

Silver's Bane

Living DEAD

BOOK ONE

ASHLI & TRISHA EDWARDS

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Prologue

1598, ENGLAND

"Juliana! Come inside, Juliana!" a voice called.

"O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright," young Juliana quoted. She giggled happily and turned over on her bed of grass to take in the darkening sky.

"Juliana Elizabeth Bristow!"

"It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night. As a rich jewel on an Ethiop's ear," Juliana continued quoting her favorite play by a man named William Shakespeare. Rumor was that this playwright's words would live throughout the ages. It didn't matter if they did or not; Juliana was almost as smitten with Shakespeare as she was with her own fiancé.

"Juliana, come inside this instant!"

Juliana could almost see her Aunt Millie standing in the doorway with hands on her wide-set hips. Tossing her brilliant, auburn hair over her shoulder, she made no attempt to answer or showed any signs of compliance.

Well, Romeo, you do know how to leave a girl breathless, she thought to herself. "Have not saints' lips and holy palmers too?" She let out another giggle as she said aloud. "Aye, pilgrim. Lips that they must use in prayer."

"O, dear saint let lips do what hands do," a familiar male voice quoted from behind her.

“Laurence!” Juliana jumped up from the ground and threw her arms around the brawny man she would soon marry.

“So where is my kiss, fair maiden?” he questioned with a small smirk.

“Right here, good sir,” she whispered in his ear, batted her lashes, and planted a gentle kiss on his lips.

“Juliana!” Aunt Millie had finally reached a truly exasperated state.

“You sure do have good, old Millie vexed again tonight,” Laurence commented, holding Juliana off the ground.

“She’s always upset with me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Come.” He swung her around in his arms. “One mustn’t keep her waiting too long.”

Juliana stuck out her lower lip in a false pout.

“Go now. It is time for you to retire,” he ordered, kissing her again. “And goodnight.” He set her gently back on her feet.

“If you insist,” she replied with a playful grimace, but her smile returned quickly. “Goodnight, until it be morrow!” she said, turning on her toes and starting toward the old cottage.

Juliana smiled to herself. *Oh, I love him.*

She soon approached the cottage where she had been living with her Aunt Millie for the past year. It stood alone in the darkness, positively minuscule next to the large trees on either side. She walked into the front door, kissed her flustered aunt on the cheek, and headed up the stairs to her tiny room.

Life had been so different since her family had gone away. After their parents' deaths, Juliana had drawn her happiness from her twin. They were opposites in personality. While Juliana was quiet and reserved, like all good girls should be, her brother was known for his recklessness. It was that recklessness that had gotten him killed.

Laurence had held Juliana together throughout the traumas she had endured of late. Gradually, she had grown to love him and he her. The most joy Juliana now felt was in thoughts of the shared future that lay ahead of them. He wanted to work for the church and she wanted a family. Their dreams fit together wonderfully.

When Juliana reached her room, she did not undress. She had no intention of staying shut up in the cottage, no matter what Laurence said. She couldn't waste this perfect night. She had to enjoy the serenity of her favorite clearing in the woods. It was her secret place. No one knew of it, not even Laurence.

Impatiently, she waited in her slowly darkening bedroom. It seemed like hours before her aunt's lamp went out and the obnoxious snoring started.

The shimmy down the oak tree outside her window was a dangerous exercise but something she had done many times before. Juliana suspected Aunt Millie knew about her late-night excursions because she had started to mutter that her brother had died and left Juliana his lack of sense.

It took her a few minutes to get her feet firmly planted on the ground. One glance up at Millie's darkened window

told her that she was free. After taking a deep, calming, breath, Juliana trotted happily toward the woods.

Upon her arrival, Juliana sat on her favorite stump and drank in the sounds of the romantic forest around her. Sitting there, clutching her well-used book in her hands, she sighed. Despite all of the loss she had experienced, she found that she was at peace.

After a long while, however, Juliana yawned several wide yawns in a row and decided it was time to head back home and slip into her soft bed. She had almost reached the house when she heard a shrill, penetrating scream that made her blood run still. *Aunt Millie!* Another scream pierced the darkness. Aunt Millie was not screaming out of anger. Reality hit like a boulder to the head. *Terror!*

Juliana took off running toward the house, but before she reached her destination, the screams were suddenly silenced. Her heart skipped several beats. As she approached, everything looked dark and peaceful, but something felt wrong; unsettling. Cautiously, Juliana peered in the front door. It was propped open. Looking down, she noticed a trail of large, muddy footprints on the floor, much larger than her own.

“Hello?” she whispered into the darkness.

Crash!

What was that?

Crash. *There it is again!* The disturbance was coming from the small kitchen at the back of the cottage. Just then, she saw a blur of a dark shadow speeding toward her. Her heart pounded under her ribcage. The shadow ducked around the corner and into the study. *It's as big as a man!* Scared but

curious, she followed. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

"Hello?" she croaked, her mouth dry.

A low, sharp snarl echoed through the room, answering her call. Horrified, she turned to run but strong arms prevented her escape. She hardly recognized her voice as her own terrified scream pierced the air. A hand clamped over her mouth. The man hissed and bent over her trembling frame. An excruciating pain issued from the base of her neck. Her breath came in rapid spurts, but she could make no sound, due to the long fingers still covering her mouth.

Jules felt herself growing weak, slipping from consciousness as her blood left her body. She slumped to the ground, but the arms cradled her as she fell. Her head lolled back, exposing her face. She heard a sharp intake of breath that wasn't hers. "He said you were beautiful." The smooth voice mused. Somewhere far away, Jules heard a ripping sound. "He was right." Something smooth and cool pressed against her lips. "Drink." The voice commanded. The warm liquid tasted of metal and burned her throat.

Jules's eyes fluttered open, she saw the blurred outline of a face. "You are mine now," it said. He released her, Jules dropped to the floor with a thump. The man, the shadow, was gone. Jules's hand reached for her throbbing neck, she felt two small punctures in her skin. This is when the real pain started.

Chapter One

WELCOME TO ABOIT, MAINE

Over 400 Years Later, America

Juliana Bristow raced through the darkened streets. Speed was her ally, the moonlight her friend. To the human eye, she would be a blur of red and white, and still, she stuck to the shadows. The sleepy seaside town was slowly tucking itself in for late evening meals and prime time television. This was one of the reasons Jules had chosen Aboit, Maine as a home. It was quiet, it was peaceful, and it was safe. Or so was thought. In Aboit, vampires ran free. Well, three of them did.

Jules stopped abruptly and took in her surroundings. She'd taken a wrong turn. Gabriel was going to gloat if he and Eileen beat her to their destination. She thought of the smug expression that would undoubtedly appear on her best friend's face and bolted toward the center of town. Jules's run was fierce. She rounded a corner like a cheetah on the heels of its prey. Deducing a quicker route than the one she was currently following, Jules launched herself onto a nearby rooftop. She sped across it, easily making the distance. One, to the next, and then the next. Her feet moved

soundlessly over the humans' heads. Each and every one none the wiser.

Long ago, after her first taste of blood, Jules had been appalled by what she had become. But now, over four hundred years later, she had come to embrace, but control, what she was. As Jules reached the first restaurant rooftop, she stopped to take in the view around her. She could see the bustling marina clearly from her perch. The cry of seagulls rang in her ears. She took a deep, unnecessary breath. Jules loved the smell of the sea. She then peered down into the dark alley beneath her. *Empty*. She had meant to drop to the ground in silence but instead landed in a puddle with a splash.

“What was that?” someone asked.

“Probably nothing,” said another.

Jules flattened herself against the stone wall and waited until they passed. She had reached the busy downtown area. At least what the people of Aboit considered busy. This seaside haven was sparsely populated when compared to the last city she'd lived in.

Jules sighed. It couldn't be helped. She'd have to walk the rest of the way. The sweatshirt she wore concealed most of her pale, freckled skin and she pulled her blue hood up over her radiant auburn hair for good measure. Shoving her hands into her pockets, she walked briskly, but not fast enough to draw extra attention. She was drawing enough as it was. It seemed, no matter how she tried to blend into this human world, being dead made her stand out. Jules's closest human friend would say that humans looked for magic in their lives and that Jules's unearthly beauty made her feel

like magic. Jules thought it was because humans craved danger, and there was nothing more dangerous than a predator that hungered for your blood.

Jules came to an abrupt halt when she reached Henry Park. Which, in reality, was more of a bench and flowerpot in front of the public library. She sat on the weather-worn bench and waited.

“You took the rooftops, didn’t you?” Gabriel asked in a conversational tone, still at a distance that only her vampire hearing allowed her to hear. She smiled coyly but said nothing as he and Eileen reached the bench where she sat.

“Well, at least you didn’t make us wait like last time.” The jest was showing in his iridescent, silver eyes, which had just a hint of blue around the edges.

“Impatience constant in the mind brings unhappiness to the soul,” she rebutted, looking up at him.

“You remember you live in twenty-first century America now, right?” Gabriel teased as she stood.

Gabriel was tall, strong and protective. Jules felt that his name fit him well, the angles of his face were near perfection and his blond hair reminded her of a halo. However, in actuality, it was his personality that reminded her of an angel. Gabriel had a passion for people. He was a teacher, a protector, a guide. His greatest joy was teaching new generations. Jules had found him after the Battle of Brier Creek. A new vampire fresh off the battlefield, unsure how to be what he was. Jules had tried to teach him but, in the end, it had been he who had reminded her that human life was sacred.

For Jules, the temptation to kill was too great. So, together, they invented other ways to get the blood they needed: Red Cross, campus blood drives, even raiding the blood bank at a hospital when necessary.

Eileen, Gabriel's wife of near forty years, was as free-spirited as they come. Her black hair hung long, past her waist, and complimented her bronzed skin, native to this land. The silver of age had not overtaken the original black color of her human eyes yet. She was still an infant vampire.

It was always a risk, taking such a young vampire into the heart of human habitation. Eileen didn't possess the control that Jules and Gabriel had worked many years to attain. Regardless, Eileen had begged to accompany them to the Promenade tonight. Apparently, she saw an art show opening advertised that had sparked her interest.

Jules let down her hood as the three deadliest predators in Maine walked down a busy street to enter the small gallery a few shops away.

As they walked, Jules felt Gabriel's hand grasp her shoulder. Her head shot up. There was *one...two...three...* Jules counted six in the pack that was congregating outside Seaside Soda Shop.

They hollered and howled as they were joined by yet another. This one was bigger than most of the others and he had an Alpha's commanding presence.

"Werewolves," Gabriel hissed.

Jules placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Just keep going," she said quietly. "They've never attacked us before. This town is big enough for both species."

“But Jules,” Gabriel protested as he placed himself between Eileen and the wolves. Eileen’s hand went reflexively up to brush one of the long scars on her face.

Jules knew the unspoken treaty of the supernatural beings in Aboit had never set well with her coven. Past events had left them uneasy around members of this other supernatural species.

“I said, ignore them,” Jules whispered and made to move on down the wide sidewalk. But just as she started to turn away, she froze. She had caught sight of one of the wolves. He was stunning, tall, and lean. He had tan skin, dark hair, brilliant green eyes, and features reminiscent of someone Jules had known long ago. His eyes locked with her own. She could not turn away.

“Jules?” Eileen’s concerned voice seemed distant.

She heard Gabriel hiss again. This time it was directed at the pack, and yet, she still couldn’t tear her gaze from the mesmerizing werewolf’s.

The Alpha charged at them and Gabriel met the challenge. The two crashed into one another with supernatural force. But the scuffle knocked into Jules, pulling her focus away from *him*. As she assessed the situation, she noted that the other wolves had yet to join the fray. Jules knew she had to intervene before this situation escalated. Just then, the Alpha threw a full-fisted punch at Gabriel, who avoided it by sidestepping ever so slightly. Jules took advantage of the moment and leaped directly between the two fighting men. She stood, arms outstretched to her sides. This move had the desired effect, the Alpha froze,

mid-stride. Jules turned her full attention on Gabriel for just a second. "Back down," Jules commanded with a hiss.

"Jules, move..." Gabriel said.

She silenced him with a glare. "I know what I'm doing."

Gabriel conceded and moved back a few paces to stand in front of Eileen. Jules turned to confront the Alpha.

"Vampire scum," the Alpha said, apparently having gotten over his shock that such a small woman would intervene.

Jules scowled. She couldn't believe he was stupid enough to say that out loud. By now, the incident had drawn quite a crowd of spectators.

"Move, or you'll be the one to die," the Alpha spat, but this time it was only loud enough for Jules to hear.

Jules ignored the threat, but said, "you are the Alpha, yes? According to the rules of proper engagement, you must deal with me now."

"You lead this coven?" the Alpha asked.

"I do," Jules stated evenly, stepping into a stance that exuded the position and power of her years. Out of the corner of her eye, Jules saw that the other pack members had begun to encourage the crowd to disperse. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn't have to deal with being exposed to the local humans on top of this inconvenient confrontation.

"You?" the Alpha mocked. "A girl...what about that male of yours?" He gestured toward Gabriel.

"I may look young, but I wouldn't underestimate me if I were you."

“You’re a child,” he said, growling at her a bit as he said it.

“For an immortal being you seem to be unaware of how immortality works.” Jules heard two of the pack member’s chuckle. The Alpha’s face grew redder.

So, lightening the mood to defuse the situation would not work. Jules changed her approach. “My coven should never have engaged you. And for that, I offer my apologies.” This approach, however, did have the desired effect.

“Your apologies mean nothing to me,” the Alpha spat. But his expression had turned smug, rather than murderous.

“I am sure this can be solved diplomatically,” Jules said. “If my apologies are not sufficient, what do you suggest, Alpha?”

The Alpha seemed to be considering this question. After a few moments, he said, “this town is under my jurisdiction. You and your coven are no longer welcome here. You will leave tonight.”

Jules sighed. This is not what she had intended. “We have coexisted peacefully in this town for years. Surely we can come to some other arrangement,” she said as politely as she could manage.

“You will leave tonight,” he repeated forcefully.

“You see, I know that we can live in peace. I’ve been alive much longer than this feud has had fire to fuel it. Some of the greatest Alphas of your species advocated for peace. Like Stephen Cain. Surely, you want to follow his example.”

This seemed to only anger the Alpha. “How dare you mention his name. You have no right.”

“I have every right. He was one of my dearest friends.”

"You're probably one of the demons who assassinated him," the man growled.

"It wasn't me," she said easily, making sure any sadness was concealed well. She watched as the large man, who towered over her, shook with anger. Diplomacy was failing. Jules knew this could go only one of two ways now. *The Alpha will attack and die, or he will back down.* He stepped closer to her, rage in his eyes.

"Be my guest..." she said evenly, "expose yourself right here. Right now. Wolf or man, this is not a fight you will win." Jules prepared to strike if need be.

He growled audibly.

"Carson, back off!" someone called.

Momentarily taken aback, Jules looked over the big man's shoulder. The voice had come from the werewolf she'd been captivated by earlier. She looked the wolf all the way up and down, from his floppy hair to his Converse sneakers. *The resemblance.*

"Stay out of this, Luca," the Alpha, Carson, snarled, turning to look in the direction of the one who'd spoken.

Jules waited, silent but very deadly.

"We've already been too exposed," Luca added, seemingly undaunted by the glares of his leader.

The Beta?

"Don't you see how old she is? Look at her eyes," another werewolf added.

The Alpha spun and took a closer look at Jules's eyes. Solid, pure, silver. With a vampire's age came increasing strength and skill. She knew he was starting to lose confidence in his ability to win against her one-on-one. "As

I said, our species have coexisted in peace for years,” Jules said when she saw the Alpha’s resolve begin to weaken. Long moments stretched out between the immortal creatures.

“Fine demon,” the Alpha said, “you may go about your business.”

Jules kept silent. But nodded all the same.

“But this is not over,” Carson said under his breath as he turned to walk back toward his pack.

“I didn’t think it was,” Jules said under her breath as she took a few steps backward, still unwilling to turn her back on the Alpha. After a few moments, as she was about to turn away, she caught the gaze of the Beta, Luca, one last time. He seemed to be peering into the deepest depths of time and age through the windows of her eyes. She nodded at him and he at her, neither looking away for a long moment. Then they did, going their separate ways.

Jules returned to Eileen and Gabriel, who had hovered nearby during the confrontation. “So, shall we enjoy this art show?” Jules asked, her easy countenance reappearing. Gabriel looked at her in disbelief, while Eileen was staring at her in wide-eyed wonder.

“Oh, relax, both of you.”

LUCA

Luca Cain looked away from the strange and beautiful creature. He’d never seen a vampire before, heard of them yes, but had never come into contact with one personally. She wasn’t at all like the rumors suggested. Jules, *was that her name?* Wasn’t a walking corpse. She may be technically dead, but she was also full of strong and fiery life.

"Luca, let's go!" his best friend Kyle called.

Luca turned, it was then that he realized the pack had moved on toward the parking garage. He'd been staring through the glass doors of the art gallery, watching the red-haired vampire as she chatted with the other female.

"Luca!" Kyle called again.

"Coming," Luca called back and made to follow the rest of the pack.

"So, she was hot, you know, for a dead person," Kyle said when Luca joined him. Kyle was a thirty-seven-year-old werewolf who had stopped aging in his late twenties. He was tall and lean, like Luca, but his dark hair hung to his shoulders when it wasn't pulled back.

"Have you ever seen one before?" Luca asked him as they walked a few paces behind the rest. Luca was in his eighties, yet he looked to be a few years younger than Kyle.

"A couple of them," Kyle said, "but none as hot as that."

"You two need to cut that out before Carson hears you," Ben said, falling back to reprimand them. Ben was yet another member of Carson's inner circle. He looked to be in his early thirties, but Luca didn't know how old he really was. *Old, like really old.* "Vampires may look enticing boys, but remember they are soulless, immoral beings. Trust me, I've known the worst of them in my years."

Kyle shrugged, and Luca nodded. Ben had a lot more life experience than either of them. He probably knew what he was talking about. Ben patted Luca on the shoulder and then moved back toward the front of the group.

“Cover for me?” Kyle asked when they’d reached the side-by-side parking spots that contained Kyle’s sleek motorcycle and Luca’s soft-top Jeep.

“Don’t I always?” Luca asked rhetorically.

“Yep. I don’t know why you put up with me,” Kyle commented playfully. Then hopped on his motorcycle, leaving to go see his biggest secret.

GABRIEL

Gabriel Prentiss was still trying to resist running after those beasts and tearing them to pieces. He couldn’t comprehend why Jules was being so frustratingly calm after what had just transpired. He glanced over to where she stood, taking in one painting and then another. Not only had she existed before the feud began, but she had been in the midst of its inception. In England three hundred years ago, she’d seen firsthand what the werewolf packs did to their kind. She’d been faced with their threats for centuries, and still, werewolves didn’t seem to set her on edge in the slightest. He, on the other hand, could never forgive what they had done.

Gabriel took a calming breath. His body didn’t need this to survive of course, but he always found that this repetitive motion helped clear his mind. Gabriel left the girls discussing some arbitrary contemporary painting and moseyed to the back of the gallery, toward some of the more forgotten pieces.

He found one that struck him tucked away in the back corner. Hands clasped behind his back, he studied it intently. The accuracy tugged on his senses. He heard the gunshot in

his mind and rushed his hand up to where the bullet had penetrated his body over two hundred years before.

He should have died that day on March 3rd, 1779. Like so many other Patriots had. Why Colonel Smith had saved him, and only him, had confounded him all these years. Why did Corporal Gabriel Prentiss deserve to survive when so many other souls were dead or dying? Gabriel could remember clearly, lying there on the wet ground, crying out that he didn't want to die. He remembered Colonel Smith leaning over him.

"Just breathe. It will all be over soon," he had whispered in Gabriel's ear.

But it wasn't over, Gabriel remembered his neck being pierced and the piercing pain that had surged through him after he, himself, had drunk from the British Colonel's wrist. What followed, he could not remember. When he awoke, he was in the woods alone. There was a note in his jacket pocket that read:

When you wake, you will be feared by all men. You can never return home. You have a new existence. Live on. - a Vampire, and now, your friend.

Gabriel remembered the words as if he'd read them that very morning. He'd read them a thousand times, trying to figure out what it all meant. Not long after his change, he had met Jules. He could never thank her enough for being his friend, teacher, and ally.

"Are you ready?" Eileen asked, coming up behind him and slipping one arm around his waist. She rested her chin

on his shoulder and gazed at the painting he was standing stoically in front of. Eileen stood at about five-eight. She was stately and beautiful. It wasn't until Eileen had walked into his life that he'd found real, true love. "I'm getting really thirsty," she said quietly.

Gabriel turned at this and gripped her hand. Eileen was so young. She wasn't skilled at resisting the temptations that the human presence brought. It was his job to protect her from the heartlessness of the kill, and thus far, he'd done this well. Eileen had never tasted fresh, human blood and therefore didn't know what she was missing out on.

"If you're ready, I'm ready," he told her. "Is Jules coming with us?" he asked.

"Nope," Eileen replied. "She left already."

Gabriel sighed. Jules insisted on getting her own residence when they'd relocated to Aboit. He didn't like it. Covens should live under one roof, especially in a town infested with werewolves. "Let us go then."

Together, they left the quaint art gallery and walked down the sidewalk that ran along the sea. A young couple on a moonlight stroll passed close by them. *Too close*. Gabriel increased his pace when he felt Eileen stiffen. She clung tightly to his arm, fighting the instinct to attack.

"You're alright," he assured her as they neared their destination.

They made it to the parking garage without further incident, but they were followed into the elevator by a group of young humans. Gabriel wrapped an arm tightly around Eileen and placed himself between her and the innocent

teenagers. Eileen held her breath, closed her eyes tightly, and let her head fall back against his chest.

“See you tomorrow Mr. Prentiss,” one of his students from the local high school called as he and Eileen exited on the third floor.

LUCA

Luca loved the drive that took him straight through the town's center. The calm of the shopkeepers closing for the night. The young couples that moseyed the sidewalks, defying the night's end. The smell of the sea as his drive paralleled the coast. Luca loved this town. But, he was seeing none of that this time. Luca's mind was racing as he processed the events that had transpired. Or rather, as he thought about the fiery, petite, stunning, dead, vampire coven leader. There was something about her. Something he'd felt. He wondered if she'd felt it too.

Once Luca got back to the place he tentatively called home, he pulled passed the cars that belonged to various Den members and parked his Jeep on the side of the house, under his bedroom window. The Den was a six-bedroom, three-bathroom, two-story crap pile on the far side of town. In which, Carson crammed the six members of his inner circle. Luca and Kyle included. Luca looked up at his closed, second-story window forlornly. Sometimes, he preferred to jump directly into his room, rather than deal with the chaos that was life at the Den. Luca sighed and walked through the yard to the front door. On his way, he passed one of the two shutters remaining on the front of the house and ran a finger

along the chipped, white paint. As he entered, the front screen door banged shut behind him.

“Luca,” Carson called as he walked quickly passed the family room.

Luca backed up a few steps without turning around.

“Where’s Kyle?”

“He went for a run,” Luca lied easily.

“Are you sure?” Carson asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes.” Luca nodded and then moved down the hall before Carson could ask him any more questions.

CARSON

Carson growled and resumed his pacing. Having Luca as his Beta was truly a pain in the ass, but it was Luca’s birthright. Not only had he been in line to inherit his father’s pack before they were massacred, but he was a descendant of Stephen Cain’s family line. Those facts alone gave Carson no choice as to who his Beta had to be. The fact that he couldn’t entirely trust Luca was an annoyance that had to be swallowed.

As Carson paced, his anger only grew. Of course, Carson knew that there were a few vampires in Aboit. But until now, they had seemed to understand that this was his town. They had certainly never challenged him before. Defiance could not be tolerated; humiliation even less. The little vampire bitch had damaged his reputation with his pack. How could the pack trust him if they saw weakness in him? Something needed to be done to repair the damage that tiny, dead girl had inflicted. The vampires need to be dealt with.

“I am not fond of vampires,” Ben complained as he joined Carson in the common room.

Ben was one of the only pack members that didn't make it a point of avoiding him when he was angry. Carson saw value in that. “Yes Ben, something must be done,” Carson said, with fury in his voice and conviction in his heart.

Chapter Two

DEAD GIRL IN A COFFEE SHOP

The roar of the wind was all around Kyle as he flew through town toward her home. He came to a speedy stop in front of the old apartment building, just in time to see the love of his life walk from her family's apartment. She was being followed closely by her older brother, Adam.

"Dad doesn't always know what's best Adam!" she shouted when he grabbed her arm, spinning her around.

"Neither do you!" he shouted back.

Kyle turned off the ignition and dismounted but kept his distance. He relaxed against the motorcycle, waiting for the fight to fizzle out.

"Why is he here?" Adam questioned, catching sight of Kyle.

"Kyle's a part of my life, Adam. Deal with it." Hayley pulled her arm free and turned away from her brother.

"You barely know him!" Adam shouted after her, shoving his hands into his pockets and storming back inside the apartment.

Hayley ignored him as she reached the motorcycle.

"Do you two ever get along?" Kyle asked, wrapping her in his arms and pulling her against him.

"We have our moments." She smiled at Kyle in a way that suggested she was no longer thinking about the quarrel she and her brother were just having.

"Hello, wife." He smiled down and ran one hand through her long, highlighted, hair.

"Hi, husband."

He bent down and met her in a kiss. A few weeks back, Kyle had done something that, when discovered, would not be easily forgiven. Kyle had whisked Hayley Reynolds, now Hayley Reynolds-Cooper, off to Las Vegas and married her. The marriage was legal by the United States standards, of course. However, pack laws were quite different. When the Alpha of your pack had his eye on a mate, marrying her was severally looked down upon. A little over a month ago, Carson had demanded that Hayley's father grant him his daughter's hand in marriage. Mr. Reynolds had not immediately complied, but Kyle would not take the risk that he would relent; damn the consequences.

"Get a room," another one of Hayley's brothers, younger and still attending Aboit High, commented as he walked passed them.

"Good to see you too Landon!" Kyle called after him.

He waved once but didn't turn around.

"Let's go somewhere we can be alone," Hayley whispered.

"I had an idea about that," he whispered back, rubbing his nose softly against hers.

JULIANA

On a long, quiet street directly across from the sea, sat Jules's little green house. She walked passed the car she'd neglected to drive to the art gallery and through the freshly painted front door. It was peaceful and charming and full of character, but mainly, it was all hers. Jules was four hundred years old. Her first hundred years as a vampire had been a life of extravagance and indulgence. She'd lived on an English estate, in a grand manor, which housed one of the oldest covens in existence. After her time there had come to an abrupt end, she'd spent many years drowning in loneliness. Until Gabriel. With him, and then Eileen, came an existence of family and hope. Even so, the last few years had caused her to thoroughly enjoy the solitude of living alone.

Jules walked through the darkened house, stripped off her sweatshirt and jeans, pushed back her covers, and dropped gracefully onto her mattress. She still had a few hours before she had to resume her current life as a modern-day American. She pulled her soft, feather blanket up around her shoulders and instantly drifted to sleep.

Jules tossed. She hadn't been prepared for her past to haunt her dreams this night and yet...

There she was, standing at the entrance to an opulent ballroom. She walked inside, her long dress swaying with her stride. Music set the mood as couples moved across the dance floor. She could see her friends happily waltzing in wide circles. Gwendolyn, a primordial vampire, one of the first of their kind, and Stephen, her werewolf husband.

Jules could smell the blood that was served in large goblets. She could almost taste it. Jules licked her lips in her sleep.

“Dance with me Juliana,” a familiar voice said. The atmosphere changed, darkened, as he slipped an arm over her stomach possessively.

Jules thrashed in her sleep.

She turned and stared into the face that she dreaded most. An accustomed, cold smile shown on his primordial lips. *Hector*. “You’re mine, Julie.”

The dream shifted as she cowered under Hector’s glare, his hand connected with her face yet again. Another image, the bloodied and lifeless body of her friend laying on the riverbank. “Juliana, help me,” called the distorted and rotting corpse of Stephen Cain.

Startled awake, Jules sat up in bed. She pushed her matted hair from her face and took a few deep breaths. It was a human reaction to steady the nerves, but still relatively effective. Jules swallowed, her throat was dry. She was parched.

Jules pushed back the covers and walked to her sparsely stocked kitchen. Her cupboards had some plates and things for if she had company, but in this area of the home, her own need was extremely specific. She reached up and pulled one of her glasses from the cupboard. She squinted as she opened the refrigerator to retrieve a bag of blood with the hospital’s tag still on it. She had several stored up from her last raid on the local blood bank. She ripped the bag open with her teeth and poured its contents into the glass. Throwing the empty bag in the sink, she walked to her tiny

living room and flipped on the television. Some news program played as she sipped from her glass.

For a moment, Jules thought of nothing but the liquid seeping into her tissues as she drank. Everything inside her was consumed by the quenching of her thirst. She drained the rest of the blood in the glass. The ecstasy and rejuvenation that blood brought to her erased the pain of her nightmare. Her, now crimson-colored, eyes blinked as she regained her composure. Jules then set the empty, blood-stained glass down on her wooden coffee table and sunk back into her plush, velvet couch.

Her thoughts drifted to her life before the English coven had taken her in. It was a time when humans greatly feared but believed in such superstitions as vampires. They were considered demons on earth and she had just become one of them.

Once the physical pain of her death had receded, her heart stopped beating and the change was complete. She was strong but disoriented. Her senses were amplified. She could hear and see things from great distances.

She'd run faster than she'd ever thought possible to her fiancé, Laurence; ever her rock and protection. After being invited into his home, she'd told him what had happened. She had hoped he would try to see passed her demon face and into her heart. He did not. All he could see was evil standing in the place of the one he was to marry.

She'd run from Laurence's cottage straight into the arms of Hector. He had taken her to his home, to his coven at Pelmoore Manor. There Jules met his sister, Gwendolyn,

who was as sweet as she was mad. They had become instant friends.

Jules had watched as Gwendolyn fell in love with a young werewolf from the village. Stephen was strong and gentle. After they were married, life at the Manor couldn't have been more peaceful and jovial. Over time, the packs elected Stephen Alpha over much of England. Together, Gwen and Stephen ruled both species as one; equally.

However, when Stephen had stepped in to help Gwendolyn rule, their combined influence usurped Hector's authority. His early attempts to reconstitute his power over the vampires were futile. In hopes of disintegrating the alliance between werewolves and vampires, Hector had told Gwendolyn and Stephen that their people were beginning to fight amongst themselves. This was true, but only because of Hector's coaxing lies. The couple had decided to remain steadfast. They believed that the hate would pass in time. But they were wrong; it did not pass. And Hector's greed grew. Hector was a vampire of nightmares, even Juliana's.

Jules could feel the bitterness overtaking her. That night still haunted her, the one down by the river. The night of Stephen's death. *If only he hadn't been walking alone.* Hector had ended Stephen's life that night, but he hadn't stopped there. He tore him apart bit by bit and sent the pieces to the neighboring werewolf packs. Instead of disheartening the werewolves as Hector had intended, this whipped the packs into a frenzy. They retaliated. Both sides lost many lives. Hector wanted war, and he got one.

Vampires began disappearing in droves. Jules found out later that the packs were burying their enemies in coffins,

far underground. How humans had gotten and twisted that information, Jules didn't know. The races fought until the casualties were too great for both werewolves and vampires. Jules didn't know what had caused the cease-fire because, by then, she was far from England. After Stephen was killed, Gwendolyn's heart had grown cold and she had banished Jules.

Jules was pulled from the memory when she felt a single, thick blood-tear escape her right eye and slide down her cheek. She shook herself free of her thoughts yet again. When she wiped under her eye, the back of her hand came away smeared with blood.

The Manor and all those within were no longer a part of her existence. They hadn't been for centuries. Jules tried to focus on what the late-night newscaster was ranting about; some murder somewhere not far from Aboit.

LUCA

Luca woke abruptly as a door slammed and someone yelled, "get the hell out of this house!" It was Carson roaring in anger about something or another. Being a normal occurrence, Luca rolled over and closed his eyes again.

"She was never yours, you bigoted brute," Kyle shouted back, apparently finding a shred of defiance deep inside himself and acting on it.

There was a sound that meant one of them had gotten punched. Luca assumed that the soon to be bruised one was Kyle.

Luca sat up in bed, trying to shake himself awake. He wobbled a little as he stood and untangled himself from his

sheets. He moved to the door, pulled it open, and walked down the hall toward Kyle's bedroom. They met on the stairs. Kyle's lip was bleeding.

"Did you know about this?" Carson shouted, upon seeing Luca at the top of the stairs.

"Nope," Luca lied and followed Kyle to his room.

Kyle started haphazardly shoving his belongings in one of three large duffle bags he pulled from his closet. Luca stopped at the door and watched.

"Hayley's brother told him," Kyle explained, without turning around.

"Which one?" Luca asked referencing Hayley's many brothers.

"How should I know?" Kyle snapped as he continued.

"Probably Adam," Luca said.

"Probably."

"Where will you go?" Luca asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"I've got a place," Kyle said, then smiled mischievously. "You didn't think I was gonna stay in this frat house forever, did you? I'm a married man."

Luca shrugged. He'd moved into the Den around ten years ago, Kyle had been here before that. Kyle leaving after he and Hayley had tied the knot hadn't really occurred to Luca.

"Come by the apartment later," Kyle said, picking up bag after bag and slinging each one over his shoulders. He looked like an overstuffed pack-mule as he walked toward Luca. "It's on the floor above Hayley's parents."

"I bet they'll love that," Luca joked.

“We’re married now,” Kyle said. “They’ll get over it.”

“You’re sure?” Luca asked, rubbing his eyes, still feeling a bit groggy.

“Ehhh,” Kyle waved his hand in a swiveling motion to indicate that the real answer was maybe. “Can I borrow the Jeep?” Kyle asked, looking down at his belongings.

Luca imagined Kyle trying to get himself and three large bags balanced on a motorcycle and chuckled.

Kyle shifted until he could dig the keys to his motorcycle out of his pocket.

“I’ll bring it by Hayley’s later,” Luca said, catching the keys when they came flying toward him.

“It’s my place too,” Kyle chided.

Luca made a face.

“You’re right, it’s Hayley’s.” Kyle conceded. Despite being thrown out of the house he’d lived in for over a decade, Kyle was in good spirits. Of course, he was generally in good spirits. It was just in his nature. “Throw down the Jeep keys,” Kyle said as he thudded down the stairs.

Luca walked back to his room. His bedroom was the largest room in the house, the master suite. Kyle said it was a fair bribe for someone with Luca’s lineage to become Carson’s Beta, instead of putting forth the challenge for Alpha. At first, Luca had laughed it off, but now he was thankful for the space to escape.

Luca shut his door behind him again and searched through old clothes and clutter until he found where he had dropped his car keys the night before. Housekeeping wasn’t Luca’s strong suit. Luca walked to the window, opened it, and tossed the keys into Kyle’s outstretched hand.

"Be careful with my Jeep."

"Don't crash my baby," Kyle called back, looking forlornly toward the driveway and his motorcycle.

Luca laughed and pulled his window back down, turning to prepare for the day.

JULIANA

Unable to resume sleeping after the night's dreams, Jules had dressed for work early and decided to take a stroll down her street. She'd chosen this street for its ambiance. The small cottages that lined the rocky coast were full of charm, and she could see the waves crashing on the rocks from her back porch. Jules had rarely felt more at peace.

She loved to watch the morning routine of her quiet neighborhood. The woman next door rushing off to work and the family three houses down, herding their young children into a car, headed for school. It all reminded Jules why she had chosen to cherish human life.

As the time for her to leave for work approached, Jules walked back to her own house and started her car. It was still dark out, so she drove the few minutes to the coffee shop she frequented. Not because she drank coffee. She was dead, what good would caffeine do her? But because her best, human friend worked the early shift most days.

Per-usual, the coffee house was relatively empty inside while the drive-through was a mass of honking cars and impatient drivers. Jules saw Monica handing the same old man his coffee order. "Is there anything else I can get you, Mr. Boyer?"

“What do you think?” he snapped grumpily.

Monica smiled regardless and wished him a good day. Jules approached the counter as Mr. Boyer made his way back to his usual little table.

“Does he ever go home?” Jules whispered to Monica once she was close enough to keep from being overheard.

“Yes, between ten and noon,” Monica said and they both giggled.

Monica was several inches taller than Jules, with caramel skin and brown hair that she wore soft and wild past her shoulders. Monica had graduated last year and was in the middle of a gap year, which she'd promised her parents she was using to think about her future. Jules suspected it had more to do with the fact that her boyfriend, Seth, was a year younger and still trapped at Aboit High. Jules knew that Monica planned on going to college but wanted to wait for Seth, so they could take on that adventure together. Monica had her whole life planned out, down to the year and moment she wanted Seth to propose. Jules knew that life rarely worked out how one planned, but she hoped in Monica's case it would.

Monica picked up the water bottle she always carried and walked out from behind the counter. “I'm taking ten,” she called to her co-worker, who was in the back.

“Okay!” they shouted in return.

“Are you still coming over tonight?” Monica asked.

Jules nodded as they sat down at their usual table.

“Good. How was your night? Mine was fine. Seth and I just hung out with my family. I got into a fight with Ethan because he didn't knock first, and Seth and I were making

out. Thank God that's all he saw. So, what about you? Anything eventful happen last night?"

Jules smiled. The number of words Monica could get out in one breath was almost inhuman. "Actually, yes." Jules lowered her voice. "Gabriel, Eileen, and I had a run-in with a pack of wolves."

"Did anything dramatic happen? I mean, to be honest, we both knew that was going to happen eventually. But what do you mean 'a run in'? How many were there?" Monica said.

Jules just smiled and waited for Monica to take a breath. Monica had a familiar comfort about her. They possessed the ease of interaction that naturally developed out of a deep friendship. Jules had had a few human friends over the years, but Monica Martin was different. She knew what Jules and her coven were. To Jules's surprise, she'd guessed about a year after they'd become friends. Jules couldn't understand Monica's acceptance of vampirism and everything that came with it. She was relieved that she showed no signs of wanting to be turned into one. Monica's life plan required that she keep her heart beating.

"How'd Mr. Prentiss take it?"

Jules simply made a face at her.

"That bad, huh?" Monica asked. Gabriel had been Monica's English teacher sophomore year. She knew him personally now, through Jules, but couldn't seem to stop calling him 'Mr. Prentiss'. Even after she'd graduated high school.

"He, umm, got into a fistfight with the Alpha," Jules said.

Monica looked at Jules, shock on her face.

Before Monica could ask, Jules said, “don’t worry. I took care of it.”

“Wow. I mean, I’m glad it wasn’t worse, I guess,” Monica replied. “With what happened to Eileen, I’d have guessed he would’ve bitten one of them, then and there.”

Just then, Monica’s phone beeped and she pulled it from her pocket to check the text. She smiled as she returned it. Jules thought it was likely from Seth, due to Monica’s facial expression. “Oh, I have to get back,” Monica said standing.

“See you after work,” Jules said, standing too.

“Jules, I almost forgot,” Monica stopped and spun toward Jules again. “You know how Saturday is Seth and my two-year anniversary, right?”

Monica had mentioned it on more than a few occasions, so yes, Jules knew. She nodded.

“Well, Seth kind of forgot. He made plans with a friend.”

“Anyone I know?” Jules asked.

“Probably not. Anyway, Seth was wondering what you were doing on Saturday night.”

“Monica. No,” Jules said, taken aback. She knew what Monica was asking. She also knew that it was a very bad idea. “Can’t Seth just change his plans to another night?” Jules didn’t like the idea of any form of romantic connection with a human. Not even a blind date. Not even once.

“I asked that, and he suggested that you should come with us instead. I guess his friend is like twenty-three or something.

“Monica, you know I don’t get involved with humans.” Jules looked at her friend seriously.

"Of course I do, but Seth doesn't. I couldn't exactly say, 'yeah, she can't. She might eat him' could I?"

Jules chose not to respond to that one.

"Come on, Jules. You're my best friend. Please don't make me lie to Seth any more than I already am," Monica begged, sticking out her lower lip.

Jules contemplated this. She would only have Monica for as long as one lifetime allowed. So, she offered up a long, aggravated sigh and relented. She could handle one night of small talk with a human boy.

"Thanks. You're the best!" Monica grinned widely. "It'll be fun."

"It had better not be," Jules retorted as she left the small coffee shop.

KYLE

Kyle parked the Jeep in front of the two-story apartment building, grabbed two of his three bags, and headed toward the shabby structure. Some of Hayley's younger siblings were out front. They were all piling into the family vehicle, heading across town for school.

"Hayley inside?" he asked Landon, who was climbing into the driver's seat.

"Not that I know of," he replied, without making eye contact with Kyle.

Kyle shrugged and hauled both his bags inside the building.

"Seriously dude." Adam stopped Kyle just outside his parents' doorway.

Kyle couldn't resist. He dropped both bags with a loud thud and punched Adam square on the jaw.

"What the hell was that for!" Adam shouted.

Kyle ignored him, picked up his bags again, and walked up the stairs toward his new home. The apartment's door was standing open.

"Honey, I'm home," Kyle called as he walked into the new living room. It was furnished with hand-me-downs and thrift shop finds. He'd spent the last week acquiring the furnishings, as a surprise for Hayley. It was already feeling more like home than the Den ever had.

"Yes, you are," Hayley said, walking from the bedroom. Kyle dropped both bags on the floor and opened his arms for her. She ran at him. He lifted her off her feet, kissing her. She was average height, shapely, strong, opinionated, and adventurous. Everything he'd ever wanted in a spouse. Yes, she was young, but being raised with so many siblings had caused her to mature quickly.

"Just adorable."

Still holding Hayley off the ground, Kyle turned toward the person who'd commented on their couple-cuteness.

Hayley's little sister, Amy, continued, "I'm done organizing the bathroom."

A horn honked outside.

"I think your ride is leaving," Kyle told her.

Amy swore and ran out the door and down the stairs.

"Alone at last," Kyle commented, looking down at Hayley and kissing her lips. "Are you ready to start our life Mrs. Reynolds-Cooper?"

"Yes," she said as he put her back on her feet. "As soon as you put all that crap where it belongs. As in, not on the living room floor." She pointed at the bags he'd dropped.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

"Is there more?" she asked, tapping him on the chest.

"Yeah, downstairs in Luca's Jeep."

"I'll get it. You unpack." Smiling, Hayley pulled the keys from his back pocket, smacked his backside, and walked from the room to bring up his last bag. Kyle watched her go. He was finally home.

JULIANA

Jules then got back in her car and drove in the direction of her job. She remembered meeting Monica like it was yesterday. Four years ago, the pair had stumbled across one another at the overstocked, resale bookstore in town. She'd reached for a book on the shelf, at the same moment that a young girl in braces and cornrows had snagged it from under her nose.

At that time, Jules was new to Aboit. She'd told Monica she was eighteen, no longer in school, and wasn't looking for any new friends. Monica, however, wouldn't take Jules's 'why don't you go make friend's your own age' seriously and kept bugging her until she'd agreed to hang out. They'd hit it off pretty much instantly.

Jules reached Aboit High and pulled in to a parking spot marked for staff. The sun had risen fully during the short drive. Jules knew Gabriel would have played it safe with the sunny forecast. Thus, he would already be inside his classroom with the blinds drawn. Jules put on her dark

sunglasses and grabbed her large black umbrella from under the passenger seat of her car. She cracked her door open and stuck it out of the top, like someone desperately trying not to get rained on. Quickly, she jogged toward the building, trying to slip inside without being spotted. Once through the glass double doors, she stowed both in her handbag. The guards against the sun did their job well. Between the umbrella, sunglasses, long jacket, and tall boots, she had barely begun to sizzle. Her knees were a little worse for wear, but her quick healing had her back in perfect shape in just a few seconds.

Jules walked down the darkened hall, greeting her co-workers as she went. When she reached Gabriel's classroom, she pushed the door open without knocking.

He looked up from where he sat hunched over his desk, at the far side of the room.

"Lunch today, my office?" she asked.

"If I get these papers graded, sure," he replied, sifting through the tall stack in front of him.

"Do you want me to grade some for you?"

"No!"

"Just thought I'd check," she teased, letting the door close behind her and heading to her own work area.

She reached the far side of the quiet building and walked through the darkened library to her small office in the back corner. She pulled her hair back in a tight bun, placed the pins carefully, and reached into her bag for her prescription-less glasses. This, along with a cardigan, pleated skirt, and a change into kitten heels, was all part of the act. Like Clark Kent, she was a master at hiding what she truly was.

Although, instead of concealing superpowers from another planet, she was pretending that she hadn't died at seventeen, and didn't have the natural desire to drink the student's blood.

