telling the sheriff. "Maybe it will tell us who we're looking for." He reached through the bars.

"No!" Charlie warned in a pained voice. "You can't read her, Michael." Charlie's face was red, blood vessels protruding from his skin.

"Who the heck is she, Charlie?"

"A Guardian, Michael. Nina is a Guardian."

Michael pulled back his hand, in stunned awe. A Guardian... They were some of the most powerful beings in existence. Chances were it would do permanent brain damage if he tried to read her death.

Charlie struggled to his feet. It took everything he had to do it. He held onto the bars and tried to explain. He struggled to find the right words, and when he spoke, it came out labored.

"Nina is the woman I've been seeing every summer."

Only Michael realized what he was talking about, and it made sense, at least from what Michael knew about Guardians. They wore a ring, which protected them from normal dangers. It also enhanced their strength and made their bodies impenetrable. Without the ring though...

Michael sighed as it all fell into place.

Charlie would have been able to be himself, completely, with a Guardian, unlike a human woman. He also realized why he had never gone into any real detail; the world of the Guardians was quite secretive. They rarely showed themselves to humans at all, and few outside the supernatural world even knew of their existence.

"A little confused here," Mack chimed in.

"To be honest, Mack, I don't think this woman had anything to do with the whole werewolf thing. Just wrong place, wrong time. I'll explain later."

"What are we going to do about Charlie?"

Charlie had slid down to the floor and was panting, heavily.

"Do whatever you have to," Charlie spoke hoarsely. "I'm not going to make it." *The wolf is winning.*

Out of nowhere, William materialized into the room, coming to an abrupt stop. "Actually," he announced emphatically, "we have to let Charlie out of the cell."

\* \* \* \* \*

Melinda stood in front of the house in which the Guardian named Nina had been staying. She felt weird stepping into a house she had never been in before.

"You did, sort of, technically meet her." She slipped inside the house. Upon entering, she huffed out a burst of air. "Look at this place! How the heck am I going to find a ring in all this?"

She tossed around blankets, pillows, and strewn about couch cushions, kicked an empty bottle of tequila out her way, and tried not to cut herself on a broken vase, while scouring the floor for Nina's ring.

"What the heck was she doing in here, anyway? I know this isn't where she died."

Melinda stood up and closed her eyes, the realization hitting her.

"Nina was Charlie's summer fling. Yuck, and not a visualization I need right now."

She ran into the kitchen and washed her hands. Nina had known many things about Charlie. She'd known a lot about Melinda too. But now that she thought back, Nina's knowledge of Charlie had an intimate edge to it.

"C'mon," Melinda scolded herself. "It's here somewhere."

She opened every drawer and cupboard, looking for the black ring that Nina had told her she would need to save Charlie. After not finding it in the kitchen, she moved on to the bathroom and then the closets.

"One room left," she said, putting her hand on the doorknob to the bedroom.

Melinda gasped after opening the door.

The black ring lay in the middle of the bed, on a sheet of perfect white.

All Nina had told Melinda was that she had taken off the ring before she died and it needed to be given to Charlie. He needed to put it on his finger, and Nina had explained that Melinda would arrive at the exact moment Charlie needed the ring.

Something bothered Melinda about the placement of the ring.

"It's like she was planning on dying." An eerie sadness crept into her gut.

Melinda did not pretend to understand. She reached down, scooping up the ring into the palm of her hand and raced out of the house to find the sun had set, and the moon was rising.

She gulped, hard. "Nina said I would get there at the exact right moment."

Could a Guardian be wrong?

Melinda took off running.

She knew exactly where she needed to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, let him out?" asked Michael.

"My thoughts exactly," agreed the sheriff.

"I have it on very good authority that we need to let him out," William spoke decisively.

"You can't," Charlie pleaded. "I'll hurt someone. I might kill someone."

"Actually, Charlie, you're going to lead us to the alpha."

"How?"

"By tuning into his thoughts, you can track him. Once you lead us there, we will kill him."

"Do you think we can?" Michael dared keep a glimmer of hope.

"Yes. I can." Mack pulled three silver bullets out of her pocket. "Just get me a clear shot, and the alpha's done for." She looked nervously toward Charlie.

"Just promise me, sheriff, that you won't be afraid to use those on me if something goes wrong."

"You know I don't want to, but you know I will."

"I don't know about this," Michael doubted. "What do you mean, good authority, William?"

"Melinda."

"You saw her?" Charlie asked.

"Did she have a dream?" Michael questioned.

"She's fine. No time for details." William headed toward Charlie's cell. "But I trust this plan, with complete certainty," he claimed, looking Charlie in the eye.

Something he heard in William's definitive tone and determined face calmed him. Made him feel as though he could trust whatever plan was in motion. "What do I need to do?"

"Let the alpha into your mind."

Charlie nodded apprehensively. He dragged himself back up, leaning his head onto the bars, opening his mind to the alpha's thoughts.

William motioned for Michael and Mack to back away.

"What's going on, William?" Michael's patience was wearing thin and the vampire clearly knew more than he was telling them.

"This is Charlie's final test," William told them, which clarified nothing.

Michael just stood looking dumbfounded, waiting for William to explain. He did not, instead giving Michael a warning. "You must prepare yourself. What you're about to hear will be infuriating, but you must believe me when I promise that *everything* will be all right."

Michael looked about as ready to implode as Charlie did. It was unlike William to be so cryptic. That wasn't true. But this was definitely extra cryptic even for him.

Charlie gripped the bars of his cell like they were the only thing keeping his body from ripping into pieces. The alpha's voice rang through his thoughts. It didn't hurt if he didn't fight it.

"I will make you transform," he heard the alpha sneer.

"No, you won't," Charlie panted. "But I am coming to kill you," he warned defiantly.

"To revenge your Guardian," the alpha taunted. "She walked right up to me and didn't even fight when I gutted her throat."

"I won't let you hurt anyone else. I won't allow you to control me."

The night sky brightened outside the window in Charlie's cell. The moon was full and rising fast. He clutched his chest and cried out in anguish. "I will not turn!"

"I thought it might come to this," the alpha expressed, sounding bored. "So I found myself a little *insurance*."

Charlie heard a familiar voice, through the alpha's mind.

"Another easy target," it snarled. "Found her wandering down a pathway you'll now follow. If you refuse me, Charlie Howard, *she dies*."

He started to shake uncontrollably. Silver ravaged his eyes, sucking away any sign of his normal blue. His arms and legs thickened, tearing through his clothes. He let out a sound that was a mix of howling, growling and roaring, at the same time, grabbing the bars of the cell and pulling on them with great force.

The iron broke in his hands like twigs.

He lunged out of the cell, his chest heaving.

"He's taken Emily," his voice rattled ferociously. His eyes looked venomous as he bounded out of the morgue.

Michael just stared in awe, unable to move or put together a clear thought.

"I know where Charlie is going," William advised.

"We'll take my car." Mack loaded the three bullets into her gun.

"Michael," William called out.

Michael was in a numb haze. He felt William nudge him toward the door and his body begrudgingly moved.

\* \* \* \*

Charlie raced out of the morgue and down a small alley to the back of the building, running into the woods. He sniffed the air, smelling for the alpha.

"You can't kill me," it scoffed. "Not while you're still holding onto your fear."

"I don't fear you," Charlie's thoughts screamed back at the alpha.

"But you fear the wolf. And unless you become the wolf, you won't be strong enough to kill me."

Charlie skidded to a stop. He knew the alpha was right. He wasn't strong enough. He took a cleansing breath and spoke calmly. "I might die trying, but I won't let you hurt Emily. Or anyone else." He ran forward, deeper into the woods, stopping when he spotted movement ahead. He could see the alpha. Waiting for him.

The alpha, in werewolf form, was much more menacing than the wolf that had bitten Charlie ten years ago. It stood over seven feet tall, its body slim and muscular. It reared its head upon seeing Charlie's shadow emerging from the woods.

It gnashed its jagged teeth, readying to battle.

"Surrender yourself, or die!" it threatened.

Charlie saw Emily tied to a tree just to the side of a small bonfire. He let out a primal cry as he sprang out of the woods. He assumed the alpha would expect him to stop and confront him, try to talk him out of all this, so instead he rushed forward, plowing his partially transformed body straight into the werewolf.

Emily closed her eyes as a vicious fight erupted. Melinda had promised her everything would be fine, but seeing Charlie trying to fight this terrifying creature concerned her immensely.

\* \* \* \*

Michael didn't remember walking to, or getting into the sheriff's car.

He didn't remember the ride.

He *did* remember arriving, stopping, storming out of the car and confronting William. "What did you do?" he roared at the vampire. "Offer up Emily as bait?"

William calmly put his hand on Michael's shoulder.

"I swear to you, Michael, that Emily will not be harmed."

"How can you know that? How can you be so calm? How could you allow this to happen?"

William sighed. He'd expected nothing less of a response.

Michael stuck his face right in front of William's. "If anything happens to her, I will drive a stake through your heart, William. Without a second thought."

"Michael, if anything happens to Emily, I will drive a stake through my own heart."

Michael backed down, saying no more. He turned and followed Mack. She had her gun cocked and ready to shoot, working down a pathway. He wanted to storm by her, but she motioned for him to stay put behind her.

The smell of salt water wafted through the trees, followed by the flickering flames of a bonfire.

When Michael, Mack, and William stepped over a small ridge, they saw Charlie, still only partially transformed, crouching, as a fully transformed werewolf stared him down. There was blood dripping down Charlie's arm as well as the alpha's face.

Michael paced and searched desperately for Emily. "Do you have a shot?" he asked Mack, too loudly.

"Not yet," she mumbled. "And stay put, would ya, Michael. I don't need to worry about shootin' you by accident!"

The alpha swung his arm at Charlie's head, missing it as Charlie ducked out of the way.

"You know you want to give in," the alpha jeered. "You want to kill me, I can *feel* it."

Charlie ignored the alpha's taunts, focusing on his movements. He heard the others arrive but gave them no mind, unwilling to give the alpha the advantage of catching him off guard.

William used his vampire senses and located Emily, struggling to free herself. Within an instant, he dashed to her side, freed her, and delivered her safely into Michael's arms.

It happened so fast neither was sure what had just happened.

"Michael," she exhaled hard.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, completely confounded.

"Can't say I'd like to do that again, but I'm fine. *My God*, Michael! You're shaking something wicked."

"I was so afraid something was going to happen to you."

She grabbed his face and looked into his eyes. "It's all going to be okay, Michael. Melinda told me everything." She smiled. "It's going to be better than okay. I mean, do you think I'd go along with such a hair-brained plan if I'd thought I was in any real danger? I just had to get Charlie here. Without an important enough reason, he wouldn't have come. And everyone else he cared about was already busy."

Somehow, between all the chaos ensuing around them, Michael could see nothing but truth and confidence in Emily's eyes. "Would you please tell me what the heck is going on?" he implored. "I am really, really confused." His heart was about to explode out of his chest.

"Just wait," Emily replied, stroking his face to calm him. "Melinda should be here any minute now."

Back at the bonfire, the alpha werewolf and Charlie continued to stare each other down, taking turns running and attacking each other. Neither was making any real progress towards winning the battle.

The alpha egged Charlie, hoping to force him into a full transformation, and therefore becoming Charlie's master.

Mack looked for her shot, but the alpha seemed to realize that staying in one place was a bad idea, and it continually charged out of her sight. She cautiously worked her way closer, sticking to the edge of the woods.

"Why the crowd?" the alpha's voice leaked into Charlie's mind. "Why not come alone since you care about these humans so much?"

"So they can witness me killing you," Charlie told it, lunging forward.

The alpha lunged to the right and Charlie's body skidded across the dirt. He got to his hands and knees, preparing to lunge at the alpha again.

"Did you think I would make it that easy for you?" the alpha's voice raged in Charlie's mind.

"You've done the last damage you'll ever do on The Demon Isle!" Charlie kept the alpha's gaze on him, hoping he would not hear the click of the gun behind him. He bared his teeth at the alpha, taunting it to attack.

A gunshot rang out, cracking through the nighttime silence.

Mack wasn't fast enough.

The alpha heard the click, too, leaning out of the way just as the bullet whizzed through its fur, missing contact with its body.

The alpha turned to Mack, bolting straight at her. With one swoop of its muscular arm, it hit Mack's body, throwing her ten feet into the air. She came down with a thud, unconscious. The gun flew out of her hands, disappearing in the underbrush.

Charlie took the advantage of the alpha's distraction and flung his body at the alpha, but he wasn't strong enough. Not while he was still partially in human form. The alpha pushed Charlie back, and in a split second bounded off the ground and pinned Charlie's body to a tree. Charlie wanted to give in. It felt inevitable. He could not go on like this.

It was time to make a choice: either surrender to the wolf, losing all freedom to a new master, or get killed trying to protect the ones he loved.

He craved to surrender to the wolf.

And yet, still refused.

The alpha surprised Charlie by stepping back, letting go. "I don't want to kill you," it admitted dejectedly. "I want you to join me."

"Why?" Charlie needed to know. "Why would you think I would want to live under your control? Why would I let you use my power to your advantage?" Charlie spoke as if reminding himself what he was hanging on for, just as much as he wanted to hear the alpha's response.

"You misunderstand," the alpha's thoughts echoed. "You would be my willing partner."

"I will never be willing."

"Once you surrender, your will is mine."

"Never because I want to."

The alpha snarled, turned, and jumped into the woods. It stopped a few steps in. Charlie could see its piercing yellow eyes, taunting him to follow.

"I know you won't give up so easily. Maybe you can't kill me, but let's see if you can catch me." The alpha ran deeper into the woods.

Charlie sensed the alpha truly desired to get him alone, away from the people that he cared about. Away from the anchors of his human life.

It did not matter. Charlie would follow regardless. He had to kill this thing, somehow.

Charlie cast a gaze toward William, Michael, and Emily. They were helping Mack off the ground; she was conscious again and thankfully didn't look injured, just shaken. He wished Melinda had been standing beside them; he wanted to look at her one last time. It was obvious now that he'd have to break his promise to her. Everything would not be okay.

From behind them, over the ridge, a silhouette emerged.

"Melinda..." Charlie's wish was granted, but before he could follow the alpha into the woods, Melinda ran past the others heading directly at him. She stopped, out of breath, opening up her palm.

"Put it on."

He cocked his head, confused. Why did Melinda have Nina's ring?

Melinda took hold of his wolf-hair-covered hand and slipped the ring onto his finger.

Control jolted through him, spreading through his veins. It calmed the wolf instantly, and Charlie became Charlie again. The wolf disappeared, completely. He stared down at his body in bewilderment. Even his mind was calm and controlled.

However, still confused.

A golden glow emanated from the ring, expanding into the dark silhouette of a woman. She stood in front of Charlie wearing a regal smile.

Melinda stepped back, standing next to William, Michael, Emily and Mack, all watching in electrified astonishment.

Charlie fell to his knees. "Nina," he whimpered, wrapping his arms around her waist, surprised he could touch her. She was dead, right? He rested his head on her stomach, exhausted and yet relieved to see her. "I'm so sorry you died because of me."

Nina beamed a heavenly, inviting smile, pulling Charlie up to his feet.

"Dying for you was the most precious thing I have ever had the privilege to do. Everything that happened today happened exactly as it was supposed to, Charlie."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't just happen to vacation here. As Guardians, we don't actually take vacations." She raised her hand to his face. "Although, working here definitely had its perks." She let her hand drop. "I've been watching you since you were bitten, Charlie."

"How can I touch you?" He didn't even know why he asked this. His brain was overloaded, but if she was dead, he didn't understand how she was still here, talking to him. Ghosts could not do that. Perhaps she wasn't really dead.

"Guardian's physical bodies do die," explained Nina. "However, our spirit forms work differently than human bodies. Think of me as living energy, that sometimes

inhabits a physical form." She smirked. "We're not exactly what you'd call human," she revealed. "But that's a story for another time."

Nina turned, facing everyone.

"We are not all knowing or all powerful. Being familiar with foresight, you understand that the path forward is not always clear, but sometimes... sometimes it is." She cast her regal gaze back at Charlie, then again toward the others.

"Our most honored job is to keep the balance of power in the favor of good. We have not always succeeded, but we hope our actions today will ensure this balance remains, as we have foreseen battles on the horizon unlike anything you have ever witnessed before."

Her body glowed in golden light, and to look upon her felt both empowering and comforting. She turned back to Charlie.

"This ring is yours. It belongs to you now. Never before has any mortal man been given such a gift."

Charlie stared at the ring. "Why?" he pleaded, looking at Nina. "Why give up this ring, forfeiting *your* life for mine?"

"Because the wolf should not be a curse, it should be a gift to help you in the battles to come. As long as you wear this ring, the wolf will no longer be a threat to you, Charlie. The wolf will be ruled by you, and you alone. You will be free to transform at will. The moon will have no sway. The *alpha* will have no sway. You will never fear the wolf again."

Charlie looked with awed reverence at the ring and back up at Nina. "I still don't understand why the Guardians would give this to *me*."

"Because of who you are Charlie. Not just the wolf or the witch that resides in you, but because of your compassion, your love, and your ability to be selfless and yet lead with a firm hand. These will all be necessary in the battles to come if we are to succeed in keeping the balance of power on the side of good." She paused, smiling brightly. "You have fought for so many years, never forsaking your responsibilities, never giving into the temptation or greed that the wolf's power could have so easily given you."

"Why here? Why now?"

"Because you have sacrificed enough to understand the need for the wolf to be controlled, and yet how the wolf can help you succeed."

Charlie looked into Nina's eyes with deep respect, but also apprehension. "What will happen to you?"

Nina smiled majestically. A goddess in Charlie's eyes. But she always had been. At least physically. Now in a spiritual manner as well.

"I get to be reborn. My soul will get to live a human life, in a new physical body. I'll experience things as humans do, and when that human life is over, I will be called into Guardianship again."

She stepped close to him, cupping his head in her hands. As she did, the golden glow engulfed both of their bodies, hiding them from view to the outside world.

"Don't dwell on my loss, Charlie. Live. Live fully and freely as you did with me."

Charlie could not speak. The love and gratitude he felt for Nina overwhelmed him beyond words.

"I regret nothing," she told him, laying her hand on his chest.

He took her hand in his, holding it against his cheek.

"It is time," she sang encouragingly. Her lips pressed against his for just a moment, and she leaned into his ear. "Just let go, Charlie. Give in to the wolf."

A low growl rumbled in Charlie's chest and with his next blink, his bright blue eyes dazzled her with brilliant silver. His lips swept over Nina's one last time, the thrill and exhilaration of total surrender passing through his body.

Nina let go of Charlie, her eyes dancing playfully.

"There's my big bad wolf." Her voice faded, her golden silhouette dissolving into the darkness. She was gone. Had sacrificed herself for Charlie.

He gazed at the ring and looked into the wide-eyed faces of his friends and family.

A devilish grin spread across his face. "Don't follow me!" he warned.

He looked up into the sky, his chest heaving in the anticipation of surrender.

He outstretched his arms and bayed at the full moon; it transformed into a chilling howl as Charlie Howard surrendered to the wolf, for the first time completely shedding his human skin.

With an explosive force that took but a second, Charlie Howard's human body disappeared, morphing into something much larger, and stronger. He gnashed his teeth, peering at the moon, which no longer held any sway over him. It was just a moon. Nothing more.

His skin was dark gray, his arms thick and muscular. His nails jagged and elongated.

Most importantly though, his mind was sharp and his own. All the power without the loss of control.

His head dropped, his piercing silver gaze threatening the woods with its glare. He was going after the alpha. He let out a snarl, preparing to start his hunt. The alpha would not see another sunrise.

He let out a roar, it echoed far and wide across the Isle, warning the alpha he was coming. He sprang on all fours into the woods, in pursuit of his prey. The alpha's scent caught in his snout, fast. He followed, picking up speed.

Not far in, another scent hit his nostrils. *Eva Jordan*. At first, he feared this scent might overpower him, but the ring did its job and protected Charlie from this danger. It was still a pleasant smell, but it no longer gave him the urge to kill her. His next thought, however, was *Why do I smell Eva?*

He skidded to a stop as the woods came to a clearing.

Eva's house, near Mermaid Point.

He had never been here before, but he could tell she lived here. Her smell was everywhere.

This is also where the alpha's smell ended. It was here, hiding somewhere nearby. Was this woman a magnet for trouble? It followed her almost like death was stalking her.

He snarled, casting his silver eyes into the darkness, searching for some sign of where the alpha was hiding, surprised it no longer spoke to his mind. Had it given up so easily? Or had the ring blocked this, too? Severing the connection between him and the alpha completely.

He sauntered into Eva's backyard, one muscular heave at a time.

The alpha flew at Charlie out of nowhere, sinking its teeth into Charlie's shoulder. The same shoulder it had bitten ten years prior. But this time Charlie

fought back, taking a bite of his own. He tore at the alpha's throat, sinking his knife-like teeth into its thick skin.

Something seemed different. The alpha seemed crazed all of a sudden, as if it had decided to give up on controlling Charlie and just wanted him dead, instead of its partner.

It charged Charlie again.

He lunged at the alpha, their bodies colliding in midair. They fell to the ground with a thunderous crash. Charlie took the alpha into his muscular arms and threw him across the ground, slamming its body into a tree. The trunk cracked, and another crash followed when the tree thudded to the ground.

A light came on at the back of the house. Charlie saw Eva looking through her screen door. Her eyes were wide with bewildered fear and awe upon witnessing the werewolves fighting in her yard.

"Stay inside!" Charlie snapped at her.

The alpha picked itself up, shaking itself off, thrashing its way toward Charlie, again.

Charlie stood his ground this time, waiting until the alpha was just a few feet away, and jumped to the side, using his arm to cut down the alpha. Charlie's sharp claws caught the skin of the alpha's shoulder, digging in. It howled murderously as blood spurted from the wound.

Charlie wasted no time, lunging on top of his downed prey. Its eyes looked crazed. Its arms and legs flailed, scratching, hitting and kicking. Its teeth chomped at Charlie's body, but missed his skin. The alpha's mouth opened up wide enough that Charlie could see all of its blood-covered teeth, including the one that was missing. The one it had left behind in Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie roared viciously and in one swift movement, ripped the alpha's jaw in two, tearing it completely out of its body. One last final cry erupted and the alpha's body went limp.

He'd expected the body to revert to its human form once it had died, but it did not. Did he care? Not really. It was done. Finished. Over.

He stood erect, howling into the night sky, basking in victory. Savoring his freedom.

He closed his silver eyes, breathing calmly, reveling in complete elation.

He had succeeded.

There had been a price. The life of the Guardian, Nina.

But he had killed the alpha. It wouldn't hurt anyone ever again.

And now with the ring, he no longer needed to fear the wolf. He wouldn't lose his family and they would not lose him.

A cool breeze against his skin gave him a shiver. He opened his eyes remembering he was standing in Eva's backyard. His eyes snaked down his naked body, human again; his elated fervor cooling as he darted behind a tree.

"Charlie," a voice called out faintly. "Is that you?"

"Um, Eva, hi." His head popped out to the side of the tree. "Yes, it's me."

She held a flashlight in her hand. It shook a little. "What the heck is going on out here? I was crawling into bed and heard these crazy noises and then I saw..."

"You know, Eva, when you hear strange noises, you should never investigate them. You should always run the other way." He wondered why her instincts seemed to draw her closer to danger.

"Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to crawl into bed when it sounds like an animal is being tortured outside your window!"

"Okay. Yeah. I can see your point."

"Charlie, why don't you come out from behind that tree? So I can see you."

He let out a flustered grunt. "Um, Eva, you don't happen to have a coat, or blanket, or clothing of some kind." He could practically see the grin spreading across her face, even from his hiding spot.

"Charlie," she said with an air of *you are not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on.*

"Look, Eva. I will explain everything. I promise."

"You're not going to try to attack me again are you?" Her voice was teasingly distrustful.

He gazed at the ring, shaking his head. "No, Eva. I swear that will never happen again. And if you give me the chance, I really want to make it up to you, but I sort of need some clothes first," he pleaded.

"Just stay put, I'll be right back." She sounded as though she was holding in fits of laughter.

She returned with a tee shirt and sweat shorts, tossing them to Charlie.

"So, you're a werewolf," she stated. "I could have guessed as much, but I wasn't entirely sure."

"Um, yeah, I guess I am."

"You guess?"

"It's a long story, but yes, you're right. I'm a werewolf."

After dressing, he stepped out to face her. The intoxicating smell still poured off Eva freely, and though he enjoyed it, the smell no longer held the same mesmerizing effect it had previously. He glanced at the ring, amazed and thankful.

She noticed and questioned him about it. "New? I don't recall seeing that before."

"Just got it today." He motioned for her to follow, taking her to the dead werewolf.

"Holy hugeness," she spewed out upon seeing the lifeless werewolf on her lawn. "Wow! It's so..."

"Dead," said Charlie, kicking its leg.

"I was thinking, gigantic and really, really terrifying."

Of course it would be. Charlie's adrenaline was still surging. He should have been more cautious in showing her. Prepared her for what she was about to see.

"Do you think I'm terrifying?" Charlie asked her, curiously.

Eva shrugged. "I honestly don't think you enjoy hurting people, Charlie. But if you were lying here dead on my lawn, looking like that," she looked at him as if to say, *sorry.*

"It's okay, Eva. I don't blame you, at all."

He continued to explain what had happened that night with the alpha, and how he had chased it through the woods tracking it to her yard. He did not go into

great detail about Nina, only that he had been given a gift to help him control the wolf.

She glanced at the ring.

He just waved his hand; it was apparent it was the ring he spoke of.

Eva daringly, but gently, ran her fingers across the ring with great admiration. She let go, biting her lower lip, as if unsure what to say next.

"Look," said Charlie. "What happened in the woods earlier today, I can't even begin to apologize for that. But I can guarantee you it will *never* happen again." His voice was steady and sure. "That said, I completely understand if you don't trust me, Eva. I've given you little reason to. Just say the word and if we ever cross paths, I'll go the other way."

She shifted her body, considering what he had said.

"Considering that you saved me from a possible, horrific death via the dead monster lying in my backyard, and you did save me from drowning, I wouldn't say you're a lost cause, not completely."

He chuckled, impressed with her ability to move on from terrible events. *Michael was right, she does recover freakishly fast.*

"Now, to figure out what to do with this thing." He nodded toward the dead werewolf.

"Do you think it would be weird if I kept it?" she asked.

"You want to keep it?"

"Well, not for me. For my dad. I think he'll get a kick out of it. And who knows, maybe he'll learn something new about werewolves."

Charlie stared coolly at Eva. He supposed it would save Mack the trouble of taking care of it. And Michael respected her father's research.

"Just show me where you want me to put it, I mean, where you want the werewolf," he clarified, clearing his throat.

Eva just motioned with her finger to follow him.

Charlie dragged the dead alpha's body onto a cement floor at the back of her father's laboratory, which was actually just the garage, renovated into a temporary lab.

"Let me know if you guys find out anything of interest," Charlie told her, with an exhausted breath. "Can't help but be a little curious, seeing as the same blood runs in my own veins."

They walked outside again, standing under the starry night sky.

"I guess I should probably get going," he said. "I'm sure my family wants to know that I'm okay, and I'll be sure to return the clothes." He started for the road.

"Eh, don't worry about the clothes. They were left by a previous tenant and I was about to get rid of them anyway. Are you okay walking home? I can give you a ride."

"Thanks," he said gratefully. "But I think I could use the walk."

"Long night, huh?" Her eyes filled with some unsaid understanding.

He returned with a half shrug, half nod.

"I'll see you around then," she said.

"Yeah, see you around, Eva."

"Night, Charlie."

He waved, jogging into the darkness.

When Charlie was out of sight, the smile dropped from Eva's face, turning into a scowl. She leaned over the dead werewolf's body.

"Thank you, Caleb. It was definitely fun catching up." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a tooth, throwing it onto his dead body. "You can have that back now."

Her father's tall silhouette came up behind her. "I see your plans backfired a little."

"I nearly had him," she spoke defiantly. "At least idiot Caleb came in handy. That stuff from the Bloodsucker Bay cave worked perfectly on him. Just a little bit and he went completely mad. Luckily, I had enough time to get back here, turn, and let him out before Charlie got here."

"And he thinks he killed the alpha?"

"Of course."

"And since I didn't see you after," said her father, "how did the smell test work today? Better than the cave?"

"Yes and no," she answered, thinking back to her trip to White Pines. "It completely messed him up, drew him to me, no question. But it had a bad side effect or two."

"Explain," he demanded tersely.

"He wanted to kill me. More like, rip me to shreds." She spoke as if it was no big thing. She left out the part where her wolf hadn't minded Charlie's actions. It wasn't important. Like the cave incident, her father did not need to know.

Her father sighed. "We need Charlie Howard under our control if our plan is to succeed, but I won't do it at the cost of my daughter's life."

"I don't think it matters now anyway, Dad," she spoke in frustration. "I let it wear off. I didn't need him actually trying to kill me if he did transform. I injected myself with a small dose, like yesterday, just before he got here tonight, but it's stopped working."

"Stopped working?"

"Charlie Howard seems to have inherited the ring of a Guardian," she spoke shrewdly.

Her father's eyes perked up.

"I know," she said, agreeing with his unspoken response. "If we could get our hands on that ring, and Charlie Howard..."

"There's no chance we would fail." A malicious grin settled on his face. "The only problem is how will we get the ring? And how will you become his alpha if he's got that ring on his finger?"

Eva smirked, her eyes a cruel glare. "Charlie thinks he killed the alpha tonight. His guard will be down. Don't worry, Dad. Before I'm finished, Charlie Howard will be completely under my control."

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael pulled the jeep into the driveway. His mind reeled with constantly shifting emotions: awe over watching his brother transform into a werewolf. Amazement over the fact that Charlie was sleeping with a Guardian who willingly sacrificed her life for him. Relief that Charlie would be okay and equally relieved that Emily was safe. Confusion over how exactly Melinda knew what was going to

happen and concern over where she had disappeared to all day, and finally, *William*. Michael groaned as he thought the name.

He couldn't keep his eyes off Emily sitting in the backseat next to Melinda. They had been whispering and giggling the entire drive home; as if everything that occurred had made perfect sense, or was it something else? Melinda's feelings were changing as quickly and as often as his own were. Maybe he was misreading her.

William had not spoken and neither had Michael. He let his sister and Emily pass by him into the house, but reached out to stop William.

"I'm sorry," Michael stated. "I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I," he didn't know what else to say. Words didn't seem to cover it.

"I understand. There's no need for an apology, Michael."

"Yes. There is, William. You've always been there for us, no matter what. You are ridiculously patient. I totally lost it."

"You're human, Michael. If I were still human, I would have felt the same. I am a vampire. I still feel emotions, but they don't control me so easily. I would have expected no different a reaction from you."

"I threatened to stake you," Michael droned.

William raised a brow, unconcerned.

"I just need you to know that I'm sorry."

"If you need to hear it, apology accepted. You love her. It is obvious that you cannot live without her."

"I don't think I realized how much I loved her until tonight. The thought of losing her..."

"Nearly drove you to madness. It is not such a bad thing, Michael, to love so wholeheartedly."

"Thank you, William. I don't think we say it enough. I don't say it enough. Thank you," he repeated.

"I will always be here, for as long as you'll keep me." William turned to head inside.

Michael felt lighter now that he'd apologized. His thoughts turned to his next biggest concern. "Do you think Charlie is okay? It feels weird to just leave him out there."

"I believe Charlie is fine," answered William. "I'd wager more than fine."

"You sure we shouldn't go after him?"

"It's his first night trying out his new form. I think he deserves a little time. And if it is the alpha you're worried about, the ring won't let anything life threatening happen. Remember, Charlie is protected now."

Michael nodded as they stepped into the kitchen, where Melinda and Emily were making plans.

"Okay, so tomorrow morning, right when they open. We'll find you the perfect outfit."

"Thanks, Emily. Really appreciate your help."

"Are you kidding? About time we went on a shopping spree together."

"Shopping?" questioned Michael. "What's the occasion?"

Melinda shrugged. "Just feel like my clothes are a little outdated. Time for something new." She bit her lip in hopes of keeping her feelings to herself, so

Michael wouldn't sense what she was actually feeling. She wanted to keep Riley to herself, for now.

Emily gave Melinda a look that only the two of them understood.

"I will be in my study," William told them. His face was blank and his emotions impossible to read.

"Oh, but first," Melinda started with a wild look in her eye. "We haven't talked about Charlie yet! Wasn't that just the coolest? He was Charlie one second and then like, boom, a full on massively scary werewolf."

Michael just laughed at his sister.

Even William seemed to lighten up and could not help but turn the corner of his mouth into a smile.

"That must have felt so *freeing*," she expressed, for the first time understanding the meaning of the word. Her favorite word of the day. And a feeling she wanted to get better acquainted with herself. She wished tomorrow would arrive faster. A giddy relief poured out of her as she thought about seeing Riley again. "Charlie doesn't have to struggle anymore. This day has been so," she could not find the right word to describe it all. It had gone from good to terrible, to really awesome to terrible and then beyond incredible. She couldn't find a word that did it justice.

Michael could not keep track of all the emotions floating around the room but the happiness his sister felt was infectious.

"And what about the Guardian?" Emily brought up.

"Oh my God! Nina was so regal and compassionate, and good," Melinda spoke reverently. "And well, let's face it. Pretty attractive!"

"I also found her to be a most resilient and beautiful woman," William admitted in a pleasant tone.

"She came to me, in a dream," said Melinda, her tone more serious. "Told me everything." She explained this mostly for Michael's benefit since she'd already told this to William and Emily. "Nina knew years ago she would die today. She was so brave. I don't think I would want to know when I'm going to die. I could certainly never live out my final moments with Nina's grace or bravery."

The room went quiet; as if each were paying silent respect for the lost Guardian, whose bravery saved Charlie from a terrible fate.

"Well, I don't know about you," said Emily after a minute, "but I'm beat, and I should probably get home and check in on Dad."

"I'll take you," offered Michael. He did not relish the idea of Emily leaving his sight.

"See you in the morning," Emily winked at Melinda.

She replied by grinning and rubbing her hands together in nervous anticipation. After seeing them off, she turned around to find the kitchen empty.

She sauntered into William's study.

"Are you okay, William?"

"I am fine. Why do you ask?"

"You just seem off. *For you.*"

"Are you sure you're not getting your brother's empathic abilities?"

"I'm sure," she retorted. "Besides, they don't work on vampires."

There was something different about her tonight. A new confidence in her smile. It was most appealing to him.

When he did not reply, she stepped closer. "C'mon, William. I can tell something is bothering you. I may not be empathic, and you may not express your emotions in a human way, but I know you. Is this about what Michael said to you? You know how sorry he is about that, right?" She missed talking openly with William. This felt more like *them*. As they used to be before she'd gone all awkward on him.

"I'm not worried about Michael. He was impassioned by the moment. My fear is what Nina, the Guardian, spoke of... the battles to come. If the Guardians chose to give Charlie that ring, it means they fear the balance of good and evil may shift towards evil."

He stopped for a moment in need of the right words.

"The truth is, as Michael feared losing Emily, I fear losing each of you. And even as a vampire, my emotions do sometimes overwhelm me."

Melinda walked up to William and put her hand on his face, daringly, lovingly, without questioning the choice to do so. His arm darted up to stop her, but dropped. Her warm fingers against his cool skin felt too pleasant to force them away.

"You won't lose any of us. I know how deeply you love, William. I saw it every day when my parents were alive, and I see it every day now, with us. You mean everything to us. You mean everything to me."

Her words melted over him. They shouldn't have, but they did.

He reached up fervently grasping her hand, bringing it to his lips.

Melinda shuddered, losing all ability to breathe, speak, or think clearly. She'd never felt such an intense feeling over a simple act. The sensation raining down her arm was just like in her dream of him.

She'd forgotten all about her fiery dream until just then. Riley had pushed it far out of her mind. It forged back into her thoughts as if her day with Riley hadn't even happened.

Riley?

Riley who?

She didn't understand how she could feel like this. Just minutes before she'd been begging the hours to speed up so she could see Riley again, and now the only thing she could think about was William's touch. And how much more of it she wanted.

His eyes closed, his lips parted, still holding her fingers hostage. He could not force himself to let go.

She couldn't stop the dreams from replaying in her mind. Each tempting scene unraveling. Begging her to lean in closer. To taste his mouth with her lips. Every impulse, every nerve pleaded for her to do it.

Her heart fluttered, the same way it had just a day before. The same way it always fluttered when she got worked up over William.

The vampire's reaction was instant. His eyes flew open wide, a look of shock washing over his features. He dropped her hand and before Melinda could blink she was alone in the study.

She stood speechless, breathless, and unsure how to respond. William had never touched her like that before. He hadn't touched her in any manner, for months. She didn't understand why his actions towards her had changed all those months ago. All she could think was that she'd done something to upset him. Or

that he just didn't enjoy spending time with her anymore. That he'd grown tired of her flirtatious playing, but that had all been before the dreams had started.

"Oh who am I kidding?" Melinda blathered. "I'm in love with two men. One a total stranger and the other a vampire I can't have. I'm a complete idiot!"

She wandered into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of merlot. She turned to go to her bedroom and spun back around, grabbing the bottle. "Time for a hot bath and all of this bottle."

Today had been too weird. No, weird didn't even begin to cover it.

It had been a rollercoaster. And whatever this thing was with William, it didn't change the fact that he was off limits, romance wise.

Wasn't he? She wasn't so sure just now.

*And why now? Why not before this morning?*

*Before she'd met Riley. Perfect, say everything I need to hear, Riley.*

She ran her bath, adding bubbles. She absolutely had to have lots of bubbles tonight. She got in, one foot at a time as the water was steaming hot. The water and the wine didn't do much to clear her head. Nothing made any sense. How could she possibly want two very different guys at the same time? She downed a deep chug of her wine.

William was... *William!* Adoring, handsome, and her best friend. Someone she trusted with her life, and her heart. Someone she could be open with, until these last weeks since her dreams had started at least. Her crush changing to something more had ruined that. She could see it now. She had changed the dynamic of their relationship, not William. He was pushing her away. Because it could not be. Ever. No matter her dreams. No matter what had happened tonight.

And then there was Riley. He was not off limits, and quite willing and eager. There was already a deep connection between them considering they'd only known each other for a day. He brought out a side of her she'd hidden away for far too long. And she liked it. She liked how she felt with him. That he made her feel like a queen.

Her mother's last words rattled Melinda's brain. It was like she had seen this coming. Somehow known her daughter would fall in love with two men.

She could only have one, and William was off limits, no matter what had happened between them earlier. And she was certain if he knew Riley, he'd agree with her choice.

But if she had the option to choose between them, would Riley be the man she'd give her heart to? If not, was that fair to Riley, to be her consolation prize? Would it be fair to any man? Or to her?

If William was the love of her life, would any man be able to make her happy? In the end, was she doomed to a life of wishing she was with William?

Melinda sank into the water with a whimper.

This might just be a two bottle of wine night.

\* \* \* \* \*

William didn't stop until at the outskirts of The Demon Isle. He thought for a moment of leaving. Without any explanation or goodbye. It was too dangerous for him to return.

Why had he kissed Melinda's hand? It seemed so simple and innocent. In that fleeting moment, he had given in. Without a thought or care. She'd needled her way inside his lifeless heart without any effort.

He'd kept his distance, tried to keep their friendship as it had always been. Not because she'd done anything to make him think she actually had feelings for him, but something had changed. He could feel it. Sense it when she was near. And he enjoyed it too much. The little thoughts wrapping around his brain. Tugging at the emptiness he carried inside. Little delights he took in the possibility she did... *did what?* Loved him?

How could she?

It was a childish crush and nothing more.

This is what he'd thought until he'd kissed her hand and let his guard down. Allowing Melinda to engulf his senses. He'd accidentally slipped into her mind. Something that required an intimate connection, which he hadn't allowed to take place in a hundred years.

In doing so, he witnessed her thoughts. The desires playing out in her mind. Melinda's reaction to him shattering all his defenses. The sights, the sounds, emblazoned in his mind. Waking cravings that had slept for too long now. Too long to allow them to wake up and take control of him.

And then he'd heard that heart flutter, the one driving him mad for days. And realized with the utmost clarity and certainty that he was the cause of it.

He delighted in the fact he was responsible for that flutter.

Confirmation of her true feelings.

And then he'd left. Left her alone without explanation.

He would not allow it to go any further. Even if it meant giving up his life on The Demon Isle.

Catherine Howard's final words haunted him. He refused to allow them to fill his thoughts and pretended she'd never said it. He could not do what she asked. Ever.

He'd made a promise to protect the Howard Witches. Long ago.

But he'd made a second promise as well, to never fall in love with another human.

To protect the Howards, he might *have* to leave the Isle.

"I am a vampire. I cannot love Melinda Howard."

*It's too late* his dead heart echoed.

"Then I will love from afar," he proclaimed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before going home, there was one stop Charlie wanted to make. He stood in front of Nina's house. He wanted to miss her, to mourn her, but he felt nothing but devout gratefulness. He looked at his finger, now adorned by the black ring. He looked up at the full moon, no longer fearing its rise.

Nina.

The Guardian he'd been seeing for three summers.

The Guardian that had given him physical release had now saved his life.

He recalled their first meeting like it was yesterday.

Nina had walked right up to him and kissed him. She hadn't even introduced herself. He was standing on this same beach, late at night. Worked up. Full moon

just days away. Bottle of tequila four shots down, worried about his sister. His brother. Missing his parents. Unsure he was able to do his job well enough to keep them all alive.

They spent the rest of that night on the beach, and many other nights that summer. He chuckled at the memory. She might have been a Guardian watching out for him and not actually on vacation, but they'd had a lot of fun while she did. He would definitely miss her.

Damp stung at his eyes. He did love Nina.

He wasn't in love with her, she wasn't the settling down type and he wasn't ready for that yet either. Although he'd never been able to think like that. Too afraid he might bite a woman and turn her into a werewolf.

He felt obligated to settle down and start a family. It was his job to do so and carry on the Howard line. He peered at the ring he knew so little about. Would it really protect him? Keep him from getting hurt, or from hurting anyone else?

Footsteps approached. He turned to see who it was. "Michael, hey." He was surprised to see his brother.

"Everything okay?" he asked with a bemused smile. "Melinda told me where this place was. I assumed you might come here."

Charlie nodded. "Alpha's dead," he said matter-of-factly.

"I can't imagine how that must feel."

"It's like I'm breathing as a free man for the first time in ten years."

Michael patted him on the shoulder. "I have tried to imagine you transforming before, but to actually see it, I have to say it was pretty insane." He paused before asking, "What's it like?"

Charlie thought for a moment before replying.

"It's like, giving in to every primal instinct. Giving in to every desire you've ever had. Every urge. Without a single fear of the consequence."

They stood in silence for a moment. The only sound, the crashing of waves against the shore.

"You know, in some ways, Michael, I've been hiding myself away, just the same as Melinda did. I was so afraid I might hurt someone, or find something meaningful and have to give it up. I guess I'd let the wolf win a long time ago." Charlie looked at the ring again. "What Nina gave me today, I only hope I can prove myself worthy to own." He paused before continuing. "It's what set me off at the morgue, seeing the ring missing from her finger."

Michael waited for him to explain.

"Nina told me that a Guardian's ring can only be taken off voluntarily. Built in safety measure. When I saw it missing, I knew she had for some reason, taken it off. I just couldn't imagine what that reason could be."

"I guess she thought it was for a good cause," Michael comforted, his tone sympathetic. "I'll leave you alone. Just wanted to make sure you were still alive and kicking. See you at home, Charlie."

He nodded with a humbled exhale. "I won't be far behind."

Michael left, and Charlie walked out onto the deserted beach, the full moon tossing shadows onto the water's surface. He swallowed hard, his throat tight.

"I didn't realize how much I needed saving, Nina. Thank you. Thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

A block away, a body that looked like Michael Howard began to shift and contort as it walked down an empty moonlit road. When the shifting was completed, Eva Jordan craned her neck, stretching.

"Much too easy," she congratulated herself. A sinful grin spread across her face as she walked away from Charlie Howard. "The ring can only be removed voluntarily. I can definitely work with that."

