

Book Four

The Vampire Within Retribution

Drew Silver

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Book Four

The Vampire Within

Retribution

SEPTEMBER - TUESDAY - TRITON CITY

Ronnie and Gloria Bennett sat down on their brand new couch with its dark-leather base and beige microfiber cushions and enjoyed some long-overdue snuggle time. Ronnie usually put in fourteen-hour days, if not more, at work, and when he returned home each evening, he was so exhausted that it eradicated any hope of being intimate with his wife of sixteen years, even though their ten-year old son, Kenny, had gone to bed hours earlier. Yet, despite his tireless work ethic, he was shocked to learn about his layoff first thing Monday morning from his job as the most respected heavy equipment operator at the largest construction company in Triton City. His longtime boss gave him two months severance pay, an apology, and a promise to bring him back as soon as the pride of bloodthirsty mountain lions, which apparently roamed unseen through the city streets and attacked people, was caught and business picked up again.

Ronnie wasn't pissed off at his boss—or anyone else, for that matter—about the circumstances. It was unfortunate, but he knew the economy was in the tank. The housing market had been hammered by a landslide of foreclosures that some people in various media

outlets speculated was in large part due to the rash of homeowners that had gone missing and stopped paying their mortgages over the past six months. Whatever the reason, Ronnie was grateful for the extra month's pay. He knew his boss wasn't playing favorites—he was merely aware of the Bennetts' financial struggles spiraling out of control through no fault of their own. Still, Ronnie didn't say anything about the extra money to the other hardworking folks on his crew. They received only a month's severance when the proverbial ax fell. In spite of the moaning and groaning that followed, it was still better than the measly two-week pay everyone else in the city was getting when similar bad news came their way.

The Bennett's new couch was delivered around lunchtime as promised by the store's night manager the day before. It was the lone piece of furniture purchased from an actual department store in over two years and had taken thirteen months of scrimping and saving and a sliver from Ronnie's severance check to pull it off, but it was worth every cent. The new addition's only flaw was its stark difference in appearance compared to the rest of their furnishings. Four one-gallon buckets were flipped upside down on the floor in the center of the living room with a sanded piece of plywood laid across it. During the daytime, it was used as a coffee table and a desk to pay bills from. In the evening, it was used as an informal dining table and a place to kick up your feet. The antique four-drawer dresser, which was nestled in the opposite side of the room, was a gift from Gloria's parents. It kept Gloria's bras, their underwear, socks, and other personal items hidden away from view

and supported a twenty-seven-inch tube television with a built-in VHS player.

The one-bedroom condo didn't offer much in the way of creature comforts, either. It didn't have any store-bought decorations or conversational keepsakes except for the occasional family photo in a nondescript frame. There wasn't any expensive artwork carefully hung on the wall by wire wound tightly around a screw in case a significant earthquake struck and violently shook the ground. The original builder's flat-white paint still blanketed every wall from floor to ceiling except in Kenny's bedroom, which had been recently repainted a dark blue by his parents. And the first-floor condo didn't shout out the blood, sweat, and tears Ronnie and Gloria put into it to make it their own little piece of paradise.

Ronnie and Gloria spent a lot of time that summer hand-sanding the lacquer off their kitchen cabinets and refinishing them in a rich mahogany stain. They ripped out the linoleum flooring and replaced it with the stone tiles they had found in a trash dumpster behind a local hardware store. Then, they continued their renovation into the living room, where they pulled up the carpet and laid down beautiful hardwood flooring courtesy of a construction project that had an abundance of material. Ronnie purchased the excess for pennies on the dollar from his boss. Their hard work was in the pursuit of making family and friends feel more welcome in their home for birthdays and holidays. Even before all the improvements, no one could deny the love and support that filled every room. It was a nine-hundred-square-foot space with the feel of a mansion.

Contrary to how most of their family and friends shopped for a home, Ronnie and Gloria purchased the condo sight unseen, but they had three very good reasons for doing so. First, they had taken multiple tours of the builder's model, which was an exact replica of what the other units would look like when finished, and fell more in love with the floor plan every time. Second, it was within their price range, in a good area, and came with some very nice extras. Most importantly, it was close to Kenny's elementary school, where he still had friends to play with even if he wasn't able to run around with them like he used to.

For the Bennetts, though, what really sold them was the attached one-car garage, which was an added bonus if the buyer purchased a first-floor unit. It was spacious enough to park their minivan in and still have plenty of room for Kenny's wheelchair. They installed a sturdy narrow ramp from the kitchen to the garage so that he could easily guide the wheelchair to the minivan's rear passenger sliding door without getting stuck or scraping his knuckles on the wall. This was a crucial element of both his physical and mental rehabilitation. He needed to feel safe and secure in his environment, and Ronnie and Gloria made it their top priority to deliver that.

At the moment, an old gangster movie from 1983, *Scarface*, which starred Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer, flickered on the television screen, but neither Ronnie nor Gloria paid any attention to it. They were making out on the new couch like a couple of teenagers in the backseat of an old 1970 Plymouth convertible at a drive-in theatre. It had been too long since Ronnie was afforded the luxury of time to arouse his wife with

a little foreplay action, and he didn't plan on missing a beat. Their passion after two decades of being together rivaled that of most newlywed couples'.

Ronnie pulled his lips away and wiggled his eyebrows. "What do you say we test out our new bed?"

"I like the way you think," Gloria said, giggling. "I'll get us a glass of water. I'm sure we'll need it."

"Don't take too long," Ronnie replied.

"I won't," Gloria said, hurrying excitedly into the high-efficiency kitchen while Ronnie picked up the piece of plywood from off the empty paint buckets and set it by the dresser.

* * *

Luckily for the Bennetts' drained checking account, the kitchen had been gutted during the renovation project from apartments into condominiums. Theirs came with brand-new appliances, including a side-by-side fridge. They had used their entire life savings for the required 20 percent down and miraculously managed to secure a home loan at a very low interest rate. Since then, every dollar Ronnie made went to paying the mortgage, monthly utility bills, and the mountain of medical expenses delivered daily by their postman into their mailbox. Callous letters sent by the other driver's car insurance representative showed up once a week as well. Each one stated the same legal mumbo-jumbo: Until a declaration from the judge presiding over the case was handed down, they wouldn't pay another cent toward Kenny's medical expenses since their client was serving time in jail as punishment for the crime.

With each insensitive and nasty letter, Gloria's Irish temper flared and she'd rant about the injustice of the whole situation to anyone who would listen, which was mostly Ronnie. Kenny had been in the backseat of her car on their way to his soccer practice when a drunk driver blew through a red light and T-boned them in the intersection, almost tearing the compact car in half. Gloria was knocked unconscious and suffered a few broken ribs, but Kenny took the brunt of the impact and had to be cut out from the tangled metal by the Jaws of Life. The crash stole his ability to walk, but at least he was alive.

Once all the evidence related to the car accident was presented and the defense attorney gave his closing argument, the judge excused the jurors to deliberate privately behind closed doors. Four hours later, the prosecutor came into the coffee bar where the Bennetts and other members of their family gathered to announce that the jury had reached its decision. Gloria considered waiting outside the courthouse in case the jurors felt pressured into letting the young man responsible for the accident go free because his father was the mayor of Triton City. If not for Ronnie's constant assurance that justice would prevail, she would've missed the moment when the jurors unanimously came back with a guilty verdict.

Gloria resisted clapping her hands together out of respect for the young man's family. They weren't to blame for the accident or her son's paralysis. Still, she couldn't understand why they glared at her and Ronnie throughout the trial as though they had been the ones responsible for the accident. They weren't, of course, nor would they wish this on their worst enemy. It was

simply a matter of choice. The young man's demons led to his inebriation and the consequences that followed it. A ten-dollar cab ride home would've altered the course of all their lives, especially Kenny's, but there wasn't a court in the world that could right *that* wrong.

The man convicted of nearly killing Kenny that fateful day was awarded an early parole hearing on account of his stellar behavior and finding God behind bars. Gloria chuckled scathingly when she heard the news from the prosecutor and promised to be at the parole hearing in January. She would gladly testify on behalf of her son the various reasons why the convicted felon should finish serving out his six-year sentence, which was a pathetic punishment in her opinion. Kenny was still a prisoner of his wheelchair and probably would be for life.

Gloria's game plan for the parole hearing was simple: tell the truth. She would tell the parole board everything Kenny excelled at prior to the accident and the overwhelming hardships that followed it. Next, she'd let them know how often she begged and pleaded with God to heal her son so he could play soccer with his friends again and not be confined to the sidelines. And last but certainly not least, she'd stress the irrationality of allowing the man responsible for getting behind the wheel of a car with a blood-alcohol content of 2.0 any leniency because he conveniently found God in jail. Life wasn't fair, but it would be a cold day in hell before she'd let him get a free pass out of jail without a fight.

* * *

When Gloria returned from the kitchen, the cushions were off the couch and Ronnie had pulled out the full-size sleeper bed. He sat on the edge of it, held up a new set of sheets, and flashed a goofy grin. “Would you help me put these on?”

Gloria set the glass of water on the dresser next to the television set. “Of course.”

Ronnie tore open the package and removed a few cardboard inserts tucked within the cotton fabric. “I still can’t believe we will be sleeping on an actual bed tonight,” he said, shaking out the fitted sheet. “No more floor for us!”

Gloria chuckled. “Keep your voice down,” she whispered. “You might wake him.”

“It’s so not *my* voice we need to worry about tonight,” Ronnie said slyly.

“We’ll see about that.”

“Is that a challenge?” Ronnie asked, tucking one end of the fitted sheet beneath the mattress.

“It might be, but only if you’re up for it,” Gloria said, seductively swaying her hips from side-to-side.

“Oh, I’m up for it,” Ronnie said with a devilish smile spreading across his ruggedly-handsome face.

They finished making the bed, stripped off their clothes, and slipped between the cotton sheets. Their bodies were drawn together like magnets. Ronnie had forgotten how incredible it felt to hold his wife in his arms. “You feel so good,” he whispered.

As their hips found a familiar rhythm, Ronnie picked up the television remote off the couch’s armrest, pressed the power button, and tossed it onto the floor. Without the distractive noise from the gangster movie, muffled sounds suggestive of a bar fight penetrated the

glass of their sliding patio door. Gloria's body tensed. "What is that?"

"I don't know or care," Ronnie said, rocking his hips a little bit harder. "My focus is solely on pleasing you tonight."

"You could please me by checking out what all that ruckus is about," Gloria said sweetly. "It's awful."

"Raccoons," Ronnie said, kissing her neck. "It's just raccoons searching for food."

The double-pane windows installed throughout the entire condominium complex was an added incentive and one the Bennetts fortunately did not have to pay for. The benefit was twofold, or so the builder told them. It cut down on heating and cooling expenses and kept the hectic street noise to a minimum, especially during rush hour and Friday afternoons when it seemed everyone in town headed to the bustling Triton City Credit Union to deposit their paychecks. After the mayor's warning on Monday, though, the usual hustle and bustle dwindled down to a car or two an hour and no one dared go outside after dusk.

Almost every one of the Bennetts' neighbors left the city to stay with out-of-town relatives until the precautionary curfew was lifted. Still, Ronnie and Gloria never had any intention on leaving their home despite the many long-distance phone calls from worried family members and friends urging them to do just that. News had spread like wildfire about the vicious attacks on both the track and football teams at Triton University. Yet, they weren't going to be coerced into using their available credit for a couple nights' stay at an overpriced hotel because of a politician's plea to abandon ship at the crack of dawn or

a friend's supernatural beliefs that little green men were snatching people right out of their beds by some sort of teleportation.

Nevertheless, Gloria began thinking about their options as she lay beneath Ronnie and listened to the alarming chaos that unfolded outside. "Do you think we should at least call the police?"

"And say what?" Ronnie countered.

"The truth," Gloria replied.

Ronnie shook his head. "You really expect me to call the police and say that I'm just too busy making love with my wife to check out some suspicious noises, so they need to do it?"

"What's wrong with that?" Gloria said. "It's the truth."

Ronnie rolled off Gloria, tossed aside the sheet covering them, and strutted toward the sliding glass patio door without bothering with his underwear. The romantic mood that ignited between them had been doused by whatever was going on outside. "I'm telling you that it's nothing more than raccoons," he said, pulling aside the drapes.

The metal trash cans were untouched within the cramped patio enclosure. Ronnie flipped on the outside porch light but didn't see anything to explain the noise. Then, he glimpsed movement across the street in the bank's parking lot. As his frantic mind came to grips with what his eyes were seeing, he flipped off the light and slowly moved away from the glass, keeping his back to Gloria.

"What do you see?" Gloria asked playfully. "A killer raccoon?"

“Get dressed,” Ronnie said softly. “We have to leave.”

“Ooh, scary,” Gloria teased, getting to her feet and making a beeline for the patio. “You don’t have to play it up for me.”

Ronnie abruptly stepped in front of her and grabbed her by the arms. “Don’t.”

Gloria frowned. “What’s gotten into you?” she asked, pulling away. “You act like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s worse than that,” Ronnie said, catching one of her hands as she attempted to get by him. “Trust me.”

Gloria turned and searched his gaze. “Worse than a ghost?”

“Yes,” Ronnie replied, releasing her hand. He snatched up his jeans off the floor, shoved his left foot into the pant leg, and almost fell over as he tried to pull them up and thrust his other leg into the jeans as well.

Gloria rolled her eyes. “I’ll believe it when I see it.” She peeled back the drapes, wrapped it around her to shield her body in case anyone was out there waiting for a peep show, and flipped on the porch light. “I don’t see anything.”

Ronnie sat on the edge of the sleeper bed and shoved his bare feet into a worn out pair of tennis shoes. “Look across the street.”

Gloria stood on her tiptoes so she could see past their small privacy fence and noticed the silhouette of a very large man standing on top of a car in the bank’s parking lot. He was easily over six feet tall with broad shoulders and thick arms. His agility was extraordinary for someone easily two hundred-plus pounds. He leapt

effortlessly from the car to the sidewalk, which was just about across the street from their single-car garage. “What do you think is going on?”

Ronnie pulled out a duffle bag from the coat closet and tossed it onto the sleeper bed. “You don’t want to know.”

Gloria was completely spellbound by the man’s superherolike abilities. Suddenly, the stranger turned and sneered at her, his white fangs glistening beneath the fluorescent street lamp. In an instance, the moisture evaporated from her mouth and she flipped off the porch light. “That... that can’t be,” she said, struggling to formulate a cohesive sentence as her body shook uncontrollably. “They don’t exist.”

“They do now and know we’re home,” Ronnie said, leading her away from the patio door. “So let’s not wait around for them to knock on the door and ask to be invited in.”

* * *

Kenny jerked the flannel sheet and dark blue comforter over his head and cowered beneath them for protection. The ravenous snarls outside his bedroom window had grown louder and closer in proximity, forewarning him that the monsters of his dreams were indeed real and steadily approaching. “Please go away,” he whispered, wishing he could shrink into the size of a pea and roll beneath his pillow or leap out of bed and sprint to the living room where his parents were probably sleeping. Save for him crying out in terror, neither option was a viable one.

His bedroom door creaked open and fear stole his ability to move his arms or even breathe. He knew the faceless monsters had found their way in to him and apparently his parents couldn't stop them. *Probably killed in their sleep*, he thought grimly. There was nothing he could do, but lie perfectly still in his own pool of nervous sweat and pray that if the ravenous monsters located him, they wouldn't waste their time on such a little snack. Perhaps, he would get lucky and they wouldn't even notice him in the darkness.

His current and only source of comfort was his trusty wheelchair parked right alongside the bed as it was every night, but it held no magical powers or secret weapons. If he tried to reach for the wheelchair's armrest, the monsters would undoubtedly spot his movement. They would drag him into the darkness beneath the bed and devour him alive. He would never be seen or heard from again. Any evidence like a small pool of blood would go unnoticed as it seeped into the carpet and dried to a dark brown. When a search party did come looking for him and his parents, they would probably think it was spilled chocolate milk.

A beam of light swept back and forth across Kenny's bedroom. He could see the glow through the covers but made no effort to investigate it. He squeezed his eyes shut as the beam grew more and more intense above where his head lay on the pillow as if honing in on a target. Then, he felt something brush up against the bed and could almost sense the monster debating whether to toy with him a little longer or start munching on his fingers and toes like a sizzling appetizer plate of deep fried mozzarella sticks. *Please, I don't want to die*, he prayed.

Without warning, the covers were ripped from his grasp and stripped off his body. He opened his mouth to scream, but a hand clamped down over it. “It’s okay, my little bedbug,” Gloria said softly, setting the flashlight on the nightstand. “It’s just me.”

Kenny opened his eyes, threw his arms around her neck, and sobbed loudly. “I’m so scared, mommy,” he said. “There’s something outside my window and it sounds like it wants to eat me.”

“I know it does, baby, but everything is going to be okay,” she said soothingly. “Now, let’s get you into your chair, grab a change of clothes for tomorrow, and get to the garage so we don’t make Dad worry about why we’re taking so long.”

“Are we going somewhere?” Kenny asked.

“Yes, we’re going to see Grandma and Grandpa Bennett in Chicago,” Gloria said, helping Kenny into the wheelchair. “Dad’s packed the van with food and supplies, so all we need is you.”

* * *

Ronnie flung open the minivan’s rear passenger sliding door and hurried around to the other side. A minivan hadn’t been on his list of must-own vehicles growing up, but throughout his life, especially over the last two years, he’d learned there really was some truth to life being similar to a box of chocolates. No one really did know what was in store for them. He and Gloria opted to buy the minivan instead of another eco-friendly car with the insurance money allocated to replace the compact decimated in the crash. It was a perfect fit for Kenny’s new medical condition.

After about six months, they sold their second vehicle and purchased an ultralight titanium wheelchair with high-performance wheels and custom-painted it for Kenny in his favorite color, dark blue. Neither of them looked at selling their second car as a sacrifice. The probability of someone Kenny's age surviving a crash of such magnitude was slim to none. By the grace of God they still had their son, but there were plenty of other people who couldn't say the same thing about a loved one after such a terrible tragedy.

Thirty seconds earlier, Ronnie had been in the living room gathering a few last-minute items from the dresser when the outdated metal trashcans on the patio toppled over and made a horrific crash. He didn't need to investigate what had caused it; he already knew, and it sure wasn't a starving raccoon family. Five minutes hadn't even passed since he first glimpsed what was transpiring in the bank parking lot across the street. To him, time began ticking faster than his heartbeat and he stood nervously by the driver's side door. "Hurry up, love," he whispered.

Ronnie checked to make sure his wallet was still in his back pocket and glanced at the fire extinguisher he had used to prop open the door into the kitchen before sliding in behind the steering wheel. He angled the rearview mirror so he had a direct line of sight into the condo. No matter his terror, he wouldn't leave without his family even if it meant giving up his life.

An eerie scraping sound came from the outer shell of the garage door, reminding Ronnie of someone who was trying to pry open the top of a Coke can with a flathead screwdriver, so he closed the driver's side door. He stared through the windshield at the all-of-a-

sudden too thin sheet of metal separating him from whatever horror lay on the opposite side. He wondered if his imagination was getting the best of him as he pictured Dracula's minions setting up an elaborate dinner table with cloth napkins on the sidewalk and serving him as the main course. Nevertheless, he'd seen what was out there and it sure in hell wasn't mountain lions.

A sudden flash of color reflected in the rearview mirror, and Ronnie turned his head so quickly that he almost gave himself whiplash. Gloria sprinted through the kitchen; her facial expression twisted in sheer panic as she pushed Kenny in front of her. Kenny was still in his pajamas and a small duffle bag rested on his lap. They sailed down the ramp so fast, it was as if they crested the first drop-off of a roller coaster and needed the extra momentum to survive the next section of the ride. They skidded to a stop at the passenger door.

Gloria grabbed the duffle bag and tossed it into the van. Then, she scooped up Kenny into her arms and kicked the wheelchair aside; toppling it over just as they heard the shatter of breaking glass coming from the living room. She carried Kenny into the van and dropped him gently onto the benchlike seat. "Go, go, go," she said, sliding shut the rear passenger door.

"What about my wheelchair?" Kenny said.

Gloria fumbled with the security harness that worked similar to a seatbelt in Kenny's specialized section of the seat. "We'll get you another one."

Ronnie pressed his finger against the button on a small rectangular control box clipped to the van's sun visor that activated the garage door. "Calm down, my

love,” he said, maintaining a surprising cool and collective tone. “We will be on the road in no time.”

“I’ll calm down when we’re on the road and far away from here,” Gloria said.

Ronnie glanced in the rearview mirror and spotted a creature staring at him from the open kitchen doorway. As soon as their eyes met, the decaying creature launched itself onto the minivan’s roof. It drove its elongated nails through the fiberglass shell, piercing the interior as easily as a three-hole punch on the edge of a sheet of paper.

“Get down,” Gloria shrieked, covering Kenny’s head with her hands.

Ronnie pressed the automatic door lock button and sealed them inside the van. He leaned over the console separating him from the passenger seat a split second before the creature’s nails penetrated the roof above the driver’s seat. In a sudden panic, he pressed his foot on the accelerator, revving the engine, but not going anywhere. When the garage door finished its ascent, which seemed to take an inordinate amount of time due to the terror that had besieged the Bennetts, an assembly of creatures meandered about in the short driveway as if waiting for an all-you-can-eat buffet to have its grand opening. “Shit,” Ronnie said, peeking over the dashboard. “They’re everywhere.”

The creatures stared with menacing yellow eyes and sniffed the air. Rotting flesh hung from their bones, and a few were missing vital parts of their faces—an eye, nose, ear, or all of above—and all that remained were gaping holes. There was no reason to wait around and find out what the creatures wanted—it was obvious by the obnoxiously long fangs that flared outward from

their decomposing gums and blood caked around their mouths. They wanted to sink their teeth into the red river of life flowing through the Bennetts' veins, and there was no way Ronnie was about to let that happen.

The creature atop the minivan drove its talons through the roof again and this time connected with the driver's seat headrest. It was all the encouragement Ronnie needed. He pulled himself upright, shifted into drive, and stomped on the accelerator. The van shot forward, smashing into the creatures and hurtling their bodies like rag dolls over the hood and through the air. Ronnie did his best to shake off the creature clinging to the roof. He jerked the steering wheel left and then wildly to the right, struck a fire hydrant that unleashed a geyser of water into the air, and sideswiped a couple cars parked along the street.

Gloria crouched down into the cramped space between the front and middle row of seats. She could see the terror on Kenny's face and took his trembling hand. "It'll be okay."

Kenny struggled for breath. "Uh-huh."

The creature on top of the roof ripped his talons out of the headrest and then back down again, falling just shy of filleting Kenny's cheek. Gloria screamed and grabbed the closest thing in proximity: a bright orange emergency safety hammer tucked into the back sleeve of the driver's seat. She slammed the iron point of the emergency hammer repeatedly into the creature's nails and broke off a couple before it could rip those that remained out of the roof.

"Slam on the brakes!" Gloria shouted, bracing herself between the seats.

Ronnie did as instructed. The tires gripped the pavement and the front end of the minivan dipped violently. The creature flew off the roof and landed on the pavement in front of them. It struggled to get back up on its feet, but had suffered compound fractures in both legs. The other creatures were immediately drawn to the blood freely flowing from the multiple wounds on the creature's head and legs and wasted no time in letting their intentions be known.

"They're like flies on shit," Ronnie said, turning his face away as the creatures fought like rabid dogs over which one would be able to sink its teeth in first. When he found the strength to look again, the injured creature was nothing more than a sacrificial lamb drained of every last drop of blood. The other creatures were rejuvenated and stared at the minivan with a disquieted rage in their glowering yellow eyes.

A large shadow passed in front of the minivan's headlights and another appeared beside the driver's side door. Ronnie swallowed the terrified lump of emotion caught in his throat and turned to face the man that was certainly the same one he had seen on top of the car in the bank parking lot. The dark-skinned vampire rapped his knuckles on the window but made no attempt to peel open the door like a banana. He easily could have if his large, muscular arms were any indication.

Kenny's eyes grew wide. "I think he wants to talk to you, Dad."

"I think you're right," Ronnie said, biting down hard on his bottom lip. He lowered the driver's window about half an inch. "Please don't hurt my family," he said, struggling to keep his voice from cracking.

Lawrence Williams glared at him. “We’ll clear a path for you, but don’t come back or you and your family will die, got it?”

Ronnie could only nod his head as his tongue lay stunned in his mouth.

Without another word, Lawrence strutted toward the front of the minivan where his companion kept the creatures at bay by snarling and growling at them. The creatures were smart enough to realize that what was in front of them could inflict serious bodily injury and more than likely, imminent death. They made clicking sounds with what was left of their tongues and communicated with each another that way. Each took a turn to glance away from the glowering eyes of the hairy beast as they broadened their shoulders in an attempt to appear larger, but they weren’t dealing with a bear.

Ronnie rolled up the window and gripped the steering wheel. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Kenny stared at the two unlikely allies taking positions like tag team wrestlers in front of the minivan. “I never knew they were friends.”

Gloria peeked between the front two seats and over the dash. Lawrence’s companion leapt forward and attacked the first encroaching creature with a mighty swipe of its claw, ripping its face clean off. Gloria shrunk back down behind the seats and clenched her hand against her chest. “Please God... save us.”

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Lawrence turned and flashed his menacing fangs one more time in warning at the stunned minivan driver. He knew this terrifying theatric was needed in order for the driver to understand that they were not friends and this was the man's only chance to escape the city unscathed. If the driver hesitated or had an abrupt change of heart about leaving his home, neither Lawrence nor his companion, Robin Michaels, would be around a second time to save him and his family. This was a one-time offer. His and Robin's split-second decision to help out these foolish strangers and keep them from being eaten alive by the ravenous creatures put both of their lives in higher peril than their escape from the bank did. It also left Julie Chang alone in the front seat of a car some thirty feet away.

Robin's transformation into a werewolf was a triumphant moment in tipping the scales in their favor of personal survival when it came to the vast number of creatures that encircled the perimeter of the bank. Her animalistic fury and razor-sharp claws held true to their legendary status and proved beyond a reasonable doubt that she was indeed a force to be reckoned with. An

uprising of others like her, the vampire's supposed enemy from centuries past, would have a devastating impact on both humans' and vampires' continued existence. Lawrence couldn't help but wonder how quickly he could melt down his father's rare silver coin collection into bullets and if it would help keep the werewolf population from wiping out mankind and perhaps *his* kind. Then again, silver bullets might be as effective as crucifixes against vampires—utterly useless, but he didn't know where else to start.

Together, he and Robin had fought their way out of the rear emergency exit of the bank and kept Julie tucked safely in between them the entire time. Robin sliced through the encroaching creatures' rotting flesh with the effectiveness of a blender through warm butter. She decapitated each one with the indifference of a child popping off the head of a flower stem. Once they reached the middle of the parking lot, Lawrence leapt onto the roof of an abandoned car to get a better view of where they were and how many creatures were standing between them and their getaway car. *Too many*, he thought, but didn't voice this opinion.

Brenda Ryan had been gracious enough to loan out her private collection of exotic cars to assist the team in staying one step ahead of Dr. Cohn and his minions. So far, none of the vehicles was returned in its original condition, including the least expensive, the H2 Hummer. Justin drove it to football practice, and after a terrifying chain of events, Jennifer was forced to crash it into a tree to save him from being murdered on its roof by another vampire. That decision nearly cost Julie her life.

Later on that same evening, Colleen Summers and Calvin Whitmore brought back Brenda's cherished Lamborghini Diablo with a hundred or so new bullet holes in its exterior after encountering a mob of ruthless citizens taking advantage of the curfew issued by the mayor. The mob employed cement blocks to shatter large windowpanes of profitable businesses and stole everything they could get their greedy little hands on. If a lowly security guard or anyone else for that matter tried to intervene, a looter would change his or her mind by leveling automatic weapons at their chests. However, karma had a way of balancing the scales at the right time. When the mob encircled the Diablo in a bold attempt to forcibly take it from Calvin and Colleen, their lives were spared by the sudden arrival of a horde of creatures searching for their next meal. Calvin and Colleen escaped without any physical harm, but the same couldn't be said for the classless mob.

Upon their return to the Ryan's estate, Calvin exchanged the Lamborghini for a flashy silver Jaguar with leather seats. He volunteered to drive Lawrence, Julie, and Antonio to Ideologies Pharmaceuticals to see if they could uncover the truth about Lawrence's dad's death. Unfortunately, Calvin and Antonio's lives were tragically cut short and the responsibility of the Jaguar transferred to Lawrence and Julie. They left it parked right across the street from the bank, believing it would be safer there among other abandoned vehicles. Now, it was surrounded by creatures waiting for dinner to be delivered like a damn pizza.

The sudden intrusion of a gleaming porch light from a first-floor condominium, which was located diagonally across the street from the bank, flicked on

and off twice. It captured the creatures' attention and lured them toward it. Lawrence grasped the opportunity to leap over to the sidewalk and get a better view of the person responsible for the distraction. It also afforded Robin the time she needed to escort Julie to the Jaguar without too much interference.

Robin and Julie waited for Lawrence to join them, and he did within seconds and unlocked the driver's-side door. Julie dove into the front seat, scrambled over the leather console to the passenger side, and dropped onto the floorboard. She curled up into a ball, wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her head. Fear had taken hold of her again, but there wasn't time to calm her down. All Lawrence could do was lock the door as the next battle beckoned with the opening of the condo's garage door.

Lawrence and Robin kept up their assault on the creatures that were determined to get as close to the minivan as possible, like groupies at a rock concert. The creatures fought back hard, using combat skills obviously taught to them by someone expertly trained in military or police tactics. They exchanged punches, threw kicks, and tried to sweep out Lawrence's and Robin's feet from underneath them. They might have fared better had their human side not been so devastated by Dr. Cohn's caustic vampire serum. Their bones were brittle and snapped like toothpicks with every blow given or received, and they were quickly reduced to heaps of rotting flesh with nothing solid left within their bodies except, perhaps, their teeth. Lawrence knew they were from one of Dr. Cohn's earlier experimental groups, and it wouldn't have surprised him if some

were from around the same time as Eric Monroe's unplanned indoctrination into the clan.

Once they had fatally wounded or killed every creature in close proximity of the minivan, Lawrence motioned at the driver to get a move on it. The child sitting in the second row of seats pressed his frightened, pale face against the passenger window. His expressive brown eyes reflected complete incomprehension as if wondering what he'd done so wrong in his young life to be caught up in such a horrific situation.

As the minivan rolled past, Lawrence tried to ease the boy's apprehension and smiled, but the boy shrunk away from the window. The reaction mimicked that of Lawrence's own little brother, Anthony. It was heartbreaking to invoke such emotion when offering the kindest of gestures, but he did understand it probably looked especially frightening with the fangs.

Ignoring the memories and emotional baggage that accompanied a life he didn't call his own anymore, Lawrence focused on the task ahead. He was weak and needed to replenish his energy reserves, but gorging on a creature's blood wasn't ideal. The side effects from Dr. Cohn's initial attempts to create the perfect serum were devastating, and he avoided anyone exposed to it except for one, Eric Monroe. Dr. Grosse developed a semi-antidote that would stave off the side effects for a short time and had administered it to Eric every few days for the last five years. Lawrence couldn't fathom why Dr. Grosse even helped Eric in the first place, given his recent track record. Perhaps all those years ago, Dr. Grosse was an entirely different man and had a reserve of decency hidden somewhere within his being that was slowly used up, but Lawrence doubted it.

There had to be an ulterior motive. He just had to figure out what it was before it was too late.

There wasn't a single misgiving in Lawrence's mind that Eric would lose his brave battle to maintain his humanity in Romania if it took longer than the forty-eight hour window Emily Radcliffe estimated it would to complete their mission. If everything went smoothly, they would land in Bucharest, head to the Ryan's abandoned diamond mine, collect the DNA samples, and return to Triton City late Wednesday night or early the following morning. If that timetable worked out, Eric wouldn't suffer through the awful side effects because Dr. Grosse's antidote would stave them off for three or four days. He received his last shot on Sunday. If for any reason they were held up, Eric would start to change, and whatever damage was done to the human side of him would be irreversible. Even if the plane landed right in front of Dr. Grosse's house, it would be too late for the anti-serum to do any good.

Lawrence tried not to think about the agonizing decay of his friend's body if time got away from them. Emily would be the first to notice and offer assistance, but there wouldn't be anything she could do. The flight home would prove too much for Eric and he'd evolve into the worst kind of vampiric creature, unable to distinguish between friend and foe. The others would have to kill him and burn his body immediately upon landing without having the opportunity to say good-bye to an integral member of their team.

Julie's high-pitched squeal pierced the air, obliterating Lawrence's thoughts and jolting him back into the present. He looked toward the Jaguar and saw two creatures circling it like vultures. They growled and

hissed, snapping open and close their mouthful of jagged teeth. Each gestured to decapitate the other with its serrated, black, nails if it got in the way. Lawrence recognized this display of aggression. The creatures were engaged in a cockfight to see who got first dibs at the meager human appetizer inside the car. It was a bizarre sight to witness, but an astonishing one for the supposed mindless creatures.

While Robin took care of additional creatures cowering in the shadows, Lawrence sprinted toward the car. He didn't see another one of Dr. Cohn's creatures clinging to a window ledge almost directly above him. The moment Lawrence was almost beneath it, the creature released its grip and plummeted rapidly. It slammed down onto Lawrence shoulders. The impact knocked Lawrence to his knees, and the creature toppled over him, smacking his head on the sidewalk.

Momentarily disoriented, Lawrence regained his bearings and tackled the creature before it had a chance to attack him. He drove his black nails into the creature's chest, found its heart, and crushed it with his bare hand. He had learned from numerous run-ins with the creatures and Dr. Grosse's constant complaining about them that vampires and anything remotely like them had few vulnerabilities. The trick to surviving an unavoidable encounter was literally beating them to the punch. Plunge a sharp instrument like a stake into their heart, chop off their head, or set them ablaze, but do it fast and do it first before they had time to do it.

On the first night Lawrence returned to Triton City after his much-publicized disappearance in June, he ran into Antonio Maggiano and Dr. Alan Grosse on Triton University's football field. The two of them were

out searching for Dr. Cohn's creations, and they were set on extinguishing the creatures' miserable existence by either a wooden stake through the heart or a swift slice of a sword blade right through the neck. After a few more unscheduled meet-ups, Lawrence came to the conclusion that Antonio was a good man and could be trusted, but the same feeling didn't hold true for the good doctor. There was a deliberate and unwavering deception concealed behind Dr. Grosse's dark brown eyes. Lawrence knew they reflected how full of shit the doctor was when he downplayed his involvement in the vampire epidemic. And, it was an epidemic.

In the beginning phase of the experiment, quite a few students were tricked into taking the serum based on the unsubstantiated claims of its ability to eradicate ailments. For those who participated in the first few years, they either died because of complications within their cell structure or survived long enough to see their humanity deteriorate right in front of them. Regardless, no one stayed among the living long enough to report Dr. Cohn's indiscretions to the proper authorities, and he and his minions got rid of the bodies in record time.

From well-placed propaganda, more students were eager to arrive at a hyped-up state of perfection and were intentionally coerced into trying the serum. They eagerly participated in the twelve-week program of injections like hapless guinea pigs, all in the name of perfection. Most of them reached the goal, but it was short lived. Once the injection phase ended, the students returned to their normal routines and basked in the joy of their new, improved selves. Then, the craving for blood bubbled up and took precedence over everything else in their lives, including their class work. It even

invoked horrific nightmares if they tried to sleep through it.

Many students sought help and discussed the nauseating side effects with Dr. Cohn. His reply was always the same: Perfection has a price, and this is it. Then, he tempted their willpower with an overflowing medieval goblet of human blood, which he placed on a table in front of them before leaving the room. It didn't take long for the students to pick up the goblet and chug the contents even if they were repulsed by the idea of it an hour earlier.

Once the students had sucked down every last drop of the coppery liquid and, as expected, asked for more upon Dr. Cohn's return, he agreed to get them another cup but on the condition they did something for him: Swear their undying loyalty to his secret society. Most of them agreed without question and scribbled their names in red ink along the bottom line of a written contract that stated that violation of the listed terms would result in swift, harsh, and lethal action. Ninety percent of the students didn't bother to read the contract and blindly signed it. Their desire for perfection—and now human blood—trumped all rationale.

Dr. Cohn trained his new inductees to target people walking alone at night. The primary goal was to use their newly acquired vampiric instincts to overcome prey and satisfy their bloodlust. He wooed anyone not fond of the nightly slaughter with tales of the infallible business success, the stunning beauty, and the insatiable sex drives that were enjoyed by others before them. He kept up the charade until the student succumbed to the vampire lurking just beneath the skin and no longer acknowledged their human side at all. If anyone

appeared skeptical of his stories, refused to participate in the hunt, or just seemed to be snooping around, his kind demeanor vanished and he would have them killed instantly. Only one person had managed to escape Dr. Cohn's army of death dealers, but the young man met his fate a short time later by staggering onto a highway right in the path of a fast-approaching semi truck with a full load in its trailer.

Lawrence challenged Dr. Grosse on how it was possible he knew so much about Dr. Cohn's operations if he weren't in some way equally responsible for the vampire epidemic. Dr. Grosse defended his position by stating a wild tale about how he got roped into the early stages of the project by Dr. Cohn's insistence to combine their impressive resumes and find a cure for cancer. Dr. Cohn theorized that if they could figure out how to manipulate the longevity of telomeres in the human body, they might unlock the secrets to living a healthy and eternal life.

According to Dr. Grosse's version, he wanted out the second the investigational phase of the serum shifted from experimenting on rats to human beings. He knew the devastation it had caused in the rodents because he witnessed it firsthand. Dr. Cohn wouldn't hear of it and made it crystal clear that anyone who turned their back on the project, which was so close to being perfect, would wind up regretting it. With this verbal threat on his life, Dr. Grosse stayed involved but took a solemn oath to avenge the deaths of countless students tricked into taking the serum. His main goal in continuing with the project was to find a way to permanently wipe out Dr. Cohn and his loyal followers off the face of the earth...or so he said.

Thus far, Lawrence hadn't seen any evidence to support that righteous claim. Dr. Grosse's obvious glee in tracking down every last one of Dr. Cohn's creatures who were once students and mercilessly killing them was an absolute contradiction to it. After a few months of what boiled down to nothing but servitude, Lawrence concluded that if he didn't continue to go along with what the *good* doctor asked of him, he would be the next to get staked and, in time, probably would anyway. He confided these thoughts in Antonio and much to his dismay, Antonio was in complete agreement. They came up with a perfect plan for Lawrence to escape the city and be out of the country before Dr. Grosse even noticed his absence. However, an unexpected wrench was thrown into the mix and drastically altered their anticipated course of action.

The final round of students attending Dr. Cohn's cure-all forum had arrived at his laboratory on campus the previous Thursday and filled out the customary survey questionnaire. Dr. Grosse reviewed the answers and selected the ones he wanted as part of the control group. He waited to begin his well-rehearsed spiel about the program until the others destined to be a part of the experimental group under Dr. Cohn's watchful eye disappeared into an adjoining room.

After a quick introduction, he gave everyone in the room one last chance to change their minds and leave, but no one moved a single muscle. The promise of eternal beauty and phenomenal health was too much to resist. He instructed Antonio to give each person in the control group an injection that was supposed to be the standard placebo solution. In actuality, it was the

latest and greatest vampire serum he had stolen from Dr. Cohn's office a few days earlier.

Lawrence never trusted Dr. Grosse, but when he learned of his latest con involving the students, it was the final nail in the coffin. His decision to leave was absolute until Antonio confided that Lawrence's long-time friend, Brenda Ryan, had been part of the control group. They had been friends since grade school, and he learned through the grapevine that she never stopped searching for him after his bizarre disappearance. There was no way he could turn his back on her now and walk away after all she had done in hopes of finding out what happened to him. There was no doubt she was a tough cookie and would survive the gut-wrenching effects invoked by the serum, but he didn't trust Dr. Grosse to keep her safe. She needed a guardian angel, and he nominated himself for the job.

From what Lawrence had observed over the past few months in conjunction with the events of the week prior, the pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place, and they created a terrifying picture. Dr. Grosse was a Nobel Prize-winning serial killer. He pretended to care about the students suckered into the project but was the co-conspirator for the whole mess right from the start. His motivation for switching it up was his selfish need to finish tweaking the werewolf serum. When Dr. Cohn's creatures began getting out of hand and interfered with that goal, there was nothing left for him to do but inject the control group with the serum. He believed a band of good vampires would distract Dr. Cohn and his ruthless army of minions just long enough to complete his pet project without distraction. He was wrong.

* * *

Another terrifying scream escaped Julie's lips as one of the creatures rammed its fist into the Jaguar's side window and shattered the glass. Shards rained onto the passenger seat. The creature reached inside and grabbed Julie by the hair. She cried out and flung her body toward the opposite side, leaving short black and blond-streaked strands of hair in the creature's hand. The creature immediately crawled through the window after her. Julie opened the driver's-side door, tumbled out onto the street, and slammed the door shut behind her. The second creature darted out from around the rear bumper and cut off her intended escape route toward Lawrence. She grabbed the driver's side mirror, hoisted herself up, and hobbled backward trying to keep weight off her injured ankle. The creature crept closer with a mixture of pus and saliva dripping from its mouth.

Out of nowhere, Robin leapt over the Jaguar as though it were no larger than a child's toy car. She landed on the creature, pinning it to the ground, and stomped down onto the creature's neck, crushing its windpipe. She drove her deadly talons into its chest, swiftly ensuring that it wouldn't get back up.

Lawrence rushed over to the shattered passenger side-door window and intercepted the first creature that had crawled into the car after Julie from escaping. It had reversed direction as soon as it saw Robin bend down and glare at it through the driver's side window. Lawrence snatched it out of the seat by its throat and dragged it out of the car the same way it had entered. He whipped it over his shoulder and smashed its head

down into the sidewalk, splitting it open like a melon. It died instantly.

Lawrence brushed off his hands. "Our work here is done."

"We should go then," Julie said, refraining from putting too much weight on her ankle. "There may be more on the way."

Lawrence sniffed the air and furrowed his brow. "Smells that way," he said, strutting over to the driver's side door. "Let's get to Brenda's and see if the others made it back yet."

Julie climbed into the Jaguar's swanky but ultra-cramped backseat and looked out the window. She saw Robin moving away from them. "Where's she going?" she asked.

"I don't know," Lawrence said, bending down so he could see into the backseat. "I'll go see."

"You're not leaving me alone in this car again."

"She saved our lives," Lawrence reminded. "We wouldn't have survived five minutes against all those creatures if not for her."

Julie crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I know that," she said. "Can you ask her to come with us without leaving the car? Please? I'm already scared to death the way it is."

Lawrence knew Julie spoke the truth. He could see it reflected in her almond-shaped eyes. Any more excitement and she'd succumb to hysterics. They had lost Calvin and Antonio earlier in the day and, the night before, her parents. She was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown and there was no time for that.

"You win," he said. He straightened up and cupped his hands over his mouth as the stench of death

grew stronger. “Hey, there’s plenty of room in the car if you want to tag along!”

Robin paused in the shadows cast upon her by an intermittently working streetlight and cocked her doglike ear in their direction. Lawrence hustled around to the other side of the Jaguar, opened the passenger side door, and swept off the glass from the seat. “Come on,” he said, patting the seat. “We can really use your help.”

Robin lowered her head and stared at the thick layer of coarse, reddish-brown hair covering her body. Julie leaned forward. “Tell her I can find her something to wear at Brenda’s.”

Lawrence nodded. “Julie says she can hook you up with something to wear at Brenda’s.”

Robin dropped onto all fours and was at the car in no time flat. Werewolves were dangerously fast, especially when they incorporated all their extremities. She leapt into the passenger seat, which instantly broke from her massive weight. Julie barely got out of the way before the seatback crashed down against the seat she was sitting in.

Julie gasped for breath. “Damn, that was close.”

Robin looked back and whined.

Lawrence climbed into the driver’s seat. “I think that means she’s sorry.”

“Yeah, I figured that out on my own,” Julie said sarcastically. “So, now what?”

Lawrence’s hands trembled as he gripped the steering wheel. He needed food, but not the kind found at a convenience store. “We head to Brenda’s and pray we don’t run into any more creatures.”

“And if we do?” Julie asked.

“I’ll need to have a few pints of your blood,” Lawrence said matter-of-factly.

Julie’s entire body shook. “You’re so not funny right now.”

“I wasn’t trying to be,” Lawrence said, angling the rearview mirror so their eyes met. “I’m extremely weak, and your blood may be the only way I can keep us alive.”

“I thought you didn’t like Chinese food.”

“Every rule has an exception,” Lawrence said. “Let’s pray we don’t run into any more of the decaying kind.”

“If we do, then we’re turning this fucking car around and hauling ass in the other direction,” Julie said. “I refuse to be a walking blood bank.”

SEPTEMBER - TUESDAY - TRITON CITY

Blood trickled from a severed section of small intestine that dangled from the white arch trellis in Dr. Grosse's well-manicured front lawn. It swayed in response to the cool night breeze and sprinkled droplets of red onto the green grass blades like cast-off from a painter's brush accidentally flicked at a wall. Decayed flesh slid off a couple of bronze crane statues and collected on the ground like malleable clay. Two creatures fought over a stash of severed limbs they had discovered between a family of ceramic gnomes and the darkened garden orb with swirling hues of purple, blue, and black on its surface. This was all that remained of another one of Dr. Cohn's creations. It had been obliterated by the front grill of a car. Neither creature showed remorse for having filled their bellies with whatever parts were still edible.

Justin Monroe didn't pay any attention to the creatures' depravity or sickening cannibalistic appetite. His sole focus was on finding a way to save the love of his life, Jennifer Langstrom. The initial stake launched from Dr. Cohn's crossbow remarkably missed its mark, but the second one hadn't. It struck him in the chest,

tunneled through his pectoral muscle, shredding the tissue, and exited out his back. Then, it slammed into Jennifer, who was standing behind him. It plowed through her slender frame and nailed her to the trunk of a large Coulter pine tree. Her vampiric DNA instantly went to work on repairing the damage, but the stake interfered with the pumping action of her heart and impeded her ability to heal.

Justin slid Jennifer's body off the stake and gently laid her on the ground. Death was stealing her away from him and he didn't know how to stop it. His brown eyes were swallowed up by a toxic blend of grief and hatred, turning them as black as coal along with his fingernails. As the vampire within took over, he left Jennifer's side and strode toward Dr. Cohn, fixated on nothing else but killing him.

Dr. Cohn saw Justin's rapid advancement and quickly reloaded another stake into the crossbow. He pulled the trigger and watched the wooden stake plow into Justin's stomach, but there was no reaction from the impact on his face. Justin simply reached up, pulled it out, and threw it onto the ground. Dr. Cohn fired a fourth stake that sunk into Justin's thigh, but the effect was the same. It should've made him stumble, vampire or not, yet Justin's anger blocked out all other emotion except for the raging agony of his broken heart. It was quite apparent that he would have his revenge if it was the last thing he ever did.

Dr. Cohn wasn't able to reload another wooden stake fast enough. He tossed aside the crossbow to go toe-to-toe with Justin. Anyone with the tiniest bit of intelligence knew that was a really bad idea. As Justin came within striking distance, he lashed out and raked

his nails across Justin's face, filleting the skin beneath his left eye.

Justin didn't flinch and wasted no time in answering the attack with a vicious swipe across Dr. Cohn's face. It removed Dr. Cohn's nose leaving only his nostril holes and shaved the skin from the right side of his cheek with the ease of an apple peeler. Dr. Cohn tried to counter, but Justin was faster. He speared his black fingernails deep into the soft tissue of Dr. Cohn's chest and twisted his hands around, so the palms faced in opposing directions. Then, he gripped his fingertips beneath each ribcage and jerked apart his hands, tearing open Dr. Cohn's chest cavity. As blood rushed from the gaping wound like a waterfall, Justin found Dr. Cohn's heart, ripped it out of his chest, and stared at it for a brief second before tossing it to a nearby creature that gobbled it up without hesitation. Dr. Cohn collapsed to the ground at Justin's feet and bled out within seconds. It wasn't the most fitting end for a man Justin felt responsible for destroying all he cared about and loved, starting with his brother, but it would have to do.

When Justin returned to Jennifer's side, he fell to his knees and gazed upon her angelic face, which inevitably soothed him. His anger dissipated right along with his vampiric appearance. It wasn't fair for her life to be cut short when the stake had been meant for him. The more he dwelled on that, the more determined he became to save her. First and foremost, he needed to stop the bleeding, so he stripped off his shirt and tore it into two pieces. He tucked the first piece into the hole in her back where blood seeped out like a leaky faucet and then pressed the second piece against her chest. The tips of her brown hair were already tinted a rust color

from the blood that pooled beneath her shoulders. Her soulful blue eyes no longer glimmered with the crystal clarity of a cloudless sky; now they resembled a thick, cloudy, gray one. It didn't matter. Justin was resolute to save her, and nothing would change his mind.

There was no doubt Jennifer needed an urgent blood transfusion and a miracle from the Man Upstairs to overcome this latest brush with death. Justin knew if God blessed him with the time and tools to give her one more shot at life, he would do everything in his power to abolish the deviant snakes slithering within the realm of God's Garden of Eden. He had already killed one of the men responsible for the deaths of countless students and wouldn't rest until the other man was punished for his heinous crimes against humanity, too. Whether it was hashed out in front of a jury here on Earth or angels in the afterlife, he wouldn't rest until the job was done.

Justin never saw eye to eye with his parents on the subject of religion. He believed in a deeper truth—one that held God as an all-loving being who never asked or wanted to be feared but simply to be respected. His parents believed a society needed to be God fearing in order to hold on to their morals. Justin witnessed the hypocrisy by many so-called believers who dropped to their knees each Sunday morning, confessed their sins, and begged for forgiveness. Then, they went out later that very day or the following and repeated the same sins. His father was one of them, sometimes going to church with liquor still on his breath from his early morning breakfast.

Justin closed his eyes and prayed with all his might for God to look over Jennifer and heal her if He saw fit. He also asked God to grant him the strength to

tackle the next round of obstacles that would inevitably come his way. Then, he opened his eyes and drove his fangs into his bottom lip, allowing the resulting blood to drizzle onto Jennifer's tongue. It was absorbed instantly, and he found much-needed hope in that. Still, there was one more issue to contend with before he could whisk Jennifer to the only doctor in Triton City who might be able to save her with God's guiding hand. An old friend had unexpectedly shown up, and it was a tough call to know on which side he played for now: good or evil.

* * *

Bradley Coolidge knelt to the ground and put into his gym bag the crossbow he had used to eliminate quite a few of Dr. Cohn's creatures. He placed it on top of the last bundle of wooden stakes concealed inside. Only ten stakes remained of the original thirty. After everything he'd seen, especially within the last twenty-four hours, there was no doubt he would need a lot more if he wanted to stay alive. The thorough search of his father's office for anything of significance in regards to Dr. Cohn's next plan of attack revealed clues that led him to his current location at Dr. Grosse's house. It was his purposeful step away from the path of damnation he had started out on, and he had no plans on going back.

There wasn't any reason for Bradley to worry about his blatant disregard of the strict household rules as he ransacked his father's office. He didn't even need the tiny silver key his father wore dutifully around his neck to access the locked filing cabinet. His father was dead and gone, and Bradley hoped his body was already

picked apart by ravenous birds of prey or eaten by something far worse than a pack of coyotes. He felt nothing but hatred for his father. His mother's murder, on the other hand, was a brutal blow to his heart. He loved her immensely, and his own father had ensured his mother's permanent silence for eternity. Bradley had made his father pay dearly for that.

The locked filing cabinet had been no match for Bradley's anguish and need to find answers. He yanked on the metal handle and popped open the top drawer as easily as the lid to a can of stackable chips. It made a horrendous noise as the locking mechanism failed to withstand the brutal pressure, and the internal security bar collapsed to unveil a treasure trove of information hidden within the filing cabinet. The bottom drawer contained a stack of manila folders related to sketchy business dealings with the recently deceased CEO of Ashton Enterprises, Brian Levine. The drawer above it held the wooden stakes.

Bradley zipped up the gym bag, slung its strap over his left shoulder, and stood up. He searched the shadows surrounding the Tudor- and Victorian-style houses for anything that moved in contradiction to the wind. The stench of decaying flesh hung in the air and filled his lungs like thick molasses with each breath. He knew more of Dr. Cohn's creatures were scheduled to arrive, but had no idea from which direction. "I know you're there, you motherfuckers," he shouted. "Come and get me."

It didn't take long for the creatures to show their ugly faces. They crested a hill on the south side of Dr. Grosse's extensive property and made their way toward Bradley. Their advanced stages of decomposition

hampered their progress but didn't slow them down enough to make Bradley feel confident in dillydallying for another minute or two. He remembered the fable his kindergarten teacher always read in school about a race between a slow but steady tortoise and a lightning-fast hare and who inevitably won. He wasn't going to be the foolish hare and underestimate the tortoise, so he sprinted to where Justin was performing CPR in a valiant attempt to save Jennifer's life.

"It's too late, man. She's gone," Bradley said. "Stop wasting time and let's get out of here."

Justin wiped away the sweat glistening on his brow. "It will be too late if I have to dick around with you."

Bradley was taken aback. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

"Are you sure about that?" Justin said. "Because you've shown plenty of proof to the contrary."

"Look asshole," Bradley said, balling his hands into fists. "If I wanted to kill you, then you'd be dead. But I took out quite a few of those fucked-up science experiments saving your dumb ass tonight, so shut up and listen."

"I'm all ears."

"I came here to help put an end to this bullshit once and for all, but if you'd rather handle it all on your own, that's fine with me," Bradley said heatedly. "It's no sweat off my back."

Justin glimpsed the horde of creatures breaching the outer limits of Dr. Grosse's property line. "Tell me why I should believe you," he said, slipping his arms beneath Jennifer's limp body. "How do I know you can really be trusted?"

Bradley shook his head. “We don’t have time for this shit.”

“I have plenty,” Justin said, refusing to budge.

“Let’s just say I saw the error of my ways in my mother’s eyes,” Bradley replied. “I made her a promise to be a better man.”

Justin noticed the sadness that rippled across Bradley’s face. “Did she get out?”

“No,” Bradley said, choking on the answer.

Justin lifted Jennifer off the ground as Tommy Blevins tore through the grass in another one of Brenda’s flashy loaners and came to a screeching halt not more than five feet away. Justin held Jennifer close to his chest and inhaled a ragged breath of air. “I’m sorry about your mom...None of this shit is fair.”

Tommy coughed up more blood, rolled down the driver’s-side window, and spat it onto the ground. “You’re telling me,” he said, laying his head against the steering wheel. “This fucking sucks.”

Colleen Summers flung open the passenger side door and leapt out, shotgun in hand. Her green eyes narrowed as she leveled the shotgun at Bradley. “What is he doing here?”

“Apparently, he’s here to help, or so he says,” Justin muttered, consumed with worry as he carried Jennifer over to the car.

“Uh-huh,” Colleen said skeptically, keeping the shotgun trained on Bradley. “Are you sure about that?”

“No, but I don’t really give a damn one way or the other right now,” Justin said. “All I care about is getting Jennifer to Brenda’s house as soon as possible. Samir is the only one who might be able to save her, so I’m not wasting any more time on this shit, okay?”

Colleen lowered the shotgun. She opened the rear passenger door for Justin and raced around to the other side. She climbed into the backseat where the scent of vomit still lingered from Tommy's earlier puking fit and closed the door. "Hold on, Justin," she said, tucking the shotgun beside her leg with the barrel pointed toward the floorboard. "I'll help you."

Justin eased Jennifer into the car. Colleen kept Jennifer's head stable as Justin slid in and got situated. He looked back out at Bradley. "This entire area will be crawling with military personnel tomorrow," he said. "If you want to live, get in the car."

"The military?" Bradley questioned. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't have time to explain," Justin said.

Colleen looked past him. "Uh, Bradley, you've run out of options to do anything else anyway."

Bradley glanced over his shoulders at the creatures that were now less than fifteen feet behind him. "Why can't these fucking things go away?"

"Just get in," Justin said, closing the door.

Bradley climbed into the front passenger seat and quickly slammed shut the door. He pressed the automatic lock button just as a creature went for the door handle. "I don't have anywhere else to be," he said, ignoring the grotesque face staring incredulously at him through the glass. "Everything I've ever loved is gone, so there's no point in going home."

* * *

Tommy steered Brenda's car between the two towering cast-iron gates protecting the main entrance onto the

Ryans' twenty-plus-acre property and sped toward the imposing mansion at its center. Justin had used his cell phone to call ahead and make sure the preparations for their arrival were followed to the letter. They had to be certain everyone at the house, especially the security personnel, knew about Jennifer's critical condition so that there weren't any frivolous delays. Still, it was eerie to see the front gates standing wide open and the security guards lined up along its perimeter. They wore tactical apparel and were burdened with an arsenal of weaponry, including flame throwers.

The amount of security the estate usually had on hand was tripled, and none of the guards looked too happy to be there. As Tommy and the others drove by, the guards avoided making eye contact with them, which didn't leave Tommy feeling warm and fuzzy. He had been to the house twice before - once when he brought Brenda home after she had too much to drink to ride her motorcycle home safely from Sulli's Pub and then earlier in the day when he snuck onto the property through a hidden entrance known only to the Ryans.

The security guards' abrupt change in behavior, however, as well as the resistance to acknowledging their late-night arrival was very distressing. Tommy remembered how cordial they had been to him the first time he pulled up to the gate with Brenda passed out in the passenger seat. Now, the guards were frighteningly different. They seemed to have a solid handle on what was going on and were well-informed of the various stages of infection that four out of the five passengers in the car had.

Tommy raised his foot off the accelerator as he neared the seven-car garage and darkened helipad with

perimeter lighting and wind cones. He pressed down on the brake as the car rounded the Renaissance fountain and Toscana pool and rolled to a stop next to the Jaguar parked right in front of the house. Dr. Samir Mahida waited for them on the cedar landing with a stretcher.

Bradley stepped from the vehicle into the brisk night air and nodded in greeting at Samir. He grasped the rear passenger door handle and opened it. "Come on," he said. "We need to get inside before any more of those creatures decide to show up."

Justin slid out with Jennifer cradled in his arms. There was a faint scent of dog and heated rubber in the air. "Did the others just arrive?"

"Fifteen minutes ago," Samir said, gripping the lapel of his long white lab coat with one hand. "They're inside."

"Did they bring a dog back with them?"

"Not exactly, Justin," Samir said.

Bradley grabbed one end of the stretcher. "Why aren't they out here helping us then? She's bad off."

"They had a rough night, too," Samir replied.

Colleen took the other side of the stretcher from Samir. "Did they find anything at Ideologies?"

Samir ran his fingers through his thinning black hair and stepped aside so Justin could lay Jennifer down on the stretcher. "I'll answer all your questions later, but right now, Jennifer needs our undivided attention."

Justin brushed aside a few strands of dark brown hair that had fallen in front of Jennifer's vacant-looking eyes. "Hold on a little while longer, baby," he pleaded.

Samir held a small mirror beneath Jennifer's nose and checked for breath. There was a slight fogging on the reflective surface. "I'm sure you are all tired and

probably hungry,” he said. “There is some freshly made coffee in the kitchen and a plate of cold cut sandwiches on the table in the dining room that you all can help yourselves too after we take care of Jennifer. And if that doesn’t fit the bill, I’ve rigged up another type of pick-me-up, but Lawrence is using it right now.”

Bradley gritted his teeth. “He’ll be so happy to see me.”

“We’re all in this nightmare together,” Colleen said, struggling not to drop her end of the stretcher.

“Hopefully, Lawrence remembers that,” Bradley said. “Our last run-in proved fatal for my almost new girlfriend.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Colleen said indifferently.

“Yeah, well, shit happens.”

Justin took the end of the stretcher Colleen was holding. “Can you get the door?”

“Sure thing,” Colleen said, striding over to it.

Samir pressed the stethoscope against Jennifer’s chest and listened. He could hear her heart, but the beats were very shallow. “Let’s go,” he said. “We don’t have a moment to spare.”

“I’m going to stay here,” Tommy said, dropping onto the landing’s front steps. “I’ll keep watch out for any unwanted visitors.”

“Whatever,” Bradley said dismissively.

In the glow of the porch light, Colleen saw the skin around Tommy’s eyes had turned jaundice yellow and was beginning to peel away from the sockets. “Can I bring you anything?”

“No,” Tommy said. “I’m fine.”

“We’re going to have to lock the door behind us,” Samir said. “You won’t be able to get in once we’re inside. Are you sure you want to stay out here?”

Tommy gazed across the darkened landscape. “It’s for the best.”

Samir nodded. “Understood.”

Colleen propped open the door and waited as the others quickly went inside, leaving her and Tommy alone on the cedar porch. “I’m sorry,” she said, unable to avert her gaze from the gauntness of his face. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“There is one thing,” Tommy said, “if you don’t mind being a messenger.”

“Name it.”

“Tell Julie I’m sorry and sincerely wish things could have ended differently between us. I love her very much, and all I ever wanted was to protect her from this evil.” Tommy hung his head. “Now, I’m becoming part of it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Colleen said. “You have to remember that. None of this is your fault.”

Tommy glanced up as an eerie rumbling erupted in his stomach. “You better get inside before I can’t tell whether you’re something I should eat or not, okay?”

A single tear slipped out the corner of Colleen’s eye and plummeted onto her cheek. “Good-bye,” she said, before moving inside the house. She quietly closed the front door and locked it.

Colleen glanced at the clock to the right of the floor-to-ceiling mirror with the 24-karat gold-leaf frame and took note of the time. It hadn’t even been twelve hours since Tommy’s run-in with the creature at Ashton Enterprises, and the swiftness of his deterioration was

mind-boggling. She quickly wiped away another tear stealing down her face and caught up with Justin and Bradley, who warily balanced Jennifer on the stretcher between them.

They chased Samir down the hallway, past the kitchen and dining room, and into the living room with its museum-like artifacts. Then, they turned right and proceeded into the Ryan's expansive library, where one side of an oak bookcase was pulled away from the wall. Behind it was a staircase built of rock and cement that led beneath the house to an underground stronghold built similar to the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. It had thick granite walls, security cameras mounted to the ceiling, motion and infrared-detectors at every turn, and a main blastproof door, which was standing ajar at the base of the stairwell.

Samir continued deeper into the underground stronghold. They followed, passing by additional rooms with closed doors and others secured by watertight doors usually found on submarines.

A low whistle escaped Bradley's lips. "And I thought my parents were well off," he said. "What does Brenda's parents do for a living? Sell drugs?"

Colleen rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's it," she scoffed. "They're huge in the Colombian drug cartel."

"Bite me," Bradley said, adjusting his grip on the stretcher. "I was just asking."

"Knock it off," Samir said, pausing outside one of the submarine-like doors. He ripped off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "It doesn't matter how they earned their money. All you need to know is that this is one of the most sophisticated safe houses on the West Coast, and my bet is we'll need it in the coming days."

Samir knocked three times on the door, opened it, and proceeded into a large room with approximately two thousand square feet of work space. He motioned for Justin and Bradley to bring Jennifer over to a shiny surgical table that was already prepped for her arrival. Scientific lab equipment was set up for use at various workstations, stacks of medical supplies such as bandages, gauze, and bottles of rubbing alcohol lined metal shelves, and there was a wall of large clear plastic tubs packed full with food rations. Lawrence was in the back corner hooked up to an IV machine, receiving what looked like a fresh supply of blood. Julie was curled up in a chair with an icepack on her swollen ankle. And the third person, a woman who paced back and forth like a caged animal in front of a four-tiered shelf filled to capacity with glass beakers, stainless steel instruments, and safety glasses, seemed to be wearing nothing beneath a white, fluffy robe.

“Who’s she?” Colleen asked.

“Her name’s Robin,” Lawrence said, glaring at Bradley. “She saved our lives tonight.”

Julie leaned forward. “Where’s Tommy? Wasn’t he with you?”

“Yes,” Colleen said, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot under Julie’s intense stare. “He opted to stay outside.”

“Why?” Julie asked, crossing her arms to fight off an onslaught of goosebumps invoked by a chill in the air.

“He was infected by one of Dr. Cohn’s creatures when we were at Ashton Enterprises,” Colleen replied. “He’s already started to change and thought it best to stay outside for everyone’s safety.”

Julie's face grew pale. "I need to see him."

"You can't," Colleen said, instinctively stepping in front of the door. "He did ask me to tell you that he loves you and wished things could have worked out differently."

"I need to hear that from him," Julie cried out, removing the icepack off her ankle. She tossed it onto the seat beside her.

Colleen stood her ground. "Tommy's body can't adapt to the changes," she said. "He's deteriorating rapidly from the inside out—and in record time. I've never seen anything progress so fast."

"And you left him out there to die alone?" Julie said, tears spilling from her almond-shaped eyes.

"It wasn't *my* choice," Colleen said. "It was his, and by God, I'm not denying the man his last request."

"He's so stubborn," Julie said, standing up.

"Enough," Samir said. "Sit your ass down and stay off that ankle."

Julie bowed her head and collapsed back onto the seat. Robin swiftly crossed the room, picked up the icepack, and sat down next to her. She wrapped her arm around Julie's shoulders. "It'll be okay. Everything is going to be okay."

Lawrence's eyes narrowed. "Does anyone else have something they want to get off their chest?"

"Are you talking to me?" Bradley said, visibly squaring his shoulders.

Colleen shook her head and moved away from the door. "Both of you need to grow up," she said angrily. "Life's too short for this macho bullshit."

Bradley gritted his teeth and nodded. "You're right."

“All right, then,” Colleen said. “Can anyone tell me where Calvin and Antonio are? I didn’t see them upstairs.”

“They didn’t make it,” Lawrence said flatly.

“What?” Colleen said, her immense feelings for both of them, especially Calvin, flowing across her face in waves. “That can’t be.”

“If it makes it easier,” Lawrence said, softening his tone, “Calvin died heroically.”

“And so did Antonio,” Julie sobbed loudly.

Colleen backed up and leaned against a wall for support. “It never ends.”

Bradley looked over at her. “What doesn’t?”

“Losing people I care about,” Colleen said.

Samir inserted a catheter into a large vein in Jennifer’s arm and used a tube to connect it to the bag containing the blood for transfusion. “Alright,” he said, picking up a pair of scissors to cut off what was left of Jennifer’s shirt. “Everyone needs to go back upstairs except Justin and Lawrence. They’re going to help me pull off a miracle tonight.”

SEPTEMBER - WEDNESDAY - ROMANIA

Emily Radcliffe crawled as fast as she could across the dirt-covered cavern floor and dove behind a cluster of stalagmites rising from the ground like an ancient forest of trees. The stalactites, which had developed over the centuries from a continual chemical reaction between limestone and water, hung from the earthen ceiling. A few of them met up with their stalagmite counterparts and created beautiful columns. Additional stalactites resembled the icicles dangling dangerously off the rain gutters of her childhood home during brutal winter storms. She had absolutely no desire to break one off and lick it, though, like the icy versions back home in Massachusetts. It was just another reminder of one of the many reasons why she chose to leave there in the first place.

It took a lot more effort than Emily ever dreamt it would to convince her parents that attending an out-of-state college was as good if not better than going to their revered Boston College to achieve her educational goals. Initially, her parents argued that the cost of a local college was much more practical for their budget. Emily argued that it didn't matter how much tuition

ended up costing as they were not responsible for it anyway. She had earned a GPA greater than 4.0 all the way through high school and many prestigious colleges had offered her full-ride scholarships. She selected Triton University because it had a phenomenal teaching staff and a notable academic curriculum that included advance degrees in her favorite subjects: chemistry and genetics. Also, a degree from Triton would go further toward job placement, especially in this economy. And, though she had no interest in football or any other sport for that matter, the university did have an excellent athletic program that included quite a few pro football success stories, which she knew her father would appreciate.

Emily pleaded her case for two months before her parents' warmed to the idea and ultimately gave their blessing. Of course, it was based on the condition that she promised not to do anything foolish. She swore on her dreams to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Alan Grosse, a Nobel Prize recipient in chemistry and a teacher at the university that she would make them proud. Unfortunately, Dr. Grosse wasn't quite the man everyone, including herself, thought him to be.

To that end, there was no way of knowing how her parents would react to her current predicament if she survived long enough to tell them about it. Perhaps they'd find her curiosity to experience firsthand what Dr. Cohn's research forum was all about the previous week completely naïve, since it had a direct correlation to her present location. Then again, maybe they would think of her as daring and heroic considering how high the stakes were for her to succeed for the good of mankind. Either way, there was nothing she could do

about it at the moment. She was trapped in a perverse game of roulette, with every spin a possible step closer to her demise.

But even if Emily had been given the fantastic opportunity to go back in time, enroll in her parents' preferred college and essentially erasing everything she'd witnessed over the past five days from memory, she would not and could not have done it. Sure, snuggling up on her parents' sofa with a cup of hot cocoa after a long day of classes at Boston College probably sounded a whole heck of a lot better to most people than freezing her ass off in a godforsaken cavern halfway around the world, but she wasn't most people. Her parents were overbearing, and at times it felt like they were purposely trying to snuff out her dreams so she would follow theirs. She knew going back home would extinguish her passion for life, and considering all she'd been through already, there was no question that everyone was living on borrowed time. She definitely had no intention on wasting any more of it.

Although Emily cherished her parents, she knew they would never understand the importance of her role in the mission. To their credit, she also never imagined that after a superior first year and barely a week into her sophomore year, she'd throw it away to be in Romania trying to save mankind from the horrible evils that men do in their quest to be God. As strange luck would have it, there was a little bit of a bright side that came with the terrifying darkness, even if her parents wouldn't see it that way. She had fallen madly in love for the first time in her young adult life, and though it wasn't with her dad's ideal man of a doctor or lawyer, she didn't care. Yes, Greg Ashton was a vampire, but he clung

courageously to his humanity with every ounce of strength left within him. And he had kissed her with such tenderness on the Ryan's private jet right before takeoff that it made her legs feel as if they had vanished from beneath her.

Now, Greg was using every bit of his vampiric ability to stay alive and keep the gang of evil vampires distracted so they wouldn't notice her valiant attempt to remain hidden among the stalagmites. As she stared up at the ceiling trying to gather the courage to do anything other than sit there in debilitating fear, her imagination transformed the stalactites into terrifying fangs capable of chomping down on her if she moved a muscle. The other rock formations surrounding her were grayish-brown in color and didn't appear as menacing, but their tips glowed with a golden hue enhanced by the light cast upon them from two torches flickering wildly on the opposite side of the room. They taunted her with silent messages of doom.

The torches were propped up against the main entrance into the cavern. The unexpected arrival of Steven Banks, Debra Reed, and the other vampires in their entourage had derailed the team's task of keeping the cavern brightly-lit for those who required the light to see. Three torches had become victims to the relentless drip of the mineral-rich water that was responsible for the amazing sculptures of natural art within the cavern. Only two of the original five torches still burned, including the one Thomas Ryan had brought with them into the abandoned diamond mine. Emily didn't want to fathom the veil of darkness and evil that would encase her if the remaining two torches were allowed to burn out, too. She had to get her hands

on at least one of them or suffer the fate of her own inner light being extinguished.

Emily knew her every move was a calculated risk, but it was one she had to take to stay alive. She kept her focus, swallowed her fears, and moved swiftly from one stalagmite to the next, passing behind Greg while he battled one of the vampires.

Greg had been struck in the shoulder by a stake seconds earlier, but his sister, C.J., had intervened and saved his life. She had flung one of two razor-sharp tipped kamas, which were shortened versions of an old-fashioned farming sickle, at Wyatt Green, the vampire responsible for firing the stake at Greg. The half-moon shaped kama blade sunk in his chest about two inches, like a hatchet. This made it difficult but not impossible for Wyatt to fire another one. C.J. didn't wait to see if that would inevitably come to fruition. She threw the other kama across the room like a fan blade, and it sliced through Wyatt's neck, decapitating him.

By that time, Greg had ripped out the stake and sprung to his feet with vengeance etched in the creases of his young face. The fight for their lives was in full swing, but he took his eyes off the advancing death dealers for a brief second to be sure Emily had taken refuge behind the stalagmites. When he was certain she was safe, he turned to confront Ray DiSanto, who sported a very expensive gray Italian suit set off by well-polished black shoes. Ray's black hair was soaked in so much gel that the same amount could easily have lasted most people a couple months of daily use. In fact, he looked more like a mafia member than one of Steven's undead henchmen; the only reason anyone other than Steven's group knew his name was because

he bellowed it out like a sports commentator before a boxing match announcing the contender in each corner.

Ray took off his coat, draped it over the closest stalagmite, and loosened his tie before engaging Greg in an all-out street brawl. They exchanged punches so powerful that an ordinary man would have been dead within seconds. It was hard for Emily to tell who had the upper hand as she peeked over the stalagmite, but Ray seemed to be winning. It was quite obvious he was familiar with beating people to a pulp, vampire or not, and avoided the majority of blood splatter that erupted with almost every hit like a professional. Greg, on the other hand, was quite resilient in taking a beating and dishing out a little of his own retribution. Emily knew whoever had the most stamina would survive the duel, and she prayed it would be Greg.

Emily darted to another stalagmite and zeroed in on C.J. and Damon West, who were forced to team up and take on the infamous Mike Richter. She'd seen his mug shot on the late night news as someone wanted for questioning by the Federal Bureau of Investigations in the brutal deaths of his former gang members. He was very intimidating both in appearance and stature. His long, strawlike hair was tied back in a ponytail. He didn't wear a T-shirt beneath his black leather vest, and he strutted like a rooster in his massive leather biker boots toward C.J. and Damon with an amused smirk on his face as if there were some inside joke about them and only he knew the punch line.

C.J. made the first move, throwing a spinning hook kick that clocked Mike in the side of the head with her heel. He stumbled back a couple steps but swiftly answered her effort with a powerful punch to

the face that lifted her feet off the ground and knocked her back about four meters. Damon attacked next and pummeled Mike in the stomach with a rapid succession of punches. He avoided staring at the disturbing tattoo on Mike's chest—an anaconda devouring a sweet-looking puppy dog. Mike countered with a brutal uppercut, which sent Damon sailing into a fragile cropping of stalagmites, crushing them under his weight. He and C.J. staggered back onto their feet, bruised and bleeding from their injuries but refusing to give up against the colossal giant.

Emily squatted as low as she could get to the ground and darted to another cluster of stalagmites. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and stole a look from behind her hiding place, surveying the most promising route to take to get her hands on a torch. The wet, gritty surface of the stalagmite felt strange on her cheek, but she refused to pull away as Brenda Ryan and Seth Jacobson sized each other up. There weren't many people who would ever witness such a matchup, and she wasn't about to miss it.

Everyone in Triton City was familiar with Seth Jacobson because of the recent black-and-white photo that accompanied a newspaper article about the death of his younger sister. The paper reported that his parents had returned home after a dinner party and discovered their 8-year-old golden-haired, blue-eyed girl was missing. A few days later, the police came back and conducted a thorough sweep of the house to locate the source of a horrible stench reported by everyone from her parents to the next-door neighbor to the postman. They discovered the little girl's lifeless body beneath the crawlspace.

After the autopsy was performed, the coroner released a detailed statement on how the Jacobson's girl died, and it wasn't from choking on too much dirt from mud pies, as her brother, Seth, suggested she liked to create and eat. It was manual strangulation, but the handprints around her neck were distorted by extreme decomposition of the body from the extraordinary heat wave. The lead homicide detective fingered Seth as the main person of interest, but Seth emphatically denied the allegation, and so far, there was no proof to the contrary.

Despite his vehement claim of his innocence in the murder, it was quite apparent that Seth was indeed the culprit and evil to the core. He implemented various tactics in an attempt to gain control of Brenda, including wrist grabs, choke holds, and glancing around in hopes that Brenda would take the bait and look, but nothing he did worked to his benefit. Brenda met Seth's every move with a stronger block, a swifter sidestep, or a more vicious counterattack. At times, there actually seemed to be the beginnings of a smile pulling at the corners of her lips, as if she were subconsciously amused by Seth's infantile behavior. For Emily and anyone else watching this unfold, it was an exceptional battle between a typical sociopath and a well-known socialite. If it had been arranged by a few lucrative sponsors at a stadium-size arena, the event would have been sold out for months and ticket scalpers would have been raking in the dough.

Former Secret Service Agent Maria Gonzalez, and Brenda's father, Thomas Ryan, were engaged in a perilous game of cat and mouse against Doug Harrison. Maria was the Mouse, darting around the cavern to

keep Doug the Cat distracted while Thomas scoured the floor for the semiautomatic weapon Maria had tossed onto it a few minutes before Steven and his gang of party crashers arrived. Emily saw how hesitant Maria had been to part with the weapon but understood the decision.

When their group had originally arrived at the excavation site and discovered the vampire remains missing, Thomas unleashed a vicious wrath at Brenda. His reaction was so uncalled for and pissed off everyone so much that Emily knew that each of them—none more so than Maria—wanted to snatch Maria's gun from her hip holster and blow him away to shut him up. The look that came over Maria, however, during Thomas's tirade was of a mother's love and protection. Everyone fell eerily silent at that moment, and Emily nibbled at her bottom lip as Maria placed her hand on the holster, unsnapped the strap securing the weapon in its place, and drummed her fingers on the stock. Time stood still, or so it seemed, as they all waited to see if Maria would rip out the gun and kill Thomas in a firestorm of bullets. She did eventually pull out the gun, but tossed it on the ground instead. Emily prayed things would calm down if given time, but then Steven and his gang of vampires showed up.

Anyone who spent even the smallest amount of time with Thomas realized he had the innate ability to get underneath a person's skin. Emily and the others learned that firsthand. He had gone on and on about Brenda's ignorance in her blind trust of people and this latest example she would pay for. Emily wondered if that mentality was Thomas's way of dealing with the fallout when things went awry while pillaging a

country's secrets with hired help. She knew there had to be quite a bit of money at stake. Still, it wasn't right or acceptable when he used such lame tactics against his daughter. How Brenda could've had a hand in the heist no one knew or could possibly fathom, but Thomas divulged his theories on the various scenarios that he believed would cause Brenda to sell her soul to the devil.

After another unproductive minute of Thomas's lunatic accusations, everyone stopped listening and went back to searching for anything the thieves might have overlooked or left behind. Emily knew Brenda had no part in the disappearance of the vampire remains as she was just as baffled as the rest of them when they arrived in the ransacked cavern. She also knew Thomas wasn't involved. His hotheadedness and over-the-top temper tantrums spoke volumes about his personality, work ethic, and ironically, his innocence. Equally apparent, however, was his quickness to point the finger at anyone but himself when things didn't go according to plan. There wasn't any way this debacle could be *his* fault.

Even in the minimal lighting, Emily recognized Doug as the same man that had been lingering around the Triton University science building. She hadn't been interested in conversing with him then and definitely wasn't now. It was obvious that he was close to the same age as her father, but he stared at her in a way that made her feel violated, almost like he had seen her naked in the shower. When she passed him on her way to class the previous Thursday, he asked her out on a date, and she quickly but politely declined. Apparently, he didn't believe she was serious and would have a

change of heart if he continued to follow her across campus and into another building where her class was held. He suggestively and slowly flicked his tongue, and spoke about how good of a time they would have together if she gave him the chance.

This bold approach frightened Emily, and she picked up her pace, but so did he. She was on the verge of hysterics when she collided with another student in the hallway and spilled her books onto the floor. The young man apologized and helped her gather up her belongings, but she didn't have time for idle chitchat. She had lost track of Doug and could think only about getting to the safety of the classroom. She was almost certain Greg would never speak to her again after that, but during Dr. Cohn's research forum that same night, he was very kind to her and didn't bring up their brief encounter even though she could tell he remembered it.

Emily also knew that Steven Banks had his sights set on Eric Monroe from the moment he entered the cavern with his posse of outlaws. She watched in horror as Steven lowered his head and rushed him like a bull, but Eric shifted gracefully out of the way like a professional matador. It was obvious Eric wasn't doing too well and had grown considerably weaker since their arrival at the Bucharest airport. Emily didn't believe the others had noticed his deterioration but would if his zest for life diminished any further. His energetic pace through the dense forest dwindled considerably once they'd breached the mine's entrance. She knew full well it had nothing to do with making sure that no one was following them; though in hindsight, that would've been a great idea.

Eric had been the first to sit down and rest after ten minutes of searching the cavern. Emily noticed the skin around his eyes was slowly turning jaundiced. To make matters worse, he seemed to need the artificial light of the torches as much as she did. And that wasn't a good sign, either. Nevertheless, his and Steven's fight was the bloodiest and most violent of all of them. They delivered blow after bone-crushing blow, and the sound resonated throughout the chamber. Emily could almost feel the intensity of each hit. She cringed at the thought of being struck with such force. The damage inflicted on their organs had to be catastrophic.

A solemn thought dropped onto Emily like a giant net. She knew it wouldn't be much longer before Doug stopped wasting time with Maria and stepped up his game. He would no doubt snatch hold of her long, flowing dark hair, jerk her head back, and kill her with a strike to the neck as swift as a King Cobra's. Then, he would eliminate Thomas by slithering up behind him while he searched frantically for a weapon that only had the power to slow down a vampire but not kill it. Emily could just picture Doug's satisfied expression as he snapped Thomas' neck like a twig and then joined Ray DiSanto to finish off Greg.

Of course, if all this came to fruition, the good guys would lose and Emily would be devoured alive. She couldn't allow that to happen. She was the only one on the team that had to stay alive if there was any hope in returning to the States with a viable sample of the original vampiric DNA strand. Of course, that was hinged on her actually locating the remains. If she perished, so did their plan. And though she knew patience was a virtue, it was now or never to make her

move. As she readied herself to take a daring dash for the closest torch, she noticed one of Steven's comrades was unaccounted for. As the hairs on the back of her neck rose, she knew with every fiber in her being that Debra Reed was right behind her.

The soft click of a stake as it was loaded into a crossbow graced Emily's ears followed by another one. She did a quick side-step and just missed being impaled by the wooden stake that sunk into the adjacent wall, which was quite impressive if one considered that the cavern walls were supposed to be made of limestone. Emily spun around and swept her foot an inch above the ground. She struck Debra in the ankle and knocked her off her feet. The crossbow tumbled out of Debra's hands and lodged in between two stalagmites, releasing the second stake. It sliced through the air and hit Mike Richter in the lower back.

* * *

Mike howled in agony and twisted around to remove the stake from his back. C.J. seized the opportunity and dive-rolled over to Wyatt's lifeless body to retrieve her weapons. One of her kamas was lodged deep within his chest, and the other lay freely beside his severed head roughly five feet away from her position. Deciding she didn't have the time to play tug-of-war, she lunged for the second weapon, but an ironclad grip clamped down onto her ankle just as her fingertips brushed the handle.

Mike jerked back hard on her leg. "Not so fast, little lady."

C.J.'s shirt rolled away from her jeans and toward her chin as Mike dragged her away from the

kama. She felt the harsh, unforgiving roughness of the cavern floor unleash mayhem on the delicate tissue of her stomach and eat away at the epidermis. As she passed by Wyatt's body, she knew the kama wedged in his chest was the only thing that might help bring down the Goliath. She reached out and grabbed the handle of the kama and temporarily halted her backward momentum. She worked it back and forth feverishly to free it.

Mike yanked on C.J.'s ankle even harder and inadvertently helped her rip out the kama from Wyatt's chest. He instantly realized his blunder, readjusted his grip on her ankle, and spun promptly. C.J. was once again lifted off the ground as though she were as light as a feather. Mike released his grip and flung her into a nearby wall. C.J.'s head struck the rocky surface with a solid thud, and she collapsed to the floor without as much as a whimper escaping her parched lips.

"You son of a bitch!" Damon shouted, leaping onto Mike's back and driving his talon-like nails into the front of Mike's chest.

Mike reached over his head and grabbed Damon by the hair. In one swift motion, he ripped Damon over his shoulder and slammed him into the ground. "You ain't so tough now, are you?" he growled, staring down at a very dazed Damon.

C.J.'s eyes fluttered open and her arms trembled as she pushed her aching body off the cavern floor. Somehow she'd managed to hang onto the kama and rose to her feet with it clenched in her hand. Mike was poised over Damon and she could tell he was ready to strike. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she said.

Mike turned and flashed a diabolical grin. He raised his foot over where Damon's heart would be located and a steel rod descended from the heel of his biker boot. "Go ahead," he said, watching C.J. struggle to maintain her balance. "No one can stop me from killing this piece of shit, especially some little girl. You can't even stand up on your own, sweetheart."

C.J.'s eyes narrowed. "You want to bet?"

Mike winked at her. "How about after I'm through with him," he replied, circling his heel tauntingly over Damon's chest, "I come over there and show you what a real man feels like before I kill you?"

C.J. squeezed her grip even tighter around the kama's handle and spun it in a figure eight formation with the blade trailing behind it. "Sorry, but that doesn't work for me," she said, slinging the kama against her arm so the blade pointed away from her elbow. She pressed the button on the back side of the handle and caught the sound of the inner mechanism release. The steel stake concealed inside rocketed out of its wooden housing and struck Mike dead-center in the chest, knocking him back and dropping him to his knees. It was designed to react like a hollow point bullet, spreading out on impact and decimating everything in its path. There was no way Mike would be able to remove it without removing a significant chunk of his heart.

Mike grasped the end of the stake sticking out of his chest. "How?" he muttered, looking bewildered at C.J.

"My parents, you stupid asshole," she said vehemently, "and they send their regards."

Mike collapsed face first onto the cavern floor, which forced the stake to break through the skin of his back, sealing his fate. Damon leapt up and quickly moved away as Mike exhaled his last ragged breath. “I owe you one,” he said.

“I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities in our immediate future to make it up to me.”

* * *

Emily and Debra were oblivious to the life and death struggles their comrades were engaged in—their own wrestling match demanded their full attention. They rolled back and forth on the cavern floor, each striving to gain the upper hand but failing miserably at it. They were each other’s equal in physical stature and quick wit. Emily managed to pin Debra’s arms with her knees and popped her in the nose with the heel of her hand. Tears sprang to Debra’s eyes, but that was it. She came back with a swift, hard slap across Emily’s face, which sent Emily tumbling off of her and struggling for control again. After a few seconds of wrestling, Emily was back on top, but it didn’t last. Debra thrust her hips and bucked Emily up over her head. Then, she pounced onto Emily like a cat, pinned her arms with her knees, and began choking her.

Steven watched from afar, wanting to clap his hands or shout out his support for the way Debra was handling the situation, but was too busy with Eric to do so. Yes, he was definitely smitten with Debra’s intellect and insatiable sex drive, but more so because she had given him the means to achieve something far greater than a mere position on some pathetic NFL team. She

knew how to keep Dr. Cohn and Dr. Grosse distracted while they went about setting her secret plan into motion. All she had asked was for him to follow her instructions to the letter. If he did, she promised they would rule the modern vampire race together from their new home inside the Oval Office. He couldn't wait or resist that temptation, even if it meant he had to pretend to be okay with Debra's continuous manipulation and flirtations with the others on their team.

As that wondrous dream drifted out of his mind, Steven noticed C.J. and Damon creeping their way over to Emily and Debra. He knew they were headed there for one purpose: to save Emily. Debra would be killed in the process, as she wasn't a vampire, not yet anyway, nor had any special powers to self-heal. His disgust as well as his anger rose with terrifying velocity. He shifted his attention back to Eric and delivered a devastating roundhouse punch to the side of Eric's head, knocking him down to all fours. He immediately followed the hit with a horrendous kick to the ribcage, and the resulting sound of breaking bones mimicked the twigs snapping underfoot as one trekked through the mountains of a Transylvanian forest.

Although Eric was spitting up a considerable amount of blood and couldn't stand, he refused to give up. "Is that all you got?" he asked.

Steven kicked Eric one more time right in the face. His foot connected with the underside of Eric's chin and sent his fangs through his lower lip, spilling blood onto his chin. Steven grabbed Eric's sweat-drenched hair and jerked back his head. "You're so pathetic."

“And you’re a coward,” Eric muttered, finally giving into the pain and collapsing onto the ground.

Steven turned his attention back to C.J. and Damon, reached into his pocket, and withdrew a small stick of dynamite. “That’s enough,” he shouted, “or I will blow this whole fucking place sky high.”

Everyone froze in their tracks except for Debra, who continued to try to strangle the life out of Emily. Greg caught site of their fierce battle and put immediate distance between him and Ray. “Wow, you have a *real* smart plan there, Steven.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Steven said.

C.J. took another bold step toward Emily and Debra. “We all need to calm down, especially you, Steven, and think this through.”

Steven held the stick of dynamite next to one of the burning torches. “Don’t test me,” he said. “I know what you’re up to, little Miss Ashton.”

That stopped C.J. in her tracks and caused Damon to run into her, knocking her slightly off balance. “You wouldn’t dare,” she said, recovering swiftly. “You don’t have the balls to kill yourself.”

“Did I say anything about that?” Steven said. “My life is just getting good. On the other hand, I have no issue with killing you or your friends. Of course, you could plead for your life by dropping to your knees. I’m sure you can convince me how much you want to live.” He unfastened his belt and unzipped his jeans.

C.J. held his gaze as her face seemed to turn slightly green in color. “You’re disgusting,” she said. “I would rather die than service you.”

“Is that so?” Steven said. “That’s a pretty strong assertion. Sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

“Positive,” C.J. said.

Steven shrugged his shoulders. “Your loss,” he said, zipping up his jeans and managing to refasten his belt with one hand. “Now, my guys and I need to get a move on it. Our work here is done.”

Ray DiSanto snatched his coat off the stalagmite and retreated toward the entrance, with Doug Harrison by his side. “If we ever meet again,” he said, chuckling cynically at Greg, “don’t think this is over.”

“Not by a long shot,” Greg replied.

Debra released her hands around Emily’s neck and smashed her elbow onto Emily’s face. Blood gushed from Emily’s nose. “Just returning the favor,” Debra said icily. She wiped off her hands on her pants and stood up. “Let’s see how well your *friends* will take care of you now.”

The coppery-aroma of human blood filled the air and smelled as enticing as freshly baked cookies to each vampire in the room, and Greg knew it. He rushed to Emily’s side as she pressed her fingers against her nose in an attempt to stop the bleeding. He sensed his own desire to feast on the fresh food source and knew the others were experiencing the same thing.

C.J. darted behind a cropping of stalagmites, made her way swiftly around them, and strutted toward Greg and Emily with kamas at the ready. Damon followed closely behind her. His razor-sharp fangs almost seemed to glow in the dimly-lit cavern. Greg desperately searched C.J.’s face and discovered that though her face was morphed into a vampiric rage, her eyes still maintained human kindness. He did not raise his hand as she neared, and he sighed with relief when

she pivoted around and took a protective stance next to him. Damon did the same.

Maria and Thomas were the last to arrive; they had grabbed Eric by the arms and dragged him over to where Emily lay, both of them in need of medical care.

“You were saying?” Greg said.

Steven laughed and took Debra’s hand as she stepped beside him. “You’re so foolish,” he said. “You think your devotion to hold onto your humanity makes you stronger than us, but it doesn’t. Eventually, each of you will succumb to the bloodlust and kill the other just to get a mere taste of what you crave the most.”

Debra held up her arm to Steven’s mouth and he drove his fangs into her wrist, taking a generous taste of her blood. “It’s so good,” he said, licking his upper lip. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“You’re sick,” Thomas said.

“Am I?” Steven asked, motioning the others to get out of the cavern and move into the tunnel that had led them to where they all were. “It’s called the survival of the fittest, but you wouldn’t know anything about that philosophy. All you care about is money and how much you can get of it at the expense of others.”

“You’re really such an asshole,” Maria said. “A pathetic little boy who has no idea on how to be or act like a grown man.”

“Well, that may be, but at least I tell it how it is,” Steven said.

“Prove it,” Damon interjected. “Tell us how you knew we were here in the first place?”

Steven’s lips spread into a wicked grin as if he had just chewed up and swallowed an unsuspecting canary. “Well, since it won’t matter in a few seconds, I

will.” He glanced at Debra, who retrieved a portable GPS device from her back pocket and held it up. “See these two green blinking dots,” he said, tapping on the screen. “Two of you ingested tracking devices so Dr. Grosse could keep an eye on where you were at all times. He just didn’t realize it would benefit us as well when he did it.”

“You’re lying,” Brenda said. “None of us would do that.”

“Sure about that?” Steven said. “I wonder how we were able to find you then. Don’t you, wonder that too, Greg? Don’t you wonder who would betray their so-called friends like that? Lead them into temptation and all that stuff.”

Greg’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t even try to turn the tables or...”

“Or what?” Steven said, lighting the dynamite’s wick on the torch.

“Why don’t you come over here and find out,” Greg replied.

“Hmm, I’m afraid I don’t have the time,” Steven said, watching the burning wick. “See you... in the afterlife.” He turned and walked hastily into the tunnel after the others.

“You’re pathetic,” Greg shouted at him.

Thomas shot up like someone had lit his butt on fire and brushed the dirt off his hands on the back of his pants. “Is there any truth to that raving lunatic’s tracking device theory?”

“Doubtful,” Greg said.

“Are you sure?” Thomas retorted. “He seemed to point the finger at you and since you and C.J. are family...”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Greg said, “If that’s true than you’re the fucking Tooth Fairy.”

C.J. took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “He might be right.”

“No fucking way,” Greg said. “I’d remember if we slept with the enemy.”

“We took those green pills, remember?” C.J. said thoughtfully. “Maybe they were tracking devices.”

“They were for pain,” Greg said. “Emily gave them to us, for Christ’s sake.”

Everyone turned and stared down at Emily, who with Maria’s help had almost stopped the bleeding by pressing a shredded piece of material from Maria’s shirt against her nose. “Rebecca told me to give them to you,” Emily mumbled through a piece of blood-soaked cloth. “I didn’t question it.”

“Perhaps the pills had a dual purpose,” Brenda said. “Julie offered me one, too, but I didn’t take it; I stashed mine inside my jeans pocket.”

“The pair you’re wearing now?” Maria asked.

“No,” Brenda said. “They’re at home.”

“Not good,” Maria said.

“You would have rather had her take it?” C.J. asked in astonishment.

“No,” Maria said, “but if the pills are tracking devices, then Dr. Cohn’s minions know exactly where to find the others.”

“Shit,” C.J. said. “I didn’t think of that.”

“And, it still doesn’t solve the problem of how we’re going to get rid of the ones inside of us, if that’s what they really are,” Greg said.

A stick of dynamite flew through the air and landed softly on the dirt just outside the opening of the

cavern. Another one followed it. Eric was the only one who saw them as he lay in a fetal position next to Emily. “Take cover,” he said, but it was barely audible.

“What was that, Eric?” Greg said.

Two horrendous explosions erupted and caused the rocky ceiling to collapse, burying them all beneath it and obliterating their only exit.

WEDNESDAY-TRITON CITY

The makeshift triage unit concealed within Thomas Ryan's fortified basement didn't remind Justin of any hospital room he had ever been in before. It was a lot more sophisticated. Samir had rounded up the latest and greatest cutting-edge medical technology in the county and so far had put it to good use for Jennifer's odds at survival. A portable heart rate monitor was setup next to where she lay unconscious. The green blip of her heart rate traveled from left to right across the 10.4 inch screen keeping the room from being too eerily quiet. Directly below her heart rate were additional rows of squiggly lines measuring her other vital signs, which made as much sense as alien hieroglyphics to anyone not trained on how to read it. Thankfully, the data was translated into somewhat graspable numbers on the far-right side of the screen.

Jennifer's heartbeat had grown steadily stronger over the past few hours, and her blood pressure was finally stabilized. Samir did away with the oxygen tube draped around her ears and underneath her nose when he felt confident she was strong enough to breathe on her own. Luckily, he'd been right. Jennifer's wounds were healing from their surprise encounter with the

creatures outside Dr. Grosse's home hours earlier. The god-awful stake wound that was the size of a teacup saucer in her chest had even started to heal, but regrettably, that's as far as it went. She had shown no signs of making a mental recovery.

Samir used various tactics in an attempt to wake her. He poked the bottoms of her feet with a sterilized needle, waved a jar of smelling salts beneath her nose, and loudly snapped his fingers next to her ears. There was no response whatsoever.

Justin squeezed her hand and rubbed the back of it with his thumb. He hoped his touch would somehow give her comfort even if she couldn't acknowledge it. "Come on, baby," he whispered. "Open your eyes."

It had been almost one week to the day since he picked up his brother, Eric, at Rusty's One-Stop Depot that fateful Thursday morning. They had started for his and Jennifer's townhome when their usual quiet drive changed with a dark sedan pursuing them into the city by one if not both of Julie's parents and two of Dr. Cohn's loyal henchmen, though neither Justin nor Eric knew who it was at the time. In fact, there was a lot Justin didn't know.

Eric hadn't spoken a single word to Justin or anyone else in his family for over five years because of a supposed drug overdose, which turned out to be a lie so he could keep those he loved safe. On that night, however, Eric was forced to reveal his double life by abruptly breaking his silence when he realized Justin's life was in jeopardy. He insisted Justin pull over to the curb and abandon his Nissan Z, which Justin did because he truly thought Eric was having some sort of psychotic breakdown. He followed Eric up an adjacent

steep hill where the local community center had been built and demanded to know what the hell was going on. However, there wasn't time to go into further detail. The infamous black sedan rolled up beside the Nissan Z, and two men piled out of the backseat. They peered into the sports car's darkened windows to make sure it was empty.

For the first time in Justin's life, he felt the icy hand of fear grasp his spine. He watched the two men circle around his car as Eric simultaneously advised him to remove all his clothes except for his skivvies if he wanted to live. Justin didn't know what else to do, so he did as his brother said. Eric took off his clothes, too, and then combined their clothing and tossed it over the ten-foot-high fence into the center's swimming pool. He explained that in doing so, it would buy them a little extra time to escape. Justin reluctantly nodded his head as if he completely understood and raced after Eric down the other side of the hill, tennis shoes in hand. He couldn't see the sedan, but Eric told him it was still coming their way.

They cut through a slew of backyards, made their way onto Washington Street, and kept a ragged pace toward the more densely populated area of the city. Without warning, Eric jerked Justin into a dark alleyway and ordered him to get inside a filthy trash dumpster that reeked of rotting meat, behind a well-established Italian restaurant. Justin grudgingly agreed and waited beside his brother in silence. He had had just about enough when the black sedan rolled past and screeched to a stop at the corner. Justin held his breath in anticipation, thinking that their pursuers somehow discovered they were cowering like children inside the

rusting metal can. Then, another less evasive meal had presented itself—a sultry prostitute named Miss “Long Legs” Madeline. She called out in a drunken voice to the sedan idling at the stop sign. A second later, she was snatched off the street with a brief terror-filled scream, leaving behind a lonely red high-heeled shoe.

Justin had pondered long and hard about that shoe and the consequences it would have brought if he had picked it up. It was the only piece of evidence that proved Madeline had ever existed in Triton City and that a violent crime was committed against her. Yet, if he’d turned it into the police department as he had initially wanted to do, it would have been a red warning flag to Dr. Cohn as well.

Justin suspected Julie’s parents were the ones ordered to retrieve the shoe the following day. If it hadn’t been there, then the Changs would have known there was at least one witness to the horrific abduction of Miss Madeline and reported their hunch back to Dr. Cohn. Justin also knew the two men from the black sedan who showed up at his and Jennifer’s town home later that morning would have been there a lot sooner if he had ignored Eric’s warning about the shoe. He didn’t want to think about how that would have played out. It was quite enough dealing with what was already on his plate. There wasn’t any need to toss conjecture on top of it. He was still beating himself up over the fact that he hadn’t been able to protect Jennifer when she needed him the most.

* * *

Jennifer's skin was as smooth as silk and her lips so deliciously red that Justin understood how Romeo must have felt when he saw Juliet lying dead in the Capulet crypt. The anguish and hopelessness coupled with the utter inability to turn back time made Justin want to rush out and buy some poison. His heart felt stamped by a hundred horses, and his passion for life was trampled into near-oblivion by his immortality. He knew that if Jennifer's spirit decided to soar away from this hell on earth, leaving her human form behind, he would throw his own body onto a stake and pray for death to be swift so that he could join his beloved in the afterlife. He would not go on without her.

Justin dared not voice these thoughts with Samir or Lawrence hovering around the room like guardian angels. It would be too easy to misinterpret his grief as a complete betrayal of God's handiwork, since he was supposed to be rejoicing the miracle of Jennifer's slow but steady recovery. Yet, he relentlessly thought about what Samir told him: *She may never wake up, Justin, so be prepared. And if she does...she may not recognize you. Ever.*

Though Justin was quite confident in Samir's educational accolades and real-life experiences to judge the severity of how a situation like this might play out, he didn't want to hear any skepticism, so he ignored it. He believed that if Samir was able to get Jennifer's heart beating strongly again and it activated her DNA to actually continue healing her wounds, then her brilliant mind would find its way back to him all on its own. But sadly, she hadn't found her way yet. She was trapped in a deep state of unconsciousness, as Samir so eloquently put it, and there were no signs of an early recovery.

When Justin began his prayer campaign for God to step in and save Jennifer's life back at Dr. Grosse's house, he hadn't thought to expand on the seemingly insignificant details of their bargain. God would handle it. It didn't cross his mind that she might not recognize him even if she did wake up from the amount of blood loss and its direct effects on the brain. He had only prayed for her to live, and that's exactly what he got. Now, he had to make a brutal decision: stay by her side in case she did wake up or keep his promise to God and track down Dr. Grosse.

"Justin?" Samir called out softly.

Justin raised his head, but his eyes stayed glued to Jennifer's face. "Yeah?"

"You are in desperate need of rest, my friend," Samir said, draping another warm blanket over Jennifer and tucking in the bottom two corners to keep her feet warm. "You can barely keep your eyes open."

Justin knew if it was just him and Jennifer in the room, he would have curled up beside her, laid his arm around her waist, and fallen into a deep slumber. "I'm fine."

"Why don't you go upstairs for a little while?" Samir said. "Lawrence can go with you and help you settle into one of the spare bedrooms."

"I'm not tired."

Lawrence stepped up behind Justin and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Come on, big guy, let's at least stretch our legs."

"What if she wakes up and I'm not here?" Justin said, unwilling to release Jennifer's hand. "What then?"

"You'll be thankful," Lawrence said.

“And if she doesn’t?” Justin asked, looking back at Lawrence with the trepidation of a boy who’d lost his way home.

“She will,” Lawrence replied. “Have faith.”

Justin swallowed the lump of visceral emotion that choked off further comment and bent down, kissing Jennifer on the forehead. “I love you,” he said. “You know I’m always with you.”

Samir removed the empty transfusion bag off the metal hook of the IV stand next to Jennifer’s bed and replaced it with another one filled with type O blood. “We need to get more of this and soon,” he said. “It’s the last one.”

Lawrence nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

Justin studied their guarded facial expressions. “How much more do you think she needs?”

“This isn’t something you need to concern yourself with,” Samir said. “It’ll work itself out.”

“I don’t care if you think it’ll work itself out,” Justin said, his fangs descending into full view. “She’s the love of my life, and I want to know what the hell is going on with her—good, bad, or indifferent.”

Samir ignored Justin’s aggression. “I have done everything in my power to save her, but the rest is up to her. It’s only a possibility that she’ll need more blood, but a lot can change between now and then. Heck, it’s more likely that the rest of you will need the blood to survive the next couple of days.”

Justin inhaled a slow, deep breath and let it out to the count of ten. “Sorry, I just feel so damn helpless.”

“But you’re not,” Samir said. “Don’t let what happened to Jennifer be in vain. You have to stop this from happening to anyone else.”

“Oh, I will,” Justin said, reluctantly releasing Jennifer’s hand and tucking it underneath the covers. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Do I look worried?” Samir asked, maintaining eye contact with Justin.

“No,” Justin said.

“Good,” Samir said. “Now, get your ass upstairs and fix yourself something to eat. Lawrence will show you where everything is. If you want to nap...”

Justin raised his hand and cut off Samir. He walked toward the door and looked back one last time. “If she wakes up...”

“Don’t worry,” Samir said. “You’ll be the first to know.”

* * *

Lawrence lingered at the top of the concrete stairwell hidden behind one of the large bookcases in the Ryans’ library and waited for Justin. It was clear that Justin was physically and mentally fatigued and emotionally spent as well. He watched Justin trudge up the stairs, barely capable of putting one foot in front of the other, and knew that Justin was in desperate need of a good night’s rest, but that wasn’t a luxury any of them could afford to have at the moment. They had more pressing issues to address, but twenty minutes of peace and quiet might do Justin some good. He just needed to convince Justin of that, of course, but first he wanted to get his friend some food for both the human and vampire appetites raging within him.

When Justin finally reached the top of the stairs, Lawrence led him into the dining room where Bradley

had helped himself to a plateful of barely cooked baby-back ribs, a large New York strip steak cooked rare, and a cup of human blood he'd poured from a glass pitcher that was shoved behind a gallon of milk at the back of the top shelf within the refrigerator. Apparently, Samir had the forethought to realize all of them might need a little bit of a recharge and had stocked the refrigerator with the necessities, including stuff for those who were still a hundred percent human.

Justin took his usual seat at the dining table and gazed longingly at the empty chair next to him. He was in bad shape. Lawrence continued past, walked across the ceramic tiles of the kitchen, and grabbed the handle to the refrigerator door. "What do you want to eat?"

"It doesn't matter," Justin said.

Bradley wiped off his mouth with a fancy cloth napkin. "Here," he said, sliding the plate of ribs closer to Justin. "They're quite tasty, and it looks like you could use a little food."

"No thanks," Justin said, pushing the plate back toward Bradley. "I'll pass."

"Suit yourself, but you don't know what you're missing," Bradley said, picking up another rib.

Lawrence withdrew two tall glasses from a cabinet and poured himself and Justin some blood from the glass pitcher. "You know you need to keep up your strength, right?"

"I know," Justin said, staring at the New York strip that Bradley was cutting with a steak knife.

Lawrence placed one of the glasses down in front of him. "Does that look good to you?" he asked. "If it does, there's another one in the fridge."

Justin shrugged his shoulders. “Sure,” he said, hesitantly taking a sip of the blood.

“Good.” Lawrence returned to the refrigerator, pulled out the other steak, and slit open the plastic film covering with his nail. “Do you want it cooked?”

“I don’t care,” Justin said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

Colleen peeked into the dining room, tiptoed past the table, and gazed into the kitchen at Lawrence. “I thought I heard voices,” she said. “Do you need some help?”

Startled, Lawrence nearly dropped the steak onto the floor. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“Who can sleep?” Colleen said, stifling a yawn.

Lawrence shot her a perplexed look. “Everyone should be in bed getting their beauty sleep, humans and vampires alike.”

“So, why are you all still up then?”

“She’s got you there, bro,” Bradley interjected, gnawing on another rib.

“Eat,” Lawrence ordered, shaking his head in annoyance, “and I’m not your bro.”

Bradley smiled as Colleen sat down in the seat next to him. “See, I told you he didn’t like me.”

Lawrence tossed a pat of butter into a frying pan that was already heating up on the stove and it sizzled. “I’m still up because I need to make a blood run for Samir,” he said, ignoring Bradley’s remark. “Jennifer’s probably going to need a little bit more and—well, so will most of us eventually.”

“I can donate some of my blood if it’ll help the cause,” Colleen said. “I’ve been meaning to do it for a long time, but as they say, the sand of the hourglass has

no time to slow down for anyone and you can't start over."

"Wow, that's riveting," Justin said sarcastically, glaring at Colleen like she'd been the one to almost kill Jennifer. "Any other words of advice you would like to share?"

"No," she said, dropping her gaze. "I was only trying to help."

"Well, unless your blood type is O," Justin said, "you're wasting your breath."

"Hey, take it easy," Bradley said protectively.

The muscles in Justin's jaw flexed. "Sorry, it's been a really long night, okay?"

"It's okay," Colleen said, patting Bradley's arm. "So—what type does Jennifer need again?"

Lawrence stepped away from the stove and peered into the dining room. He saw Justin had laid his head on the table and went back to the heated skillet where he dropped the steak into it. "Type O."

"Why does it matter?" Colleen asked.

"Usually it doesn't matter, but type O blood is the universal donor," Lawrence said.

"That went way over my head," Colleen said.

"Although vampires can drink almost any type of blood, human or animal, to keep up their strength, when too much of it is lost, it's imperative to have Type O blood available to guarantee that the human organs have the best chance at recovery."

"I never knew that," Colleen replied.

"I still can't believe Samir was able to get her body to respond so quickly," Bradley said, snagging another rib off the plate. "She's one stubborn lady."

Justin ran a hand through his blonde hair. “You have no idea how stubborn.”

“So, when will we know?” Bradley asked.

“When will we know what?” Justin said.

“If she’ll make a full recovery?”

“I don’t know...a few hours, a few days, maybe longer,” Justin replied in frustration.

“So, we just wait?” Bradley said.

“No,” Justin said. “We go forward with our plan to defend Triton City for as long as possible. I’m sure the military is already at Ashton Enterprises, and since John hasn’t called us yet, I don’t think he was able to convince them that we’re the good guys.”

“So now what do we do?” Colleen said.

“You’ll have to hold down the fort until the others return from Romania,” Justin said.

Lawrence was suddenly beside the table again. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he said, “And what will you be doing?”

“Settling a score.”

Colleen turned her focus to Lawrence. “What is he talking about?”

“I’ve not the slightest idea,” Lawrence said.

“I’m taking the first available flight out of LAX this morning,” Justin stated. “I need a little food, a few minutes to book my ticket, and then I’ll be on my way to Los Angeles.”

“Where are you going?” Bradley asked.

“Washington, D.C.”

Colleen looked concerned. “What score do you possibly have to settle *there*?”

Justin pulled back his shoulders and leaned his head to the right, causing a loud pop to erupt from the

vertebrate in his neck. “That is where Dr. Grosse is heading, and I’m certain his intentions aren’t noble. A couple of Dr. Cohn’s minions should already be on their way, too, but who knows if Dr. Grosse is going there to eliminate them or hoping to swoop in on their plans to infiltrate the White House with his own army of monsters leading the way.”

Robin appeared in the doorway. “He’s going to be there for both reasons, but he doesn’t have an army of monsters leading the charge because he doesn’t need one.”

Justin held her gaze. “What do you know about him?”

Robin strutted into the dining room and took a seat across from Colleen. “Look, we barely know each other, but I can guarantee that if we were forced to duke it out right here and now, I’d win,” she said candidly.

Bradley laughed heartily and grabbed another rib. “Wow, that’s something I’d pay big bucks to see.”

“This isn’t some friendly game where there are winners and losers,” Robin said. “If your friend here loses, he will die.”

Justin caught the strong scent of dog again and gritted his teeth together. “What are you?”

The room fell silent.

“A werewolf,” Robin said after a long pause.

Bradley momentarily choked on a rib. “You’re shitting us, right?”

“No,” Robin said. “I tried to warn Dr. Grosse’s wife, Rebecca, earlier today about the danger she was in. I explained how I saw Dr. Grosse inject himself with the werewolf serum right after the debacle at Ideologies

Pharmaceuticals, but she didn't believe me. Maybe you will."

"A bird," Justin said, slapping himself in the forehead.

"What?" Robin and Colleen chimed in unison.

"Rebecca mentioned a bird told her that she was in grave danger, but she sent it away," Justin said. "She was talking about you, Robin, though I didn't put it together until now."

Bradley looked at Justin in bewilderment. "You actually believe her?"

"I have to," Justin replied. "You didn't see the inside of Dr. Grosse's house or the damage inflicted on his wife. Each was ripped to shreds. It makes perfect sense it was a werewolf because only a werewolf could be responsible for that type of destruction."

"Is anyone else buying this crap?" Bradley said.

Lawrence placed the barely cooked steak onto a plate and carried it back into the dining room. "We all need to," he said, placing the plate in front of Justin. "And by the way, she's dead on about the werewolves. They're extremely lethal, and you'll need a miracle if you plan on returning from this trip alive."

Colleen took a deep, deliberate breath and then exhaled slowly. "I'll go with you," she said. "I don't have much to offer in the way of physical strength, but I've gotten pretty damn good with the shotgun over the last twenty-four hours."

"I appreciate the offer and will never forget it," Justin said, "but I need you to stay here with the others and protect Jennifer while I'm away. She'll need your protection more than I will."

Colleen placed her hands on the table and used it to help her stand up. “Look, you can’t walk out of here like a gunslinging vigilante and not expect at least one member of your posse to come with you.”

“I can’t ask that of you,” Justin said. “This trip is way too dangerous even for me...apparently.”

“I’ll go,” Bradley said, shoving the demolished plate of ribs away from him. “Lawrence, Robin, and the others can stay here and fight off the creatures that will be arriving no later than noon.”

“What makes you so certain that the creatures are headed here next?” Colleen asked.

“It was part of Dr. Cohn’s original plan to get more DNA samples from Romania,” Bradley said. “He wanted to kidnap Brenda and use her as a bargaining chip, but then she was injected with the serum last week and it threw a wrench into the plan.”

“How do you know that?” Justin asked.

“I ransacked my father’s office this morning,” Bradley said. “I found some interesting emails between my dad and Dr. Cohn. One of them was a rough draft of a ransom demand, but they didn’t need it, according to another email. Apparently, Dr. Grosse tricked a few of you into ingesting tracking devices and activated them.”

“Bullshit,” Justin said.

“How do you think I came to be at Dr. Grosse’s earlier this evening? Blind luck?” Bradley asked. “No, I waited outside Dr. Cohn’s home office and followed him to see where he was headed next. I could see this tiny green light flashing on some sort of GPS locator.”

“I’m grateful for your help with the creatures back at Dr. Grosse’s place,” Justin said, “but I don’t

buy into the whole tracking device conspiracy theory. I think we'd remember ingesting something like that."

"I seriously doubt it," Bradley said with cocky self-assurance. "He probably passed them off as pain killers or something."

"What about those pills he gave everyone on Sunday morning?" Lawrence questioned. "Weren't they supposed to be for pain?"

"Son of a bitch," Justin said, getting up so fast that he knocked over the chair that he'd been sitting in. "If you're right, that's how he's stayed one step ahead of us this whole time. He knows when and where we're coming and going."

"Never underestimate your adversary," Bradley said. "It'll bite you in the ass every time."

"But I didn't take the pill Dr. Grosse offered me on Sunday morning," Justin said, stroking his chin.

"Did Jennifer?" Colleen asked.

Blackness spilled across Justin's brown eyes and he spat words that dripped with revenge. "She did," he said. "She told me Rebecca gave it to her to help with the pain."

"It probably did help," Bradley said, moving his chair a little further away from Justin. "Just remember, I didn't know anything about that shit till this morning."

Lawrence knew the time for an intervention had come, so he turned his attention to Bradley. "Did you find anything else on Dr. Grosse that might be helpful to us?"

"Like what?" Bradley said.

"I don't know," Lawrence replied. "It seems Dr. Grosse has had his own agenda mapped out from the

get-go. I'd like to catch the bastard at least one time off guard."

"Well, me too, but that's all I know," Bradley said.

Justin picked up his chair from off the floor and shoved it beneath the table. The chair's wooden back support thudded against the edge of the table, leaving deep indentations. "Well, he's about to have an abrupt change of plans."

Bradley stood up and slid his chair beneath the table, careful not to damage the flooring or nick the table's edge. "I guess what they say is true."

"What's that?" Lawrence said as Justin stormed out of the dining room and headed down the hall toward the Ryans' office, where an Internet connection waited to be used.

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

"That is very true," Lawrence said.

"Yeah, well, I'm going to take a piss and then see about booking a ticket, too," Bradley said, smiling almost sweetly at Colleen before leaving the room.

Lawrence waited until he heard the bathroom door lock click into place before turning to Colleen. "What do you think?"

Colleen glanced at Robin and smiled. "I'm just glad she's on our side."

Lawrence chuckled. "Yeah, me too. I'm pretty certain that we're going to need all the help we can get to survive the next day or two."

"And, after that?" Colleen pondered aloud.

"A miracle."

SEPTEMBER - WEDNESDAY - ROMANIA

Damon West moaned in agony as the thick haze of unconsciousness lifted and his mind was inundated with pain. Most of his body lay pinned beneath the rubble of what was once the cavern's ceiling. His head hurt, his eyes burned, and he felt certain that every bone in his body was crushed beyond repair, even for a vampire, because of the weight from the limestone and rock that had collapsed on top of him. He tried to shift his hips from side to side in hopes of breaking free from the makeshift tomb, but more rock crumbled down on top of him. Though he would never say he completely understood what Brenda went through when she had an asthma attack, he felt certain that this was close to it. It was remarkably hard to breathe because of the pressure from the rocks. He panicked at the idea of suffocating to death and took shallow gasps of air as his rib cage acted like a vise grip around his lungs and pinched off his ability to take in anything deeper.

Clenching his teeth together, Damon refused to cry out as he wrangled one of his arms free from beneath some jagged rocks. It tore strips of skin off his arm, but at least he was able to wipe off the dirt caked around his mouth, nose, and eyes. He coughed violently

as his lungs tried desperately to expel the debris caught in his bronchiole. He desperately yearned for fresh, clean air. The startling darkness that surrounded him was penetrable as oil, but he refused to give up. He concentrated on kick-starting his night vision, but after a few seconds, he lowered his head onto the hard ground in tiredness and gave in to the peacefulness of unconsciousness that overwhelmed him once more.

* * *

A couple hours ticked by. Damon was trapped in his own nightmare, unable to wake up from it and unable to alter what was happening around him. His vampiric friends were bursting into flames as a narrow beam of sunlight weaved its way into the coffee shop that they had sought refuge in and touched their skin. Then, he was suddenly on the street, racing toward a tall building where sanctuary awaited on the other side of the door. He was within three meters. Two. One. As he went for the door handle, the sun caught up with him and set his leg on fire.

Damon lifted his face off the cavern floor with a start and realized, somewhat gleefully, that he was still in the cave where no sunlight could reach. He tried to see through the darkness and forcibly blinked his eyelids in an attempt to clear the minute dust particles that tore at the sensitive tissue of his corneas, but it didn't work. There was still an excruciating amount of pressure bearing down on his spine, and it felt as if a tiny construction worker was inside his head going to town with a jackhammer in an attempt to break through the bone and tissue at the base of his skull. Oddly

enough, he felt stronger and more determined than ever not to perish in the godforsaken mine.

Damon lay completely still and listened to the eerie silence that was only hampered by the pitter-patter of water from somewhere nearby. Regardless, it did nothing to distract him from his quest in finding the answers to the relentless waves of questions crashing against his mental pier of optimism. How many tons of rock and granite were on top of him? Did he have the physical capability to escape the desolate tomb? Did he have the innate know-how to navigate through such a perilous minefield of debris, or would even the slightest attempt to move another one of his extremities knock over the first proverbial domino and trigger a massive landslide, killing him instantly? And what if someone else was alive? Did he want to be their executioner and could he live with that? No.

Fear swelled within Damon as he considered the full range of possibilities on what he was about to do, but he refused to linger on it. He was aware there wasn't one member in his family who had the slightest idea where he was or that he had even left the country. He ignored his parents' phone calls once news broke about what happened to the Triton University's track team on Sunday. Their relentless attempt to reach him increased exponentially after the football team's massacre was splashed all over the front page of every newspaper in America. Seconds before boarding the Ryans' jet, however, he did try to call them back, but it went straight to voicemail. He didn't leave a message but now wished he had.

Damon wanted more than anything to make sure his parents knew he loved them, but it was too late. He

had sealed his own fate, and no one in his extended family would know what had happened to him or where to start looking for that matter. His dad would establish a sizeable reward for any information that ultimately led to finding him, dead or alive, but the ones who knew the truth would probably never say a word as they would be implicated in his death. His body would be entombed in the diamond mine like those of the previous occupants and be discovered centuries later by some other poor sap.

This scenario didn't settle well with him nor did it seem fitting that the good guys should suffer this fate. It was probable that he was the only survivor in the collapse, but he refused to believe it. He wasn't about to give up even if in the end it meant that he perished for his own bravery. Then, so be it. With the deepest breath his body would allow, he hollered for C.J., who had been standing closest to him right before the collapse. She didn't answer. He continued down the list, calling out each of their names and praying for one of them to answer, but no one did.

As despair stole the strength of Damon's voice, the odd green glow he'd experienced within the escape tunnel beneath Dr. Grosse's house over the weekend grew from a penlight beam to encompassing a pile of nearby rocks. Then, it continued to spread across the cavern, and after only a few seconds, he could see everything within it and the devastation all around him. His heart plummeted as he spotted a hand poking out from beneath a nasty concoction of limestone and what looked like mud, but smelled more like shit in front of him. He stretched out his fingers and grasped hold of it, but had no idea if it was C.J.'s or someone else's.

As Damon held the seemingly lifeless hand, he suddenly sensed the flow of blood beneath the skin. The person's fingers slowly enclosed around his hand, and he was elated. He wasn't alone in the battle for survival after all. "Hang on," he whispered.

With most of his energy spent, Damon slowly dragged his body, rocks and all, the few inches across the cavern floor to where the person was trapped. His vampiric vision was in full swing and worked similar to a pair of flashlights glued above each ear, but as he scanned the surroundings, he wished it weren't working at all. Hefty chunks of rock and granite littered the floor, arms and legs poked out in every direction, and the eerie silence was maddening. "Can anyone hear me?" he yelled. "Is anyone else alive?"

After a few moments of deafening silence, the person whose hand Damon had hold of let out a soft whimper. "Oh, thank God," he said, laying his face on the ground.

"Don't thank Him yet," C.J. muttered.

"It's so good to hear your voice."

"Can you tell what I'm pinned under?"

Damon cranked his head to the side and looked up. He saw a thousand beady little eyes staring back down at him. "I think just the ceiling."

"You think?" C.J. said. "And what is that awful smell?"

"Well, I can see bats above us," Damon said. "The explosion must have opened up another level to the cave system and literally rained shit on us."

"At least the whole damn mountain didn't come down," C.J. replied.

"Yeah, no kidding."

“And it means there’s another way out.”

“Sure,” Damon said with a hint of skepticism. He took a firm grasp of C.J.’s hand. “Ready?”

“For what?”

“I’m going to pull you out of there.”

“Are you crazy?” C.J. said. “You might rip off my arm.”

“I won’t,” Damon said, tightening his grip. “If I can pull you out just enough, perhaps we can work together to free ourselves.”

“Sounds promising.”

Damon pulled on C.J.’s hand and she screamed in agony. He let go instantly. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay...I just hurt,” C.J. said. “Try again, and don’t stop tugging unless I tell you to.”

Damon closed his eyes, took C.J.’s hand again, and pulled on it once more. She cried out but didn’t tell him to stop, so he kept pulling until there was a subtle give. He almost didn’t reopen his eyes as he half-expected that he’d really ripped off her arm. When he finally looked, he was staring into C.J.’s dirt-covered face as tears of joy or pain—he couldn’t tell which—streaked down her cheeks from her kind cerulean-blue eyes. “It’s so good to see you, my friend.”

“The feeling is definitely mutual,” C.J. replied, slowly reaching over and brushing off a small rock on his shoulder. “Let’s get this over with so we can help out the others.”

Damon started with a few of the heavier rocks first and shoved them off C.J.’s shoulders. “Do you think anyone else made it?”

“I hope so,” C.J. said, scooting further out of the rock pile. “Or I’ll be pissed.”

“Well, they are vampires,” Damon said. “If we made it, they probably did too.”

“Not all of them are blessed with this curse, remember?” C.J. said, grasping a corner of one of the largest rocks on Damon’s back and tilting it to the side.

The pressure eased on Damon’s spinal column. He placed his hands beneath his pectoral muscles and pushed off the ground, causing the rock C.J. had angled to roll off him. “Thanks, I needed help with that one.”

“No problem,” C.J. said.

Damon freed his legs from the rest of the rubble and crawled over to C.J. “All right, let’s get you out of there.”

Within minutes, he had unburied C.J.’s legs and lower torso and helped her onto her feet. They tiptoed around the enormous slabs of ceiling and looked for survivors. C.J. spotted a familiar pair of sneakers and dropped to her knees beside them. “Oh my god, it’s Greg!” she exclaimed, digging frantically as skin tore instantly from her fingertips as though she were holding them up against a grinder.

Damon rushed over and helped C.J. hoist some of the larger rocks off Greg’s back and shoulders. They took turns removing the smaller debris around his face and neck. Then, they pulled him out by his arms, being careful not to disturb the rest of the rubble so that it wouldn’t have a chance to crumble in on Emily, who lay nearby.

C.J. tried to wipe off the dried blood around Greg’s nose and mouth, but without water, it didn’t do anything except collect the dirt from her fingertips. “Come on,” she said, brushing away any debris she could see. “Breathe, damn it, breathe.”

Greg's eyes fluttered and his body instinctively tried to clear his lungs of the crap he'd involuntarily consumed during the explosion. "Damn, you're a sight for sore eyes," he said, staring up at her.

"Same here," C.J. replied, sighing with relief.

Greg sat up, tearing his now shredded shirt even more. "Where's Emily?"

"Take it easy," C.J. said as she placed a calming hand on Greg's shoulder. "Damon's getting her now."

Damon carefully moved a few large pieces of stalagmites, which had done a stellar job at shielding Emily from the worst part of the ceiling collapse, and scooped her into his arms. He carried her over to Greg. "Can you take it from here?"

"Absolutely," Greg said, accepting Emily into his arms. He laid her beside him and listened for her heartbeat. It was beating strong and loud. When he pulled away, he saw her eyes were open. "It's okay, I'm here."

"I know," Emily whispered.

C.J. and Damon carefully stepped away. They went to work unburying the others trapped beneath the debris. "Hey," Damon said, flicking off a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose. "Someone's over here asking if you're okay. Do you want to answer, or should I?"

C.J. stumbled over the rubble and smiled when she saw Brenda's intelligent brown eyes looking up at her. "My God, I'm so glad you're okay."

"Me, too," Brenda said, struggling to sit up. "How did everyone else fare?"

"So far so good," C.J. said, "but we just got started."

"What about Maria and my father?"

“I don’t know,” C.J. said. “We haven’t found them, yet, but the key word is yet.”

“Let’s get to it, then,” Brenda said, staggering to her feet.

“Take a minute,” C.J. said, catching Brenda by the arm. “You have a rather nasty bump on your head, and it won’t do anyone any good if you fall and get hurt even worse, okay?”

Brenda bent at her waist as the room seemed to spin beneath her feet and placed her hands on her knees to regain balance. “Okay, but just for a second or two.”

C.J. headed toward where she last remembered seeing Maria and Thomas and began digging. It didn’t take long to find them. Eric had shielded Maria with his body, but Thomas was left totally exposed to the full impact of the collapse. His body had been pulverized by the rocks, and his lifeless eyes stared up at her.

“I’m so sorry,” C.J. whispered, reaching out and closing Thomas’ eyelids.

“Did you find them?” Brenda asked, clamoring over the rocks toward C.J.

“Stay where you are,” C.J. ordered, wiping away the droplets of sweat threatening to plummet off her brow. “I don’t want to risk the rocks shifting.”

C.J. stepped wearily over Thomas’ broken body and dropped down next to Eric. She knocked off what remained of the debris from Eric’s back and rolled him over. Maria lay beneath him utterly unscathed except for some minor scrapes on her arms and face. Her eyes were open, but C.J. could tell that Maria wasn’t able to see her own hand in front of her face.

“Maria?” C.J. whispered. “Is anything broken?”

“I don’t think so, C.J.,” Maria said, surprisingly calm.”

“Good,” C.J. said, turning toward Eric. “How about you?”

Eric moaned. “This is the second worst day of my life.”

“What was the first?” C.J. asked.

“Being infected,” Eric replied.

Brenda stumbled up behind them. “No!” she cried out, falling down to her knees next to her father.

Maria sat up instantly. “What’s going on?”

“Thomas...didn’t make it,” C.J. reported gently.

Brenda took her father’s hand and brought it against her cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she sobbed, rocking back and forth. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t gone to that stupid forum, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

Maria reached out aimlessly for Brenda. “Don’t say such things,” she said. “If you hadn’t gone to that forum, a lot more people would be dead. Truth be told, everyone in this room has had a profound impact on altering the course of humanity.”

“Yeah, some impact,” Brenda said mournfully. “We’re causing everyone we love to become extinct.”

“You are not to blame for this,” Maria said. “In fact, none of you are. These events were put into motion long before Dr. Cohn and Dr. Grosse even got the chance to be stupid.”

“Are you saying it started because of the cave-in?” Eric asked, helping Maria to stand with C.J.’s help.

“Yes and no,” Maria said, clinging onto Eric’s arm to maintain her balance in the complete darkness. “It started the instant Thomas realized there was a considerable amount of money to be made in exploiting

another country's treasures and its secrets, and I don't mean that disrespectfully, either. It's just how he was."

Brenda's sobs slowly subsided and left the cavern as quiet as a morgue after hours. She reluctantly stood, wiped away one last tear, and stepped carefully over to Eric and Maria. She took Maria's hand. "It's just me," she whispered. "I'm going to get you out of here."

"We are all getting out of here," Greg said, helping Emily maneuver onto a large chunk of rock where she tucked up her feet to avoid them being assaulted by the countless cockroaches dining on the bats' excrement. He walked to the cave's demolished entrance. "I want everyone to stay here while I take a look around. It will be a lot safer for me to go than all of us searching for an exit point and possibly triggering another collapse. I'll look for a way out and something Maria and Emily can use to navigate with, since they don't have night vision."

* * *

Greg squirmed his way back in through the cavern's entrance by a tiny crawlspace near the top of the rubble from the initial explosion. He was caked in mud and dirt from the top of his head to the very tip of his shoes. A couple bats were stirring from their slumber, and a few others were fluttering around the ceiling. "Did you all miss me?"

Eric adjusted his position on an uncomfortable-looking rock that he had selected next to Emily. "We didn't even notice you were gone."

“Yeah, right,” Greg said, surfing down a large slab of rock. He managed to stay on his feet as he leapt off onto the floor with a couple items clenched in his hands.

Damon sat cross-legged on a large boulder and leaned back against the limestone wall. “Did you find a way out?”

“Unfortunately not,” Greg said. “The way we came in is completely obliterated like we thought, but I did find a few items that might help us get out of here.”

“Well, anything is better than staying here and having bat shit continuously dropped on us,” Damon said. “Besides, we all know how our future will turn out if we opt to do nothing and stay right where we are.”

Greg carried what remained of a singed torch and an old, rusty toolbox over to C.J. and dropped the box at her feet. “I’m hoping there is something in there we can use to light this bad boy,” he said, waving the torch at her.

Maria leaned forward “What does he have?”

“Optimism, a stick, and a box,” Brenda replied.

“Sometimes, it’s all you need,” Maria said.

“There might be matches or something in there we can use,” Greg said, kicking the box. “Do you mind checking, Sis?”

“Not at all,” C.J. said, squatting down beside the box. “It’s not like I have other pressing engagements to attend to right at the moment.”

Greg raced back up the large slab of rock and reached his hand into the crawlspace. He withdrew an old lantern and shook it, sloshing around the fuel inside for everyone’s benefit. Then, he carefully made his way back down, peeled off his shirt, and tore it into strips.

C.J. flipped open the oxidizing latches that kept the rust-colored toolbox lid shut and rummaged through it. She found a strange-looking gun, four signal flares, and a couple of handheld flares. “I suppose this is what you were hoping might be in there?” she said, holding up one of the handheld flares.

Greg paused from soaking the strips of his shirt from what was left of the kerosene in the base of the lantern. “Truthfully, I had no idea what would be in there.”

“Great,” C.J. said. “A black widow spider could have taken solace in there and bitten me for interrupting its slumber.”

Greg broke the torch into two pieces with his bare hands and wrapped the end of each with kerosene-soaked strips of his shirt. “Look on the bright side,” he said. “You would have probably lived, but I’m not so sure about the spider.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“If there was a spider, you would have launched the entire toolbox into a wall and probably given the poor innocent arachnid a one-way trip to widow-land.”

“Keep it up and see what happens,” C.J. said, tossing Greg one of the handheld flares as she slipped the other one into her back pocket.

“Ooh, I’m so scared.”

C.J. placed her hands on her hips and tapped her foot impatiently. “Are you ready yet?”

“Almost,” Greg said. “Just need a couple more seconds....”

“For what?” Maria said.

“For everyone to cover their eyes,” C.J. said.

“Brenda, what is she talking about?”

“Trust me,” Brenda said, taking hold of Maria’s hands and placing them in front of her face. “You’ll know in a second.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” Greg said. “In three, two, one....” He broke off the seal to the flare and used the match-strike igniter. Sparks flew in every direction. The cavern suddenly glowed in an eerie redness. He lit the torch and held it out for Maria. “Here you go.”

Maria squinted against the sudden brightness and accepted her half of the torch. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Greg said, handing the other half to Emily. “You have no idea what I’m about to do next.”

“Which is what?”

Greg pointed up at the bats. “We have to agitate them somehow.”

Maria gazed at the ceiling. “What on earth for?”

Emily used the light of her torch to climb up and over a couple of larger rocks. “They’ll lead us out of here,” she said. “They obviously didn’t come in the way we did, so just like when we were at Dr. Grosse’s house; we need their assistance to show us the way out.”

“I thought Brenda said something spooked them at Dr. Grosse’s, and that’s why they tore out of there like, well, bats out of hell,” Maria said.

“True,” Emily said, “so we’re just going to have to improvise.”

Everyone turned and stared at Emily like she had miraculously transformed into the main heroine in *Tomb Raider*. She suddenly felt very exposed and crept down the rock and over to Greg with the cockroaches

cracking like eggshells beneath her feet. "It's hard to know even what time it is. Is anyone wearing a watch?"

"I am," Greg said softly, glancing at the cracked faceplate on his wristwatch, "but I don't think even a watchmaker can fix this."

"Won't they go feed at dusk?" Damon asked.

"We don't know when that is," Emily replied, glancing over at Eric. "And, we're running out of time."

Eric gave her a weak smile. "Don't worry about me, kid."

"I have to," Emily said. "You're an important member of this expedition. We wouldn't have made it this far without you."

"Yes, you would've," Eric said, "but thanks for the ego boost anyway."

"What's going on?" Damon said, looking back and forth between Eric and Emily. "What are the two of you not telling us?"

Emily looked over at Eric. "It's up to you."

"I know," Eric said, his voice catching in his throat. He stared hard at the ground. "I'm dying."

Damon shook his head. "Don't be so dramatic," he said. "If you're dying, than so are we, and that defeats the purpose of even trying to get out of this hellhole, wouldn't you agree?"

"I didn't get this plague the same way you did, idiot," Eric replied. "Mine started years ago when the serum was still in its infancy."

"So?" Damon said.

"I was infected by an actual bite," Eric said. "I wasn't given a choice to have a supposed wonder drug injected into my veins. However, I do owe my life to David Ashton. He was the one who saved me that

fateful night, and the least I can do is save his two kids from this godforsaken place. Now if there are no more questions, I'd like to get out of here."

Damon could feel everyone's eyes boring into him almost as if he were on trial for being a witch in Salem. He met each of their gazes without hesitation and hoped they would see the question had come from the goodness of his soul. "I'm sorry, Eric. I didn't mean any harm."

"Whatever," Eric replied.

"Look," Damon began, "at least let me explain."

Greg wrapped his arms around Emily. "Make it quick. We really have to get out of here."

"You all are the closest thing I've had to a real family in a long time," Damon said. "If I point out the obvious, ask a seemingly ridiculous question, or act impulsive, just know I'm still trying to wrap my brain around this shit."

"We all are," C.J. said, slugging him in the arm. "We're just like the Musketeers, all for one and one for all."

"Yeah, I guess," Damon said half-heartedly.

C.J. met Greg's gaze and encouraged him with a slight raise of an eyebrow.

Greg knew the look and held out the flare gun for Damon. "Would you like to do the honors?"

Damon's lips curled as he accepted the flare gun and aimed it at the bats. "I'd love to."

SEPTEMBER - WEDNESDAY - LAX

Justin strutted through the Los Angeles Airport terminal to the specified gate number for his flight and sat down in one of the black hardback seats. He slapped his airline ticket against his knee and allowed his mind to drift while Bradley grabbed a drink at the bar. Overhead speakers belted out orchestra music, people coughed and hacked all around announcing the beginning of flu season, and every possible style of cell phone with every possible ring tone rang relentlessly. The overhead vents looked as if they were covered in volcanic ash, but instead of falling onto the bustling travelers, the grime clung to rotting ceiling tiles. Red, gold, and blue dashes spiced up the drab geometric gray carpeting, and the tantalizing smells of a nearby Mexican restaurant and coffee shop caused his stomach to growl.

Justin caught sight of his traveling companion battling his way through the masses surrounding the bar and made a beeline straight toward where he sat. He still couldn't believe Bradley volunteered to join him on this suicide mission. Of course, when they were clear of Brenda's house, Bradley insisted on stopping by his parents' place since it was on the way and he could change into something a little more comfortable. Now

he wore khaki canvas loafers with no socks and a white button-up shirt with a light pair of blue jeans and had his hair combed to the side.

“It looks like you’re traveling to the Hawaiian Islands,” Justin said.

“I wish,” Bradley said, dropping into the seat beside him. He sniffed the air and stuck out his tongue. “You would think with all the insane amount of money that passes through this city on a daily basis, they could devote some of it to the ventilation system.”

Justin couldn’t resist smiling at his old friend. “It boils down to years of neglect and accumulation of engine exhaust.”

“Well, whatever it is, I don’t like it. It smells like ass.”

Justin’s eyebrows rose. “And you would know what ass smells like because...?”

Bradley shook his head. “Forget it.”

A middle-aged Asian man wearing blue slacks, a tweed jacket, and a white shirt hurried past them and up to the ticket counter. After a brief conversation with the raven-haired beauty of a flight attendant, who wore a blue jacket that was way too big for her petite frame, he came back and sat down in a huff across from Justin and Bradley. He tossed his blue backpack into the seat next to him and tugged on his blue tie that was covered in white polka dots. It reminded Justin of the thousands of brilliant stars that consumed the night sky when he and Jennifer shared their first kiss and walked hand in hand across a grass meadow on a warm spring night. He had known right then she was the one.

In under a minute, the middle-aged Asian man was back on his feet, pacing in his black boots and speaking urgently into his cell phone.

“I wish I knew what he was saying,” Bradley said softly. “He seems pissed off about something.”

“He’s speaking Chinese,” Justin said. “It seems a business deal is about to fall through.”

Bradley’s eyes widened. “You speak Chinese?”

“I know enough to make me dangerous,” Justin said. “I took a beginner’s class last semester.”

Bradley pointed toward their gate. “Hey, I think we’re about to board.”

Justin looked over and saw the woman wearing the oversized blue jacket standing next to the podium. She picked up the microphone and announced that the airline was now welcoming its premier-card member passengers. A line formed in front of the ticket stand, and she began scanning tickets. When the line dwindled to a couple passengers, she picked up the microphone again and requested those needing extra time due to kids or disabilities to come up. Then, she continued calling each section starting with the letter *A* stamped on their boarding pass. She continued her spiel until everyone was proceeding efficiently through the gate.

Once on the plane, passengers were greeted with the customary pleasantries and lugged their belongings down the narrow aisle to their assigned seats. Most passengers attempted to shove their carry-ons into the first section of overhead storage bins, but under the watchful eye of a slightly older and much wiser flight attendant, they were instructed to keep moving and to place their things either in the allotted overhead storage bins above their assigned seat or on the floor beneath

the seat in front of theirs. If there wasn't room than they would gladly check the bag and give the passenger a claim ticket.

Bradley exchanged smiles with a fine-looking blonde of a flight attendant who was helping an elderly man with his belongings and dropped into the assigned seat next to the window. He stared out at the airplane's wing that reflected the warm rays of the early morning sun. "Do you think we'll be able to stop them?" he said, pulling down the window shade.

Justin sat down in the seat beside him. "Are you talking about Dr. Grosse or Dr. Cohn's creations?"

"Does it matter?"

Justin saw fear creeping into Bradley's eyes, but it didn't affect his decision to be truthful. "I don't know, but I think we will give them a run for their money," he said, securing his safety belt around his waist. "After everything I've seen, I prefer not to live in a world where vampires and werewolves run the show, don't you?"

"I know this will come as a shock, but I never really thought about it before my mom died," Bradley said. "For a while, I thought it would be pretty cool to live forever, but then I became a liability, a mere pawn that could be used, and had a change of heart."

"Yeah," Justin said, holding his arms away from the safety belt as the blonde flight attendant made her way down the aisle and checked that every passenger was complying with takeoff procedures, including switching off all portable electronic devices.

"Sir?" she asked sweetly.

Bradley looked up. "Me?"

“Yes,” she said, a smile instantly brightening her face. “Can you please raise your window shade for take-off?”

“Absolutely,” Bradley said. “Will you let me know when I can lower it again?”

She batted her eyelashes. “Of course, I will.”

Bradley flashed his boyish grin and caused the flight attendant to giggle as she continued down the aisle. He raised the shade and felt the heat of the sun’s reflection off the wing through the window. “So where were we?” he asked, shielding his eyes with his hand.

Justin didn’t miss a beat. “So many people desire perfection instead of happiness.”

“You almost sound sympathetic.”

“I am,” Justin replied, shoving a folded blanket inside a sealed plastic baggie behind his head. “There aren’t many people that realize the grass isn’t always greener on the other side until it’s too late, you know?”

“I know,” Bradley said. “It’s quite the pain in the ass.”

Justin grinned and closed his eyes. As the plane began to taxi down the runway, the engines hummed, and he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Dr. Grosse stepped into the five-star hotel room on the sixth floor and allowed the door to close automatically behind him. He didn’t waste time engaging the second security lock and wondered if anyone would be stupid enough to try to rob a Nobel Peace Prize recipient on his first night’s stay. And, of course, the key word was *try*. Wouldn’t he or she have the shock of their life

watching him morph into something that science long considered impossible to even exist? He could almost imagine the apologies spewing forth from the robber's mouth as he backed away with the shock of a sudden role reversal. Oh, how he would make the would-be robber pay for interfering with his plans.

His mind flashed to the previous evening when he remembered having a heated exchange with his wife, Rebecca, about the unexpected trip to Washington, D.C. She didn't want him to go, and he got angry, very angry, but that was all he recalled. He could see her face, the tears...and fear. Terrifying fear.

Dr. Grosse tossed his new duffle bag beside the closet, sat down on the bed next to the nightstand, and dropped his head into his hands. *I should call her*, he thought, reaching for the phone. *She'll be pissed if I don't at least make the effort*. He picked up the receiver and dialed his home number, but no one answered. He hung up and tried again. It just rang and rang—not even the answering machine picked up.

“Where the hell are you?” Dr. Grosse shouted, suddenly enraged. He slammed down the phone. “Why won't you answer? Does the fucking cat have your tongue?” He picked up the receiver again and struck it repeatedly against the edge of the nightstand until the plastic casing shattered as if it were made of glass. Then, he grabbed hold of the phone's base, ripped the cord out of the wall, and slung it across the room. It made a horrific noise as it struck the wall and left a large gouge in the beige paint.

Dr. Grosse's hands began trembling, and he wondered if he was having a heart attack or stroke from the tremendous amount of stress plaguing his being. He

watched in silence as the bones in his fingers separated and grew longer and his nails transformed into thick knives coated with a keratin-based substance that was as strong as horns on a rhino. “Maybe I should shower,” he said aloud. “I just need to calm down.”

Warm, soothing water fell from the showerhead like a waterfall and enveloped Dr. Grosse’s entire body. He enjoyed the peace and quiet and soaped up his entire body with a luxury brand of men’s head and body wash. It felt incredible to be clean. With a quick turn of the faucet, the water cooled, and he rinsed off. He flung open the shower curtain and stepped out onto a plush bathmat. Suddenly, a hard knock resonated against his hotel room door.

“Dr. Grosse?” a masculine voice called out. “Is everything okay in there?”

Dr. Grosse wiped his hand across the steamed-up mirror. “Everything was great until you spoiled it,” he muttered.

Another knock thudded against the door. “Dr. Grosse, I know you’re in there and really must speak with you.”

Dr. Grosse wrapped a towel around his waist and strutted out of the bathroom. He snatched open the door. “What?”

The hotel manager took a giant step back from Dr. Grosse as terror stole the calmness from his face. He fidgeted with his well-placed tie pinned to his perfectly starched white dress shirt. “One of my staff members reported some sort of ruckus coming from your room, and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Dr. Grosse almost growled his reply. “Tell this supposed staff member to mind his own business if he knows what’s best for him.”

“Listen,” the manager said, dropping his voice a full octave, “I know who you are, but I must remind you that this is one of the most distinguished hotels in the city. We respect everyone’s privacy, but if you can’t respect the rules, we’ll have to intervene.”

Dr. Grosse took a deep breath. “Why don’t you come in?” he said, sweeping his arm back and stepping aside. “I have an idea on what this staff member might have heard.”

The hotel manager raised both his hands as if Dr. Grosse had pulled a gun. “You know, I appreciate the offer,” he said, glancing toward the security camera at the end of the hallway, “but that won’t be necessary.”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Grosse asked, gripping the door handle so fiercely he could feel the metal molding to his hand.

“Quite,” the manager said, refusing to lower his hands. “Please call the front desk if you need anything, including clean towels or a razor.”

“Dr. Grosse slammed the door shut in the hotel manager’s face and strutted over to the large plate-glass window that opened onto his balcony. Within seconds, he could hear the distant wail of sirens. “He’s a dead man, a fucking dead man!” he shouted. “No one betrays me and lives.”

Dr. Grosse went into the bathroom where the steam relinquished its claim. He stood frozen, staring at his reflection in the oval mirror above the sink. There was no denying why the hotel manager signaled for help. The partial transformation on his face, including

his canine-like teeth, was proof enough that something was very wrong. His usual well-kempt eyebrows looked as if they hadn't been plucked in months. In fact, it appeared that the last time he picked up a razor was at the beginning of the summer. "Shit," he said, turning on the water and cupping his hands beneath the icy stream. Then, he saw the lengthy jet-black hair covering his hands and arms. Plus, his nails were two inches longer and resembled talons.

All of this transformation happened without him even noticing it, and he was certain that, had the hotel manager accepted his invitation to come into the room, he would have shredded him into pieces. But, if that was true, what had happened the night before? He gazed down at his left hand and swept aside the thick patch of hair covering up his platinum wedding band. "Why can't I remember?"

Screeching tires breached the silence and Dr. Grosse strolled out of the bathroom to the window. Police cruisers surrounded the hotel's main entrance. He watched as the men in blue disappeared into the building. There was no doubt that they would be breaking down his door within minutes.

* * *

The ear-piercing squeal of the jet's reverse thrusters as it skidded to a slower pace at the Reagan National Airport awoke Justin. He shot upward and would have cracked his head against the underside of the carry-on storage bin had the safety belt around his waist failed. The woman sitting across the aisle with her two kids gave him a peculiar glance. Justin ran his tongue along

his top row of teeth and felt the sharp points of fangs. They sliced his tongue. He pressed his lips together, sucked away the blood, and offered the best smile he could muster. “Flying gives me wicked nightmares,” he said with a chuckle. Then, he pointed at Bradley. “I’m not as lucky as he is.”

The woman leaned forward. Bradley was still sleeping soundly if his snoring was any indication, and his head bobbed in rhythm with the braking tires. She nodded, but refused to meet his gaze. Justin could tell he had done nothing to ease her fears and had made it a lot worse.

Justin nudged Bradley hard in the ribs. “Wake up, sleeping beauty.”

Bradley’s eyes fluttered. “I’m up.”

Justin stared at the seatback in front of him and tried to recall his very graphic nightmare. He had lost control of his inner vampire and viciously attacked the passengers as they passed by his seat. He could still taste their blood in his mouth...and it made him crave more.

Bradley slugged him in the arm. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Just hot,” Justin said, tugging at the collar of the shirt he borrowed from Thomas Ryan’s closet.

“Let’s get out of this tin can, then.”

The plane was at the gate, and the woman across the aisle had ushered her kids out in front of the mob, all but throwing punches to get off the plane. Everyone had places to be and people to see. Justin took a deep breath to calm his nerves. “I just need a minute.”

He and Bradley waited for the plane to empty of most its passengers before getting out of their seats.

They didn't bring anything with them except the clothes they were wearing, so it made departing the plane that much easier. The weapons they carried beneath the skin were undetectable even by the most technologically advanced screening devices.

They emerged from the terminal and followed the rowdy crowd to the baggage claim. Justin pointed to the exit doors where a line of taxis was waiting to take travelers to anywhere they wanted to go as long as they had enough cash to cover it. "There's our ride."

Bradley pulled out his wallet and thumbed open the bill section. It was empty except for an unopened wrapped condom. "Do you have any cash?" he asked. "Cuz I spent the rest of what I had on me at the bar."

"Yeah, we're good," Justin replied.

They made a beeline past the baggage claim and out the exit doors. Justin flagged down a taxi driver, who pulled his cab alongside the curb and lowered the passenger window. "Where you boys headed?"

"The White House," Justin said.

"To sight-see," Bradley added nervously.

"Get in," the taxi driver said with indifference.

"Relax," Justin whispered, reaching for the rear-passenger door handle. "You're making us look like terrorists."

"In a way, we are," Bradley said.

"No, we're more like freedom fighters," Justin said. "All we need to do is carry out our plan like we discussed on the drive to LAX and then hustle back to Triton."

"You're really worried about her, aren't you?"

"More than you know," Justin said. "More than you know."

* * *

Dr. Grosse snatched up the duffle bag from beside the closet and slung it over his shoulder. He grabbed the television remote off the nightstand, pressed the power button, and cranked up the volume until the vibrations from a soap opera rattled the windows. Regardless of the noise, he could still hear the chime of the arriving elevator down the hallway and the rush of footsteps toward his room. With no time to delay, he stepped out onto the balcony and closed the sliding glass doors behind him.

A hard knock thundered against the hotel room door. “Sir,” a masculine voice called out. “This is the police. You need to open this door right now.”

Not on your life, Dr. Grosse thought. He looked around and saw that there was another balcony about two floors down. *Here goes nothing*.

An all-access key card slid into the hotel room door and unlocked the lower handle. The deadbolt held fast as the police tried to enter. A couple of seconds later, the door exploded inward and came crashing down onto the carpet with a loud thud. Its hinges were left dangling off the actual doorframe.

Dr. Grosse leapt to the other balcony, swung his body up and over the railing, and reached calmly for the sliding glass door. A brunette with fiery green eyes stepped out from the bathroom, drying her hair with a towel. When she saw Dr. Grosse striding toward her, she dove back into the bathroom and slammed shut the bathroom door, locking it with a quick press of a flimsy button. Dr. Grosse paused and sniffed the air. The

woman smelled like a squeaky new toy. She had obviously just stepped out of the shower and sprayed some sort of vanilla perfume all over her body. It smelled delicious, but there was no time for a detour. Perhaps after he had concluded his business at the White House and paid the hotel manager a brief visit, he'd come back by and introduce himself properly to the woman. Besides, he wouldn't give her the chance to refuse.

SEPTEMBER - WEDNESDAY - ROMANIA

Emily swept her torch from one side of the darkened tunnel to the other and illuminated the treacherous dirt path in front of her. She didn't want to trip on the multitude of rock formations jetting out in almost every direction. Greg was a couple of feet ahead of her, and though she knew he didn't need any artificial light to find his way, being able to see him made her feel a lot better and safer. Also, it didn't hurt that she witnessed the strong definition of his back muscles working in unison as he twisted, turned, ducked, and hoisted his body to find the most accessible way through the tunnel. The rest of the team was a few meters behind her, and though she wasn't thrilled with the ratio of two humans versus five vampires, she didn't fear it, either. She knew from earlier that they wouldn't turn on her for a quick snack, but she couldn't be certain if they ended up being trapped by another cave-in and left with no way out if that would remain the case. It was the survival of the fittest, after all.

They were currently traversing through a tunnel that was revealed by the bats after Damon fired a flare right at them and scared them into flight. Because of the close proximity of the ceiling and the proven theory

that what goes up must come down; the flare fell back toward Damon, still lit, and caught his clothes on fire. C.J. had a wicked sixth sense but didn't need it this time, since the more-common one told her something like this was likely to happen. She sprinted over to Damon and kicked him in the gut, dropping him to his knees. Then, she rolled him back and forth on the feces covered centuries-old dirt floor until the flames were extinguished. The flare-inspired fire devoured most of his shirt, but the second- and third-degree burns beneath the scorched material were already healing.

The bats did their part and revealed two exit points, though no one spotted the second one except for Maria, who caught it in her periphery in the diminishing reddish trail of the flare. The first exit, which everyone assumed the bats used to escape, couldn't be seen, not even by a vampire. The bats spiraled upward like a funnel cloud and slipped out of sight in a small crevice. If not for the dissipation of their whooshing wings and fading cries of injustice, Damon's clothes catching on fire might have been for nothing. But Greg scrambled up a wall of debris and chased after the bats. He squeezed his large frame through the crevice, but came back looking defeated. In his retelling, the bats' exit point was astronomically high, probably a thousand feet straight up a vertical shaft, though he couldn't be sure. It was also approximately fifty to sixty feet in diameter and as smooth as blown glass. There were no footholds or handholds, and even if there had been, no one had brought along any sort of climbing gear.

Emily hadn't anticipated a need for specialized equipment, in particular the spelunking kind, or much less thought they would wind up in a situation where it

would be useful. She was fairly certain that no one in their group was certified in or trained for rock climbing, but even if someone were, nobody volunteered or uttered a word about wishing they'd brought along their harness, belay kit, and climbing shoes and rope. She sensed their spirits plummet into the bowels of hell, and that wasn't good. The damp, dank air was already suffocating and it offered no comforting embrace, and now it was worse. Their flicker of hope of getting out alive was extinguished.

The tension of the situation increased greatly, like the rise of heartburn in one's throat. Maria waved her torch toward the second possible exit point she had seen in the final seconds of the flare's dimming light. "I think there might be another way over there."

Greg was instantly at her side. "Where?"

"I need the flare gun," Maria said.

Damon walked over and gave it to her without a word. Maria waited as everyone sought refuge in the far corner of the room where large rocks, some the size of boulders, would protect them from another catch-on-fire incident. She stepped off to the side, aimed the gun and squeezed the trigger. The flare's trajectory lit up the cavern and illuminated the entrance to a second tunnel. Hoops and hollers erupted behind her.

Greg placed a congratulatory hand on Maria's shoulder. "Great job! Now, we just need to know if it really does lead to a way out."

The opening to the second exit point was twenty feet up from the ground with tons of crumbled rocks beneath it. It was almost as if a freakishly large dog had tried to bury his bone there and utterly gave up because the glittering stones in the wall were too sharp and tore

off the skin from its canine paws. Greg and Damon volunteered to take a closer inspection and worked in unison to get to the entrance. They scrambled up the pile of rocks that slip-slided precariously out from underneath their feet like a ladder built of playing cards.

C.J. climbed up on a boulder. “Be careful!”

Greg looked back and grinned. “No guts, no glory!”

Once inside, Greg and Damon saw deep grooves chiseled into the walls, indicating that an exploratory mining team had come through with a train-size drill attached to the front of a monstrous drilling machine. The section they were standing in was close to fifteen feet in diameter. Greg could only assume the miners must have discovered the bats’ domain and minor drop-off during the investigative phase of their quest for salt, diamonds, limestone, or whatever else their boss had ordered them to find in the godforsaken mountain. It had obviously been a tough decision for whoever was in charge, and a brave one, too, especially if Thomas Ryan was his or her boss. The right choice had been undoubtedly made—the minor drop wouldn’t have killed them but would have certainly damaged the equipment.

Eric cupped his hands around his mouth. “Any luck?” he called out, his voice echoing into oblivion.

Greg stepped precariously close to the edge of the opening where a section of ancient mountainous stone suddenly gave way and almost spilled him onto the jagged rocks below. Damon caught him by the arm and jerked him back. “Watch your step.”

Greg expressed his gratitude with a nervous chuckle. “Thanks, man,” he said. “That was a little too close for comfort.”

Damon nodded and stomped his foot down on the edge again. “Okay, this seems like it will hold,” he said, backing away. “Just be careful.”

Greg took a cautionary step onto the area that Damon had used his foot to pound down on and peered at the others. “It appears a sizeable mining company came through here but then backed out. I’m not sure if it was recent or not due to the crumbling beams and rusted braces, but it’s our only shot. Otherwise, we will still be here when the bats come back...and I’m sure they’ll be pissed.”

“That’s an understatement,” Eric said.

“I’d rather keep moving,” Maria said. “If there was a way for the miners to get in here than there has to be a way out.”

Murmurs of agreement rose from the cavern floor. It was a good sign. As long as the group was united in a common goal, there was hope. Without hope, Emily and Maria would wind up as the vampires’ main course sooner rather than later, drained of every last drop of blood. Neither would fault them for it. It was their nature.

* * *

Once everyone had scurried up the rocks, dove into the opening, and made their way safely into the tunnel, Greg took point and led the way. He followed the large, grooved path until it abruptly ended at a T-intersection. To the right, the large drilling grooves continued, but

only for a short distance—a massive cave-in that seemed to have happened decades earlier blocked their progress. Big, nasty rats had claimed the geologic pile of formations for their home and used their tiny beady eyes to check out the trespassers from their places of concealment. The cave-in eradicated any attempt to traverse further. To the left, there was a much smaller and narrower tunnel and their only other option. Greg could only stare at it.

“Wow,” Eric said. “What do you think? About six feet in diameter?”

“Maybe seven,” Greg replied.

Eric turned his face away and coughed so hard it literally sounded as if he were hacking up a lung into the crux of his elbow. “You know, we can’t go back even if we wanted to. We’d be sealing our own fate.”

“Yeah, I know,” Greg said.

“So, onward?”

“Onward.”

* * *

Water pooled in the middle of the tunnel’s dirt path and rose steadily, cresting over C.J.’s shoes. After a few minutes, her shoes and socks were sopping wet. “Do you see anything yet?” she hollered from the back of the group.

Greg sloshed forward. “No, not yet, but it’ll be soon.”

“How can you tell?”

“The air temperature is changing,” Greg replied.

Emily hovered what was left of her burning torch right about knee high and illuminated the swirling

dark water that reeked of moldiness. “Maybe the blast did more damage than we thought.”

“Shh,” Damon said, stopping abruptly, which caused a small eddy in the water. “Can you guys hear that?”

Greg paused and listened. “Hear what?”

Damon pressed his ear against the tunnel wall. “It’s water,” he said. “Rushing water.”

“Where?” Eric said.

“All around us,” Damon said.

Greg narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about? We’re in a mountain, for Christ’s sake. How in the hell can there be water inside a mountain?”

Eric stepped from the shadows into the outer edge of light that Emily’s torch cast off. The skin around his eyes had yellowed and was peeling away from the orbital sockets. In fact, his entire face seemed to be drooping. “The Arges River is nearby. Perhaps that’s what you hear.”

“Maybe,” Damon said, falling briefly silent when he caught sight of Eric. “What’s happening to you?”

Emily swung the torch in Damon’s direction, almost causing it to go out. “His body is deteriorating. Leave him alone.”

Damon retreated a couple of steps and bumped into C.J. “His damn face is sliding off,” he stammered. “That’s all I’m saying.”

C.J. shifted her kamas into her right hand and punched Damon in the arm with the left. “Keep quiet.”

Damon rubbed his upper arm vigorously. “I’m simply stating a fact—and that hurt, by the way.”

“Good,” C.J. said, striking him again.

“Knock it off,” Damon whined, stepping away from her. “That really did hurt.”

“We’re wasting time,” Greg interrupted. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“Maybe there’s an underground river?” Maria said, more as a question than a statement.

“I do hear water,” Brenda said, “but I doubt it’s an entire river. It could be a small creek, but I seriously doubt anything more significant.”

“*If*, and it’s a big *if*, there was a chance of water from a creek, river, or the Black Sea breaking through these walls than I seriously doubt the bats would have made it their home,” Emily interjected. “However, bats and geology are not my forte or subjects I’ve spent countless hours studying, so let’s get out of here just in case I’m wrong.”

“You heard her,” Eric said, disappearing back into the shadows. “Let’s move.”

* * *

As soon as Steven emerged from the diamond mine, he grabbed Debra’s hand and dragged her behind a cluster of trees, which wasn’t hard since they were co-mingling in a damn forest. He wanted to do wicked things to her, but she wouldn’t be a willing participant. She’d say there wasn’t enough time or some other bullshit, but there was plenty of time for what he wanted to do and he’d convince her of that even if she didn’t like it. He spun her around, shoved her face-first against the base of a tree, and yanked at his zipper. His animalistic need for release soared, his nails lengthened into razor-sharp talons, and blood drizzled onto his tongue as his fangs

sprung forth in anticipation. Now was the time to convert her into one of them. He hadn't been allowed to earlier. Every time they had sex, she made him wear a condom to keep his bodily fluids to himself. The serum was funny that way. If there was no exchange of blood or semen, then there was no creating another vampire. That was about to change.

He noticed Debra's mouth moving, but couldn't hear, much less understand, what she was saying to him. Since the explosion, his ears had not stopped ringing and they had spent a lot more time than planned rigging the mine to be permanently sealed.

Debra slipped her hand into the front pocket of her jeans and withdrew the stun gun she'd permanently borrowed from Dr. Cohn's office just in case something like this happened—and she'd had a strong feeling it would. Dr. Cohn was forced to use it a couple times on students trying to escape his training facility, and most recently on Steven. "I'm warning you," she said again. "Let me go right now, or *you* will regret it. I promise."

Steven didn't even bother to make an effort to comprehend what she was saying. "I can't even hear myself think," he said mockingly, slapping his thumb and fingers together like a puppet. "What makes you think I can hear you?"

Debra twisted her arm around her back and aimed the stun gun right at Steven's groin. "Moron."

There was a spark, and Steven instantly dropped to the ground in excruciating pain, holding his crotch. He lost control of his bladder and pissed all over the front of his jeans. "Fuck, what did you do that for?" he groaned. "I just wanted a little celebration sex."

Debra whipped around and glared at him. “For what?”

“Eric and the others,” Steven said, struggling to his knees. “They’re dead, and wasn’t that the point?”

“The point was to retrieve the vampire remains so we could extract the DNA,” Debra said. “Otherwise, the trip is a complete waste. Now, I have to figure out who took the remains and hunt them down, since it obviously wasn’t them,” she said pointing at the mine’s entrance. “And, to top it off, I have to deal with your immature bullshit.”

Steven struggled to his feet and fell back against the tree. “I’m sorry,” he said, still holding his crotch and unable to make eye contact with Debra, as though he had been caught with his hands down his pants jacking off. “I promise, I’ll never allow my hormones to get the best of me again.”

“Sure,” Debra said, returning the stun gun to her front pocket. She took a step toward the clearing where the others were finishing up their tasks. “‘Never’ is a long time, and just like happy endings, I don’t believe in either.”

* * *

Ray used a hand crank to unwind a left-behind black electrical cable wrapped around a termite-infested wooden spool. He walked carefully back some fifty feet away from the mine’s entrance and knelt beside the ignition source, the battery box from the Ryans’ rickety bus. He went to work on attaching the two together. There was no way Eric and the others had survived the

explosion, but just in case, this was a parting farewell present. “Doug, let me know when you’re ready.”

“I already told you I would, so stop busting my balls about it,” Doug said, maintaining his focus on the setting the last blasting cap.

Ray’s impatience mounted at the situation, but more so with Steven. He had proven his loyalty to Dr. Cohn but then to Debra when she asked him to shift his devotion. He would gladly do anything for her, even murder Steven and dispose of his body if she asked him to. They had shared more than a few intimate moments, but it was enough for him to have fallen totally in love with her. She promised it wouldn’t be long before Steven wasn’t needed anymore, and he looked forward to that day.

Doug finished wiring the bundle of explosives next to the mine’s entrance and hustled over to Ray. “Let’s do it.”

“Hold on a fucking second,” Ray said, shaking his head in frustration as a wire slipped from the battery box.

Debra was suddenly beside them. “Problems?”

“No,” Doug said, “Ray is just being careful.”

Debra ran a finger discreetly along Ray’s back and saw goosebumps explode on his arms. “Well, that’s a good thing.”

“Yes, it is,” Ray said. He nodded his head over to where Seth poked at the mutilated leftovers of a deer’s carcass with a stick. “Does anyone know why Dr. Cohn insisted Seth and his fascination with dead things should come along on this trip?”

Doug licked his lips and tasted the salty residue of his sweat. “Probably didn’t want to babysit him.”

“Seth,” Debra shouted. “Stop screwing around and get your ass over here.”

Seth stuck the twig into the deceased deer one last time. “Are there bears around here?”

Doug gritted his teeth. “Why?”

“Because this deer looks like it encountered one or two,” Seth said defensively.

“Bears don’t hunt in packs like wolves, coyotes, or even a freaking murder of crows,” Debra said. “So, let’s wrap this up.”

“Perhaps the deer was grub for a mother bear and her cubs,” Seth replied.

Steven strutted into the clearing but still walked a little awkward as he tried desperately not to bring attention to the wet spot on the front of his jeans. “We don’t have time for this morbid bullshit, Seth.”

Seth threw the twig on the ground and stood up. His eyes glowered with homicidal intent “My bullshit?” he challenged angrily. “Don’t think you’re such hot shit just because you got your rocks off with Little Miss Thing over there. Why can’t I ask a genuine question?”

Steven smirked. “That would be a first.”

Doug snorted loudly. “Oh, this reminds me of a joke. Do you know the difference between a Porsche owner and...?”

“Enough,” Debra interrupted sharply. “We don’t have time for this bullshit.”

Steven flipped up his middle finger.

“Real mature,” Seth said. “How in the hell did you ever make the football team? ’Cuz, I don’t see one ounce of potential.”

Steven dragged his index finger across his throat simulating a knife. “If it was up to me, you’d never leave this mountain.”

“Well, come on over here, big man,” Seth said, squaring his shoulders. “If you think I’m afraid of you, think again. You’re bullshit tough talk is just that—talk. Let’s see some action for a change.”

Steven stiffened and flexed his jaw muscles. “Fuck off. I’m not your little sister.”

Seth balled his hands into fists. “What did you say to me?”

“I didn’t know you had a problem with your hearing, too?” Steven said. “I thought it was just a problem with your temper.”

Rage filled Seth’s eyes and his nails grew into talons. A gunshot silenced the banter, including all the frogs and birds singing in the forest. Seth clamped both hands over his heart and fell forward, blood spilling out from the bullet hole in the center of his chest.

Debra returned the gun to her shoulder holster hidden beneath her leather jacket. “We’re out of here.”

“What about him?” Steven said, pointing toward Seth. “He’ll be up in about a minute.”

“No, he won’t,” Debra replied. “I shot him with a bullet that offers no recovery for a vampire—or human, for that matter. It’s like a hollow point, but this one has sulfuric acid in it. The impact disperses the sulfuric acid quickly throughout the bloodstream, and even with a vampire’s rapid healing power, it’s not fast enough to counter it. Now, fucking push the damn lever or whatever it is to set this shit off so we can get out of here.”

* * *

Fierce vibrations assaulted the ground and almost toppled Greg off his feet. He was tossed back and forth like a kite caught in hurricane-force winds but managed to stay in one place for a few seconds by plowing his nails into the earthen wall. As he reached out for Emily's hand, another vicious shock wave of tremors battered the tunnel. "Emily!" he shouted, before being thrown to where large cracks were developing at an alarming rate on the wall. Water trickled out and then began pouring as the tunnel walls succumbed to the pressure, adding to the building fear and chaos he could see in most of the others' eyes.

Greg knew it would be less than a minute before the tunnel would completely cave in. "Find something to hang on to!"

Emily was thrown into a stalagmite and clung to it like a life preserver. "What's going on?"

"Maybe it's an earthquake," C.J. said.

Damon braced his feet against a rock and his back against the tunnel wall. He placed the palm of his hand against the wall and felt it rumble. "Shit, I think those assholes set off explosives."

"Explosives?" C.J. said. "Where in the world would they find explosives?"

"It's an abandoned mine," Brenda said. "Lots of shit gets left behind."

"Unless it can be sold for lots of money," Eric said, staggering into the dimming light of Maria's torch. He didn't look away. The deterioration around his eyes was worse than before, and he looked more like a

character from *Night of the Living Dead* than a human being.

Greg placed his finger against his lips. “Shh,” he said, listening to the sounds of the tunnel. “Do you guys hear that?”

“Hear what?” Damon said.

“Sounds like....” Greg flung his body over to Emily and wrapped his arms around her and the stalagmite. “Brenda, grab hold of Maria!”

Brenda reached out, but the six-foot wall of water that came roaring behind them traveled faster than a train and extinguished the torches with a sudden swoosh of air and a tsunami-like wave behind it. They were instantly swept off their feet. Greg and Emily were torn from the stalagmite, and then Emily’s body was peeled as easily as a banana away from Greg’s tight embrace.

Greg fought against the rushing water, but it churned violently and would not give him a moment to get his bearings. It was as if they were trapped inside the devil’s washing machine and there was no way out. Hard, seemingly unmovable objects battered his head and body until darkness crept into the outer edges of his vision. Warm liquid filled his mouth. He recognized it as blood, and then, everything went black.

* * *

Steven chuckled and climbed into the front passenger seat of the rented SUV, which had been damaged quite extensively on its route to the mine’s entrance. “You have to love diamonds,” he said.

Ray waited until Steven closed the passenger door to shift into reverse. “Because it’s a woman’s best friend?”

“Nah,” Steven said, an evil smirk enveloping his face. “It symbolizes the death of quite a few vampires in glittering detail.”

“Uh-huh,” Ray said, backing the SUV up and over weather-damaged tree limbs. He turned around the mechanical beast and shifted into first, then second, before steering the vehicle along what used to be the main road in and out of the diamond mine. With the overgrown weeds, grossly-neglected shrubbery, and encroaching leafy green oak trees, it looked more like an abandoned animal trail that thrill seekers might use when traversing through the forest.

Steven reached back behind the driver’s seat to rub Debra’s knee. “And, there’s not a company in the world that will ever be able to convince the Romanian government that the mine is safe enough to dig there again, so we don’t ever have to worry about anyone discovering our misdeeds.”

Debra lifted Steven’s hand off her knee. “I’m not worried,” she said. “Nor am I a piece of meat to fondle, got it?”

Steven clamped his hand onto Debra’s knee. Blood pooled beneath each fingertip as his nails pierced her skin. “Don’t make me angry,” he warned. “I won’t go down so easily next time.”

Debra held Steven’s gaze. “Don’t get stupid.”

“You wanted it back there, and you know it.”

“Yeah right,” Debra said. “It was *so* romantic.”

“It could have been,” Steven said, turning back around and licking each fingertip, “except you had to freak out.”

“Yeah, that’s it. It was all my fault.”

Ray kept his eyes forward and drove toward the highway. Doug rolled down the rear passenger window and stuck his head out allowing the wind to ruffle his hair. Debra tapped her index finger impatiently against her thigh. And, Steven laid his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. “Wake me when we get there.” Five minutes later, he started to snore.

Debra slid her hand across the seat and gently patted Doug’s hand. “In a second, will you do me an itty-bitty favor?”

“Anything,” Doug replied softly.

“Don’t let him fly out the windshield,” Debra said, thumbing at Steven. “I need to keep him around a little longer. So would you use your nails to keep him in the seat?”

“You got it.”

Debra leaned forward and placed her hand on Ray’s shoulder, allowing the chill of his skin to cool the scorching of hers. “Slam on the brakes when I tell you to,” she whispered.

Ray shifted his eyes to the rearview mirror and mouthed the word *okay*.

Debra snapped on her seatbelt, looked back at Doug, and nodded she was ready. Doug braced his body against the back of the passenger seat and raised his hands above Steven’s shoulders. His nails grew into talons. A dispassionate grin spread across Debra’s face. “Now!”

Ray braced his hands against the steering wheel and drove his heel down onto the brake pedal. The stop was so sudden and violent that it almost caused the SUV to flip onto its roof. Steven would've easily sailed through the windshield if not for Doug's intervention of driving down his talons and stapling Steven to the seat.

The stench of burning rubber infiltrated every ventilation source and a large crack developed across the dashboard where Steven's shins smashed into it. Doug retracted his nails and fell back against his seat. Steven was fighting-mad. "What the hell?"

"Perhaps you should stay awake," Debra said. "Then you'd know how lucky we are to be alive."

Steven whipped around and grabbed Debra by the neck. "Don't push your luck," he said, squeezing harder on her throat. "I have no problem in crushing the life out of you."

Ray snatched a gun from beneath the driver's seat where he'd seen Doug stash it earlier and shoved the muzzle against Steven's temple. "I'd advise you not to push yours, because I don't have any qualms about pulling the trigger and watching your brains splatter all over the front seat and perhaps onto Doug."

"Hey," Doug said. "I don't want his brain matter on me. That shit gets in your clothes and it stinks. You can never really get rid of the stench."

Steven released his grip reluctantly off Debra's neck, moved his head cautiously away from the muzzle, and turned back around like he'd been put in time-out by a parent. "I'm just so fucking hungry," he said. "You guys know I would never hurt Debra."

Ray glanced into the rearview mirror. Debra could see he was worried about her. She nodded her

head, rubbed her neck, and took a few seconds to clear her throat. “Well, let’s make sure to stop and refuel on the way to the airport, then.”

SEPTEMBER-WEDNESDAY-TRITON CITY

Lawrence looked out the geometrically-shaped, brightly colored stained glass window above the stainless steel sink, but Tommy wasn't sitting on the front porch steps anymore or lingering anywhere else in sight for that matter. It was like his skin and bones had dissolved into a rotting pile of puss and dripped through the narrow slats of the cedar porch absorbing into the earth without notice. It was a crazy thought, Lawrence knew, but wouldn't be the least bit surprised if it turned out to be true. Nothing since June had made much sense to him and the current situation was confirmation of that fact. *Where was Tommy?*

If Tommy did manage to drag himself off the porch and stagger ten feet in any direction away from the house, the security cameras would have captured his movement immediately and displayed it on the black and white monitors strategically placed throughout the mansion and the guard house at the front gate. Of course, he could have retraced his steps to the orchard where the security cameras weren't as trigger happy. Even if he had given up his valiant struggle to remain human and crawled off to accept the inevitable, there

were only three places, well, actually four, he could be without being picked up by the security system. Either, he was lying unconscious at the bottom step of the porch, right beneath the kitchen window and pressed up against the house, or on the roof, which wasn't possible or at least seem to be in his deteriorating condition. The only other place Tommy could be was inside the house and that wasn't feasible. Lawrence would've heard the soft squeak of the hinges if the front door were opened by someone coming or going. He was sure of it.

Lawrence didn't really want to check out any of the possibilities, but he had to for his own sanity's sake. Investigating alone, however, was out of the question. He knew he needed strong, capable back-up and since there hadn't been a peep from the security guards all night, he felt more than slightly intimidated walking out onto the porch even if it was daylight. *Something didn't feel right.*

Of the five newly-acquainted strangers bunking down at the Ryans', only one other was a vampire and she was unconscious. There were also three extremely capable humans, but deep down he knew if something waited beyond the front door they would all perish. His only option rested in the hands of the fourth person, a werewolf, and he would have to wake her.

Lawrence dropped the blue-striped dish towel he'd been using to wipe down the kitchen sink over the long cylinder handle of the stove to air dry. He looked at the clock and shook his head. It wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning yet. Hell, it wasn't even seven-thirty. *Maybe I'll just wait it out,* he thought, inhaling a slow deep breath to squelch his craving for blood. But just like the old saying about curiosity, it got the better

of him. He leaned forward over the sink, softly striking his forehead on the window's cool glass and feeling the reverberation in his ears. No matter how hard he tried to see right below the window ledge, he could only mash-in his nose so far before it literally broke or cracked the window.

Colleen shuffled into the kitchen as quietly and creepily as a zombie. Her face was paler than the moon, the indentation of bed sheet creases crisscrossed her face in haphazard fashion, and her hair was piled on top of her head like she'd fallen asleep with gum in her mouth and awoke to find it tangled hopelessly in her tresses. "Coffee?" she mumbled.

Lawrence couldn't help but grin. "Haven't made any, yet. Is Robin up?"

"I don't think so," Colleen said, shuffling over to the coffee maker. "I can check if you want."

"No, that's okay."

Colleen rubbed her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong?"

"You look almost ashy, which means something is definitely wrong."

"Tommy's no longer out there," Lawrence said, nodding toward the porch.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know," Lawrence replied. "He couldn't have gone too far though."

"Should we go look for him?"

Lawrence heard Colleen's heartbeat quicken by a few beats and it made his stomach growl. "Yeah," he said hesitantly. "Where's your shotgun?"

"Back in the bedroom," Colleen said. "I'll go get it."

Robin poked her head into the kitchen. “What’s going on?”

“Tommy’s not on the porch,” Colleen said.

Robin stretched her slender arms over her head. “I’ll go take a look.”

“Well, I was hoping you might watch my back,” Lawrence interjected.

“You got it,” Robin said.

“I figure I’ll check the monitoring system at the front door and see if Tommy’s slumped underneath the window sill.”

“Sure,” Robin said. “And, if he isn’t?”

“We go look for him.”

Colleen strutted out of the kitchen. “Don’t leave without me. I’ll be back in a flash.”

* * *

Lawrence cracked open the front door just enough to see out while bracing the bottom of it with his foot to keep any would-be attacker from bum-rushing him. The early morning, post-storm sky billowed with pink-and-red clouds. He picked up the phone mounted to the wall next to the doorframe and dialed the corresponding numbers listed on the contact sheet to connect him to the security staff at the main gate. He had confirmed his suspicions about the porch being empty and now grew impatient listening to the endless ringing. “Something’s wrong,” he said, placing the receiver back onto the phone’s cradle.

Unbeknownst to him or anyone else inside the mansion, the security guards had fought valiantly in the early morning hours and perished with bravery. The

ones that patrolled the perimeter of the property and stood watch at the front gate were overwhelmed by the sheer number of creatures that descended upon them without warning. When all was said and done, however, only six full-fledge vampires and a handful of creatures were still alive with all hoping to devour a fresh food source soon.

The vampires and creatures were able to dash across the estate grounds to the fortress at its center with relative ease and without fear of the state-of-the-art security system announcing their bloody triumph in battle. A new ally had arisen close to the house and since there was no need to converse when they were brilliantly connected by mental telepathy, they'd been informed the power to the infrared beams crisscrossing every inch of the estate like an electrified chess board had been disabled, permanently.

Stepping one foot out onto the porch, Lawrence listened to the wind whipping through the thick cluster of branches within the orchard. The leaves shuddered and rustled. A brand new storm was brewing in the horizon. Dark cumulonimbus clouds rolled in from the west, slowly swallowing the morning sun's progress to the east. A creepy mist rose from the ground and blanketed the surrounding acreage of the estate in an inky gray fog. Roars of thunder were swiftly answered by streaks of white hot lightning, illuminating the sky in radiant flashes as spatter of raindrops smacked the roof.

There were no qualms in Lawrence's mind that a menacing presence was lurking beneath the ocean of fog like a Great White shark waiting for a seal to dive in. Of course once the seal did, the shark would clamp down on it and trap the poor thing within its powerful

jaws. The turbulent weather was an eerie touch to the situation if only he had been filming a horror movie, but he wasn't. This was his life.

Lawrence remembered being awakened around three or four in the morning by a strange noise, but had covered his head with the pillow believing it was Justin and Bradley pulling out of the driveway for their trip to LAX and drifted back to sleep. Now, in sudden clarity, he realized they had left immediately upon printing off their boarding pass confirmations. His gut instinct told him it was imperative to figure out what pieces to the puzzle were missing if he wanted to live, but couldn't recall the exact details at the moment. Deep down, he didn't really care to. He knew something had awakened him, but what? *It sounded like cars backfiring. No, that wasn't it.* "Holy shit," he said, taking a quick step back into the house.

Robin side-stepped promptly, so he wouldn't run into her. "What's the matter?"

Lawrence slammed shut the door and twisted the deadbolts into place. "It was gunfire."

"What was gunfire?" Colleen asked, aiming the shotgun at the floor.

"I don't have time to explain," Lawrence said. "Get to the basement, tell Samir to initiate lockdown, and by god, be quick about it."

"What about Julie?" Robin asked.

"What about me?"

Everyone turned to see Julie standing in the hallway, sleepily rubbing her eyes. She leaned against the wall and kept most of her weight off her injured ankle. Lawrence sensed Robin stiffen, the scent of air abruptly changing to the fowl stench of a creature, and

doom arriving with reckless abandon. Stepping into the hallway, right behind Julie from the museum-esque living room and covered in what looked like chimney ash, was Tommy. He seemed to have no recollection of his former self and grinned devilishly. “Good eats,” he spat with an almost serpent-like tongue. It had split into two pieces at the tip.

Julie turned and screamed. “No!”

Colleen was quick with the shotgun and pulled the trigger, hitting Tommy in the upper thigh with buckshot. “Get away from her!”

Tommy dropped to one knee, but was instantly back on his feet. He rushed with deformed talons at the ready toward Julie, but as he went to rake them across her throat, she levitated away from him. For a split-second, he had no idea how she did it, but then his eyes traveled upward to the ceiling. Robin’s transformation into a werewolf was scarily fast, quicker than a vamp’s. She had driven her claws into the wall and scaled it to the ceiling within seconds like a superb rock climber on the granite face of El Capitan. Julie became Robin’s unknowing, but thankful new climbing partner and was now being lifted to safety.

The sound of another shotgun shell being loaded into the chamber drew Tommy’s attention immediately back to Colleen. Though she had gotten very proficient with it over the last twenty-four hour period, she wasn’t fast enough to get a shot off before Tommy ripped the gun right out of her hands. He slung it behind him. The shotgun slid across the marble and made a screeching sound like nails on a chalkboard.

Tommy wrapped his left hand around Colleen’s throat, shoved her violently against the wall, and drew

his right hand back to deliver one last vicious and lethal blow. An enormous shadow encapsulated the area and caused him to pause. He turned his head, but didn't let go of the stranglehold on Colleen. The next thing he caught in his periphery was the flash of what seemed like serrated knives and watched his left arm plummet onto the floor next to his feet, releasing Colleen from his death grip. Blood spurted and arced across the hall, splattering the floor-to-ceiling mirror with the gold leaf frame with crimson. With excruciating realization, he found himself toe-to-toe with the werewolf that had been instrumental in saving Julie's life and now had saved Colleen's. He assumed Lawrence would be the one to confront him. It was a deadly mistake. He bled out in seconds as the werewolf crouched next to him and watched.

* * *

Lawrence darted into the kitchen and retrieved a chef's knife from the stainless steel butcher block next to the stove. He dashed back into the hall, straddled Tommy's chest, and drove the knife's wicked blade deep into his heart, all the way to its hilt. Shaking his head in disgust, he looked over at Colleen. "How long?"

"Less than twenty-four hours."

A cold chill molested Lawrence's spine, almost paralyzing him where he stood, and the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. "That's unreal."

"For most people not caught up in this horror, so are mermaids, unicorns, pegasuses, and women with snakes as hair that turns men into stone," Colleen said. "Seeing is believing."

An obnoxiously loud bang struck the front door causing both of them to jump. Another immediately followed causing the door to splinter and a large crack to develop, streaking down its center. On the second level, glass shattered as a window was compromised. “Run!” Lawrence shouted.

Colleen snatched up the shotgun as they raced down the marble-tiled hallway, past the museum-like living room with its very rare artifacts, turned right and preceded into the Ryans’ expansive library. They could hear footsteps fast approaching from above and directly behind them. When they cleared the library entryway, the automatic lights were still on, warming the space. Floor-to-ceiling, matching oak bookcases lined three of the walls and a wooden ladder on rails leaned against the wall behind the reading desk. There wasn’t a trace of mustiness, only of paper and leather.

Colleen slammed the door shut and searched for a lock, but there wasn’t one. Desperately turning to Lawrence, he understood her silent plea and shoved the heavy, dark oak desk in front of it. It would keep out the creatures for only so long. Scanning the room, Colleen spotted the one specific bookcase left slightly ajar that concealed the entry into the staircase built of rock and cement leading beneath the house to the underground stronghold. Robin and Julie had had a few seconds head start and made sure to leave breadcrumbs. It was evident by the expressions on Lawrence’s and Colleen’s face how appreciative they were for Robin’s quick thinking. They were living on borrowed time and knew it, but were appreciative by the little blessings.

Lawrence peeled open the bookshelf just wide enough for him and Colleen to slip through and into the

space behind it. When they were both concealed, he pulled the bookshelf back into place and heard a subtle click. Then, he slid a large iron bar into the specially-designed slot to keep those who weren't invited from following them into the basement, or at least, slow them down a tad.

The vampiric creatures pounded relentlessly on the library door. The grinding of the desk's legs into the wooden floor gave away its heaviness as it refused to give an inch quietly. Lawrence kept his eyes glued to a gap between two leather-clad, concrete books that were merely a façade among the other real books. He knew the creatures would figure out a way in by either breaking down the door or using what was left of their brains to figure out a different way into the room by some other means. Almost if on cue, the clamoring of a creature making its way through a heating duct could be heard. It suddenly fell through the library ceiling and crashed onto the floor beside the desk. It stood up, sniffed the air, and hissed as it looked right at where Lawrence was spying on it.

"Son of a bitch," Lawrence muttered. "It knows we're here."

The overhead lights flickered within the hidden passageway and made it extremely hard for Colleen to see anything more than the outline of the steps leading down. "What should we do?"

"Move," Lawrence whispered. "Now."

Colleen took off down the stairwell. At the bottom, she careened into Robin, who had been waiting in almost complete darkness for them, and was knocked off her feet and onto the ground. Robin was still in her werewolf state, blending in with the shadows.

Assisted by Robin's large hairy paw, Colleen was back on her feet in no time flat and raced past the blast-proof door. Somehow by memory, she guided herself toward the room where Samir, Julie, and Jennifer were waiting. Well, she knew Samir and Julie would be, but Jennifer was probably still comatose and wouldn't have the faintest idea about what was going on.

Colleen found her way through the maze of passageways and knocked three times on the door that looked exactly like the airtight one on a sub. Samir unlocked the specialized door from the inside and pushed it open. He ushered Colleen inside, stuck his head out, and spotted Lawrence and Robin sprinting toward him. He watched in awe as every step Robin took, brought her a step closer to her human self. By the time she and Lawrence were in the room with the door locked securely behind them, she was in a desperate search for something to throw on over her nakedness.

SEPTEMBER-WEDNESDAY- WASHINGTON D.C.

Eno Roberts and Elizabeth Reynolds held hands and perused the various street vendors that were buzzing with activity along the sidewalks directly across the street in every possible direction from the White House. They shopped for touristy items: t-shirts, sweatshirts, and the occasional knick knack or at least pretended to as they checked out what it would take to get inside and confront the president within the Oval Office once night had fallen upon the famous city. They knew Secret Service agents were meandering about in the crowd, pretending to be tourists, too, and eavesdropping on conversations to protect the interests of the country and its Commander-in-Chief. Yet, neither of them, no matter how closely they watched, could single-out any one person acting strange. No one messed absentmindedly with a ring or fidgeted with a gold charm dangling off a matching necklace due to its relative newness.

Eno stole another glance at his companion and a smile snuck up on his face. “You really are beautiful.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to bed with you no matter how charming you try to be.”

“You think I’m charming?”

Elizabeth blushed slightly. “Much more so than I originally thought on that first day of Professor Stein’s speech class.”

“I still can’t get over his dramatic entrance. Did you see how he plopped down into his seat?” Eno said, placing his arm around her. “He just sat there with that stupid, dumfounded look on his face. I thought he had a heart attack and died.”

“Me, too,” Elizabeth said with a good-natured laugh. “I was thrilled when he finally took a breath.”

“Did you know?”

“Did I know what?”

“What was wrong with him at the time?”

“No, but I heard rumors,” Elizabeth said.

“What kind of rumors?”

Elizabeth brushed her lips by his ear. “The nasty kind,” she replied softly.

“Tell me,” Eno pleaded.

“I overheard a girl talking on her cell phone in the Ladies Room on campus. She and her boyfriend had apparently been getting it on in one of the classrooms right down the hall from Dr. Cohn’s one night. On their way back, she overheard some strange noises and peeked in through the glass window of his classroom.”

Eno let out an exasperated breath. “What did she see?”

Elizabeth showed no reaction, but internally smiled at how enraptured Eno was with her story. “She saw Dr. Cohn inject a couple colleagues with some type of serum. I can only assume it was the same one he gave us, but who knows for sure.”

“When was that?”

“A year or so ago.”

“If you knew he might not be on the up and up, why did you go ahead and do it then?”

“I couldn’t resist,” Elizabeth said, checking her reflection in the mirror of a sunglass stand. “I needed to see for myself if it was possible to achieve perfection without a huge amount of personal investment like the flyer promised.” She flashed a perfect smile. “I’m a sucker for a good ad campaign. What about you?”

“I thought it would make me a better drummer.”

“So it wasn’t for eternal fame and fortune?”

“Nah,” Eno said, an ear-to-ear grin unveiling the dimples on his cheeks. “I just wanted to prove to those critics in Hollywood how good I really am and they should’ve let me have my shot at a record contract.”

“That’s fair.”

Eno led Elizabeth across a grassy meadow that swallowed their shoes, socks, and half of their calves. They walked to the edge of the Tidal Basin, an artificial inlet of the Potomac River, where the itchiness of the vegetation receded and the wet slap against the water’s edge was like an insulating barrier from the rest of the world. They continued their trek around the outer banks for a short while as the Cherry Blossoms hibernated and stored their awesome blooming power for spring.

Finally, Elizabeth squeezed Eno’s hand and laid her head on his shoulder. “It’s beautiful here.”

“It pales in comparison.”

“To what?”

“You,” Eno said with a boyish grin.

Elizabeth laughed. “See, you are a charmer.”

Eno felt an unusual flutter in his chest. It was like his heart had suddenly grown humming bird wings.

For a split-second, he thought he was experiencing the beginnings of love, but his friend, Sid Hopkins, told him that he couldn't feel love for anything but music if he wanted to become a successful artist. Eno needed his drums to feel alive and powerful. His drumsticks were as much a part of him as his hands when he pounded them onto the thin, semi-rigid membrane that produced the calming drone to his brain's endless chatter about not being good enough. It is what drove him to create *Blind Rage*. Well, that, and Sid, who relentlessly drove him crazy to form the band.

When Eno was satisfied that they had traveled far enough away to escape any listening equipment the Secret Service might employ, he pulled Elizabeth into his arms and hugged her tightly. "We need to be very cautious," he whispered into her ear. "No mistakes."

* * *

Justin lowered the binoculars and stepped back into the protective embrace of the Cherry Blossom's shadow on the opposite side of the Tidal Basin. He couldn't make out the words Eno whispered into Elizabeth's ear, but knew it couldn't be good. He saw the confliction on her face as the joyful expression changed drastically to one of fear and regret. Oh, if he could have morphed into a little brown bat and flown in for a closer view. Perhaps, then, he would know what Eno was up to and be able to stop him from doing it.

The inexpensive pair of binoculars that dangled from a flimsy plastic strap around Justin's neck was designed for children and it said so on the cardboard packaging that had originally encased them. Still, Justin

needed to keep the constant glare of the midday sun that reflected off the water from interfering with his ability to focus. He had been forced to settle on the binoculars as it was the only thing he could find on such short notice when he spotted his prey.

Prey? Justin thought. *What the hell is wrong with me? I'm not a damn peregrine falcon.*

Bradley jogged up behind him with six, tightly-wrapped in foil hot dogs, three in each hand. "Hey, any luck?"

"Eno and Elizabeth are here, across the water," Justin replied, accepting two of the hotdogs. "I haven't spotted Dr. Grosse, yet."

Bradley tore away the foil from the first of his hot dogs and took a huge bite. Bright, yellow mustard oozed from the corner of his mouth. "Don't worry," he mumbled. "He'll show up."

Justin crammed the first half of his hot dog into his mouth and chewed with animalistic hunger. He was famished and knew this pathetic, non-nutritional lunch wouldn't keep his ravenous appetite at bay for long. "I'm not worried," he said through another bite of food. "We just need to figure out a game plan."

Bradley crumpled up the first foil wrapper and shoved it into his back pocket. "Like what?"

"We have to warn the president about the attack tonight," Justin said. "There's no other way."

"How do you suggest we do that?" Bradley said, licking the mustard off his fingers as he finished the second hot dog. "It's not like we have the authority to demand an appointment with the nation's top dog."

"Why not?" Justin challenged. "We could tell his security staff that it's a matter of life and death."

“And literally land in jail as terrorists,” Bradley said.

“So?” Justin said, removing the binoculars from around his neck and gently placing them at the base of the Cherry Blossom tree. “If we can convince him that there will be an attack, maybe there’s a chance for us.”

“I never pegged you as an optimist.”

Justin chuckled and couldn’t help but recite one of Jennifer’s favorite sayings. “Did you hear about the caterpillar that thought its life was over?”

Bradley shoved another bite of hot dog into his mouth. “Can’t say that I have,” he mumbled.

“It sprung forth from its cocoon as a beautiful butterfly and took to the skies.”

Bradley stared at him. “What the fuck does that have to do with what we’re going through right now?”

“Everything.” Justin inhaled a deliberate breath as if he was trying to suck in courage and stole another look around the tree. The spot where Eno and Elizabeth had stood moments earlier was now empty. They had quietly slipped away. “Shit.”

Bradley withdrew an ice-cold can of Coke from his front pocket, cracked it open, and chugged half of it without pause. “What’s the matter?” he asked, almost belching the question.

Justin silently scolded himself for allowing his mind to get distracted. “They’re gone.”

“They couldn’t have gotten far,” Bradley said. “You found them once, you can do it again.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Justin said sarcastically. “I thought you tagged along to help me?”

“I did,” Bradley said, wiping off his mouth with a napkin. “I just needed a little recharge and so did you, remember?”

“Yeah, come on,” Justin said, strutting over to a well-marked trashcan.

“Where are we going?”

“To see if we can get in to see the president,” Justin replied, dropping his trash into the container.

“You’ve lost your mind,” Bradley said.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe, my ass,” Bradley said. “You have.”

“If you have a better idea, please spit it out.”

Bradley gnawed on the inside of his bottom lip, lowered his head, and hunched his shoulders. He almost seemed transformed into a little kid again who had been given sufficient proof that the big, bad wolf and the little girl wearing a red hood while skipping down a path to her grandmother’s house was based on an actual real-life event.

Justin kept Bradley’s reaction in his periphery. Bradley clenched his teeth together and stared down at the sidewalk as he walked alongside Justin toward the White House. In his heart, Justin knew the most direct route would give them the best odds of getting through the night in once piece and hopefully with all their body parts still in tact. They needed help, desperately, and if there was only time to convince one person in the entire world to believe him, then why not the president? He had a family to think about, too.

* * *

Dr. Grosse darted blindly into the height of afternoon traffic. Squealing tires, blaring horns, and a plethora of curse words followed in his wake. He made it to the other side of the highway and continued his trek toward the famous Washington Monument. It would be dark in a matter of hours and the president would have no other choice but to see him. He'd make sure of it.

* * *

Justin moved along the shrubs and trees that surrounded both the White House and its private lawn like a thief in the night. It helped that *it* was night and the security guards couldn't see him. It also helped that his vampiric eyes saw the infrared beams that protected every square inch of the property like a laser-lit grid. At times, it was a bit like playing hop-scotch as a kid. He maneuvered through the grounds, jumping from one infrared square to the next, and inhaled the sweet scent of freshly-cut grass. He slipped around the sparkling water fountain and took solace at the rear of the White House where the exterior fluorescent lights and brightly-lit crystal chandelier hanging off the back porch didn't penetrate the shadows he took refuge in.

By the time Justin and Bradley arrived at the White House earlier in the day, all self-guided tours had ended. In fact, they had ended around eleven o'clock. A private tour was going through when they did get there, but it was easy to see that neither he nor Bradley would have a shot at blending in. They weren't from India and didn't have time to buy the appropriate apparel, change, and return before the tour was over. Justin did his best to convince one of the security staff into letting him

visit with the president and even mentioned it could be a matter of life and death. However, that tactic failed miserably. The guard called for assistance and Justin and Bradley were escorted outside the gates. They were also informed, in not so nice terms, that if they were caught anywhere near the White House or the president again for the rest of their lives they would be arrested and tried for an assassination attempt on the president's life.

Bradley had been right. Now, Justin had to take the situation into his own hands, but first he required a distraction, a sizeable one. He needed to leap from ground level onto the Truman Balcony, the second floor porch at the South Portico, and slip inside without being spotted by the Secret Service. He was well-aware that the First Family was having dinner and opted to wait until they were finished with their meal to confront the president alone. It didn't make any sense to terrify his wife and children right away. That would be the president's decision to tell them the truth if he saw fit, however Justin felt confident that the president would take all necessary precautions to guarantee his family's safety. Justin's only part was to make the man believe.

The sudden shrill of an intrusion alarm caused Justin to crumble to his knees. He placed the palm of his hands over his ears to help drown out the sound. It was excruciatingly painful and he clenched his teeth together to keep from crying out in agony. He heard the security guards' heavy footsteps trampling across the back lawn, headed right for him. It was now or never.

SEPTEMBER-THURSDAY-ROMANIA

The early morning sun was brutal on C.J.'s skin. It felt like she had awakened from a deranged nightmare only to find herself bound by rope to an iron rod and slowly roasting over an open campfire for a bunch of hungry cannibals. She squeezed her eyelids tighter and did her damndest to ignore the pain searing the delicate tissue of her eyes. She coughed up more water, which had been forced into her mouth and nose, and used the remaining strength left in her trembling arms to lift her body from the puddle on the saturated forest floor.

C.J.'s body throbbed in agony and she swore every bone in her arms and legs were broken as if a few minor leaguers decided to improve their batting average by taking swings at her. She knelt back onto her heels, feeling a stretch in her aching thigh muscles, and turned her face away from the sun. Then, she inhaled a deep breath, but exhaled it almost immediately. Her lungs felt pierced by half a dozen daggers. A hand suddenly

clamped down onto her shoulder from behind and she jerked away in fright, almost falling over.

Brenda instantly took a step back. “It’s just me,” she said soothingly. “You’re safe.”

C.J. rolled over onto her butt and forced her eyelids open. She strained to see Brenda’s face clearly, but the kaleidoscope effect of sunlight weaving through the canopy of leaves made it almost impossible to do so. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” Brenda said. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll be fine,” C.J. said, grimacing as she lifted her hand to shield her eyes. “Did everyone make it?”

Brenda avoided C.J.’s intense blue gaze though she could tell that she hadn’t regained control over her focusing abilities yet. “Yes, everyone made it out,” she said, stealing a look over her shoulder at Maria, who was propped up against the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. “But we have to get to a hospital very soon. Maria is bleeding internally.”

C.J. stayed seated until the fogginess of her vision vanished and she could see Maria, who was barely hanging onto consciousness slumped against the base of a tree. Maria’s caramel-colored skin was slowly draining into a milky white and there wasn’t any blood to be found around her. “We’ll get her to one.”

A renewed sense of vigor and purpose surged through C.J.’s veins. She scanned her surroundings and saw Greg and Eric using twigs and strips of Eric’s shirt to make a splint for Emily’s arm. It had swollen to the size of Greg’s bicep so it was easily broken in at least two places. Damon paced from one tree to another, but kept his attention on Eric, who really did resemble one of the living dead, especially with his shirt in tatters.

C.J. steadied her feet beneath her hips and stood slowly. “Does anyone have any idea on where we might be?”

Eric coughed violently. It was deep in his chest and sounded extremely painful. No one bothered to ask if he was okay because it was quite apparent he wasn’t. “We toppled over that ledge,” he said, pointing about twenty meters straight up.

A steady stream of water flowed from a ledge above and created a small waterfall, which pooled at the base not more than five feet from where C.J. stood. Due to the natural contour of the mountain, the water snaked a path through the small clearing they had all been washed down in and disappeared beneath the brush.

Emily’s eyes glazed over as her mind drifted to some far off place that only she could see and struggled to formulate words. “It’s a miracle I survived,” she said almost dreamily.

“Okay,” C.J. said, barely noticing her own shirt looked alot like Eric’s. “Does anyone know where we are or which way to start going?”

Eric moved quickly away from Greg and Emily and stepped out into the middle of the small clearing, oddly embracing the sun’s rays. “We need to get out of here, right now.”

“Really?” Greg asked cynically. “I thought maybe we could build a bonfire and gather round it to tell a couple ghost stories or something.”

Emily laid her head on Greg’s shoulder. “He’s doing his best to keep us motivated,” she said, her voice still having that dreamy quality to it.

“I know,” Greg said, “but it’s not like we have road signs pointing us in a certain direction. Hell, none

of us know where we are exactly except on a mountain.”

Damon turned around slowly and stared up into the sky. He cocked his head to the side. “Does anyone else hear that? The howling?”

“Yes,” Greg said in exasperation. “It’s a pack of coyotes or something. They’ve been making their way toward us or at least, in this general direction. I’ve been awake for only about ten minutes and been taking care of Emily, but they’re definitely getting closer.”

Brenda hustled over to the Eucalyptus tree. C.J. followed close behind, but her steps were very shaky. Maria drifted in and out of consciousness. C.J. knelt down beside Maria and placed two fingers against the inside of her wrist. Her pulse was very weak. “Let’s get going before they arrive then. We can’t afford anymore delays.”

“They’re already here,” Eric said. “There are two of them watching us from the bushes.”

Damon strutted across the quaint meadow and got nose-to-nose with Eric. The skin was literally dripping from around Eric’s orbital sockets. “Will you cool it with your theatrics? You’re freaking everyone out, including me.”

Greg cocked his head and raised a fingertip to his lips. “He’s right, Damon. I hear them, too.”

C.J. gathered her kamas, which had washed over the edge and landed close to where she had originally landed. She slid each one through a belt loop and then returned to Brenda’s side to help her with Maria. They each draped one of Maria’s arms around a shoulder, slipped a hand beneath a leg, and lifted her tenderly off

the ground. "So can I," C.J. said. "Let's take that as a sign to vacate the premises."

"I second that," Brenda said.

They carried Maria quickly toward a gap in the thicket of trees where a small animal had made a visible trail. A twig snapped just beyond their view and halted their forward momentum. "Shit," C.J. muttered. "What the hell was that?"

Another twig snapped, but this time it wasn't in front of them; it had come from above. Brenda glanced nervously at C.J. "I'm not looking."

"Me either," C.J. said, taking a giant step back.

A ravenous, wolf-like snarl and a big, nasty dollop of saliva splattered on the ground right in front of them. A splintering of branches followed and caused everyone to look up even if they didn't want to. C.J. and Brenda saw a large shadow fall over them and tried to get out of its way, but it was too late. The legendary creature crashed to the forest floor and stood towering over them. With one mighty swipe of its claw, it batted C.J., Brenda, and Maria across the small clearing as if they weighed the same as a wiffle ball.

"It's a fucking werewolf!" Damon screamed.

"Run," Eric said, thrusting his body in between the three women and the uninvited guest. "There's another one! Go! Now!"

C.J. got to her feet. "We can't leave you."

"Don't worry," Eric said, never taking his eyes off the werewolf. "Just tell my brother, I love him."

* * *

Brenda and C.J. leapt over enormous logs that were toppled over and being infiltrated by bright green moss. They battled their way past wickedly-long thorn bushes that seemed to reach out with their briny ends and hook into their skin, tearing large chunks away like hungry piranhas. And, when it just didn't seem possible to get any worse, they trampled across a bee hive and irritated the occupants into chasing them, too. Still, they kept from dropping Maria onto the harsh ground somehow while maintaining their ragged pace.

C.J. sensed the werewolf was in close proximity and knew deep down in her gut there was no way they could out run it. It was faster, meaner, and deadlier than anything or anyone she had ever fathomed could exist. Way worse than Dr. Cohn's creatures. As soon as the first werewolf broke through the trees and landed on the forest floor in front of them, everyone, except for Eric, scattered like drought-ridden leaves blown away by the Santa Ana Winds. Eric saved their lives by challenging the werewolf in a brave, but hopeless confrontation. This selfless act, however, had bought them a little headway, but it was so minuscule that C.J. didn't really think it would matter in the end.

In their desperation to stay alive, C.J. searched for anything that might slow down their pursuer, but she had no idea on what to use as a weapon except for silver bullets at the ready in a firearm. She seriously doubted a gunsmith had set-up shop anywhere close to their location. And, even if that proved to be true, she seriously doubted he would be able to provide a gun locked and loaded with ammo designed specifically to kill werewolves at the ready. She chuckled silently as

they weaved through a cluster of towering pine trees and out the other side.

An enormous flat field with tall grass greeted them and Brenda picked up the pace as though hope had finally found her and given her angelic wings. But, almost just as quickly, she let out an exacerbated sigh. Their luck, just like the mountain, was coming to an end as the beautiful field simply gave way to a sheer drop-off. Another mountain rose up beyond it, but there was no time to approximate the distance.

“There’s no where else to go,” Brenda said.

Off to the right, C.J. caught sight of a feasible solution, but there wasn’t time to discuss her plan. She used her weight to change their direction and guided Brenda away from the mountainous drop-off. When she noticed Brenda’s quizzical gaze, she said, “Trust me.”

“Where are we going?” Brenda said, never once slowing her stride through the low lying, thick patch of grass.

C.J. didn’t answer and continued their course until reaching a small crevice in an escarpment where there was only room enough for two people to squish together and hide from view. She looked back over her shoulder and saw the werewolf hadn’t made it to the clearing. “Regroup with the others,” she said, helping Brenda slide Maria into the small space completely out of view, “and get Maria back to Bucharest.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Create a diversion,” C.J. replied.

“No,” Brenda said, catching C.J.’s hand as she turned to leave. “Those things are too strong. Even one of them will kill you if try to take it on alone.”

“I know that.”

“And you’re still going to do it?”

“Yes, I have to. You know that...werewolf will keep coming until it kills us,” C.J. said, wiping off the sweat that saturated her brow. She spoke the truth and also knew that Brenda could not and would not leave Maria. It would indeed cost them their lives. “I have to do this.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Brenda said, the anguish of C.J.’s decision affecting her tone. “We could just stay here.”

“You know that won’t work,” C.J. said, placing her hands on the sides of Brenda’s face. Then, without hesitation, she kissed her. It was the briefest, most passionate kiss of her life and well worth the risk. As their lips parted, she held Brenda’s gaze. “I’ve wanted to do that since we first met.”

Brenda rubbed her lips together, savoring the moment. “What took you so long then?”

“There hasn’t been time.”

A ravenous growl interrupted their conversation. C.J. turned around, but no werewolf had appeared in the clearing. “Keep out of sight.”

Brenda reached out as C.J. pulled away. “Don’t do this,” she said. “Please, stay.”

“I can’t,” C.J. said. “You know this is the only way.” With that, she turned, removed her kamas from her belt loops, and sprinted across the low-lying brush. She disappeared into the trees without looking back.

* * *

C.J. startled the werewolf that had crept up on the other side of the thick cluster of trees and been biding its time

as it watched them. She raked one of her razor-sharp kama blades across its stomach and sliced it open as she darted by. The werewolf barely flinched at the attack, but it was definitely pissed off. It charged after C.J. with a fiery rage glowing in its hate-filled eyes. There was no other choice as she spotted Greg and Emily sprinting through the forest right toward her, so she changed directions and raced back toward the field and to where the ground fell away plummeting a few hundred feet into the Arges River. The expanse was too far to make it across even for a vampire, but she wasn't certain about a werewolf. If she could keep it interested in her long enough, it would surely follow her in a leap of faith.

With what little was left of her willpower and energy, C.J. drove her feet even harder into the ground and barreled toward the ledge. As the mountain fell away, she kept going and sprang into the wide abyss knowing there was no way she could make it to the other side. The werewolf followed her as she'd hoped, but caught her with an angry swipe of its claw across the back in protest. She screamed in gut-wrenching agony, but finally understood with painful clarity what someone must feel like when a massive wave of razor blades or Chinese stars struck them from behind, and she was a vampire. It sucked, yes, but not as much as falling three hundred feet to one's probable death with an angry werewolf right on your ass.

C.J. swore she felt the werewolf's searing, rank breath on the nape of her neck just before plunging into the icy depths of the Arges River. *Please, god, she thought, save me.*

* * *

Brenda sprinted to the mountain's edge and stopped just short of tumbling over it. She inhaled a ragged breath and leaned over carefully in hopes of seeing a splash or two in the water below, but to no avail. Her knees gave out and she collapsed to the ground, burying her face into her hands. "No!" she cried out.

Greg was suddenly at her side and peered down at the dark water. He caught the tail end of an echo over the raging rapids, but couldn't decipher anything about it, including if it was human or beast in origin. "She's not dead," he said, fighting back tears. "There's no way my sister would go out like that."

Brenda touched her lips where the pressure of C.J.'s kiss lingered and anger consumed her. She knew Maria had lost a considerable amount of blood and was holding onto the land of the living with every shred of fiber left in her being, but this wasn't acceptable.

Emily eased up behind them. "Where's Maria?"

Brenda didn't look, but pointed her finger at the crevice in the escarpment. "Over there."

* * *

Emily carefully held her injured arm against her chest so it wouldn't brush against anything and climbed into the crevice. She took one look at Maria and scrambled back out, hurrying over to where Brenda and Greg were still staring over the ledge with grief etched on their faces. "We have to go," she said. "Maria has to get to a hospital. She needs a blood transfusion."

The ache in Brenda's heart was almost too much to bare and she struggled to keep her shoulders from folding inward to protect its fragility. "What are you waiting for then?" she asked softly. "Take her and go. I'll be right behind you."

"Sorry," Emily said, motioning at Damon, who had just emerged from the forest, to join them, "but you have to come with us or its no deal."

"I can't leave her," Brenda said, tears stealing down her face. "What if she's still alive?"

"She is," Emily said. "But she's not going to have enough strength to climb all the way back up here to see if we're still here staring out into the wild blue yonder. We need to work our way down and toward the main road."

"How do we know where that is?" Brenda said angrily. "How do we even know where we are?"

"If that's the Arges River, it flows southward," Emily stated. "C.J. will work her way to Bucharest by the waterways."

"And if she's not...alive?" Brenda said, choking on the question.

Emily's voice filled with conviction. "She is."

"You sound so certain," Brenda said. "How can that be?"

"Because I believe in her," Emily said.

Brenda wiped away additional tears. "I believe in her, too."

"Good," Emily said. "Let's go."

Brenda took another look over the edge where the sun's rays now reflected off the churning water below. "Are you sure?"

“Yes,” Emily said, placing a supportive hand on Brenda’s shoulder. “Come on; don’t let her decision be in vain.”

Brenda got to her feet and trudged wearily after the others as they retrieved Maria from the crevice. She had lost so many people she cared for over the past few days, including Cory and Kellie that the thought of C.J. being lost forever made it almost impossible to breathe. Her heart felt like it might stop beating at any moment. She regretted not telling C.J. that she’d fallen head over heels in love with her. Right then and there, she made a promise to herself. *If I ever get another chance, I will.*

* * *

The frigid water of the Arges River felt like a thousand ice picks stabbing into C.J.’s body and it knocked the wind out of her like a boxer’s punch to her ribcage as soon as she entered it. Another large splash resonated somewhere behind her but the force of the river tossed and tumbled her over jagged rocks, broken tree limbs, and other debris. She had no idea which way was up much less where the werewolf was and didn’t have time to dwell on it. She curled up into a ball, used her hands and arms to protect her head and face, and desperately kicked her feet to break free of the water’s tumultuous embrace, but it didn’t work.

This fucking sucks, C.J. thought, feeling trapped in a front-loader washing machine with no way to stop the spin cycle or shout out for someone else to do it for her. Suddenly, she was sent hurtling high above the water and she sucked in as much air as possible before falling back into the river where the rage of the rapids

pounded her body once more. There didn't seem to be a way to escape, but she had to do something before all her energy vanished.

Going in and out of consciousness, C.J. felt the river's embrace suddenly release her and spit her into a much calmer section. She slapped at the water trying to swim, but it was no use. Her arms were heavy like they had been weighted down by large concrete blocks, but simultaneously felt like a sand-dollar washing up on the warm sand of a tropical beach. As darkness crept in around her eyes, she heard footsteps rushing toward her and excited voices above her exhausted body. She was unable to stave off the unconsciousness any longer and gave in to the peacefulness it brought.

SEPTEMBER-WEDNESDAY-TRITON CITY

Lawrence pressed his ear against the steel door creating a suction-cup affect while everyone else in the room remained eerily quiet. Jennifer's heart monitor beeped softly but rhythmically behind him, so he concentrated harder on the screeching noises on the other side of the door. Somehow, the creatures figured out a way into the basement, managed to open the blast proof door at the concrete stairwell's base, and gained access to room after room whether the door was locked or not. Their gangly arms and grotesque, twisted talons dragged on the floor similar to the knives from the character that played Freddy Kruger as he raked them along the wall. The upside, however, was that it made tracking their progress a little more easier and yet, more frightening as they made their way closer and closer to the very room Lawrence and the others were gathered in.

Robin eased up behind him, still in human form, and whispered into Lawrence's ear. "Where are they?"

Lawrence brought his finger to his lips. "Close," he answered softly.

"How close?"

The creatures' tell-tale movements ceased and Lawrence glanced alarmingly at Robin. He motioned

her to step away from the door and she quickly obliged. He pressed his ear against the submarine-like door again, straining to hear even the plop of a water droplet in the bathroom sink, but all was quiet. “Maybe they’ve given up.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Robin said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

With sudden acuity of Superman proving to Lois Lane what color of underwear she was wearing, Lawrence knew a creature was on the other side of the submarine-like door, smirking with maniacal glee. An unusual weariness consumed him and almost made his knees buckle. He pulled his face away from the door as a split second later an armor-piercing conglomeration of talons blasted through it right where his ear had been. “Jesus!” he shouted.

The talons were immediately retracted and shot through the door again. *So this was how they were progressing so efficiently through the underground safe house*, Lawrence thought. *Sneaky little bastards.*

Samir was at Lawrence’s side and gripped his arm. “We have to get out of here, right now. There’s no time.”

Lawrence pulled his arm away. “How do you suggest we do that? Ask them for a thirty-second head start?”

Samir looked up. “No, we run.”

Lawrence followed Samir’s gaze to the ceiling and saw an escape hatch with a giant wheel on the outside of it. He looked incredulously at the others and then back at Samir. “How long have you known that was there?”

“Maria told me about it,” Samir replied.

Colleen gripped the shotgun even tighter. “So since you were called in on the very first fucking day?”

Samir shrugged his shoulder. “Yeah,” he said, somewhat testily. “She didn’t think we’d actually need it though.”

“I guess she thought wrong,” Colleen said.

Another loud bang was followed by a sizeable puncture in the door. The creature was making a circle with its talons, so it could inevitably punch a hole in the door, reach through, and unlock it.

“We have to go,” Samir said. “There’s no time to debate this. You’re either coming or you’re not.”

“What about Jennifer?” Colleen asked. “We can’t move her in her current state. It might kill her.”

Samir shook his head. “Don’t you get it? This is how triage works,” he said indifferently. “If this was a horrific accident scene with multiple casualties, I would give her a black tag. There’s no hope or sense crying over spilt milk if it won’t change the outcome.”

The stunned silence was deafening.

Colleen walked over and jammed the barrel of the shotgun beneath Samir’s chin. “I thought you were one of the good guys.”

“Keep thinking that,” Samir hissed, knocking the shotgun to the side as he walked away. “And a word of advice, don’t threaten to kill someone unless you really have the balls to do it.” He toppled over an eight-foot high metal shelf, scattering the stockpile of food all over the floor. “This is the only way out unless you’re really looking forward to taking on creatures that are much more advanced than you.”

Colleen watched Samir wrestle with the metal shelf until he had it perfectly positioned beneath the hatch. "I'm staying."

"Good luck," Samir said, semi-saluting her.

Julie crossed her arms. "You sound almost as enraptured by all this as Dr. Cohn and Dr. Grosse."

Samir flashed an almost traitor-like grin. "I am." He used the shelf as a ladder and scrambled up to the ceiling, but was unable to crank open the hatch with one hand, so he was forced to use two. As soon as he twisted the wheel all the way to the left, it unlocked the hatch. "Anyone else coming?" he said, shoving up the submarine-like door.

"I'll take my chances right here," Robin said. With very minimal effort, she morphed seamlessly into her other self.

Lawrence looked back at the door. The creature was close to having it completely compromised. "Yeah, I'm staying, too."

Samir hoisted himself into the passageway and peered down at Julie. "Surely, you can appreciate my decision. Do you want to stay and die?"

"I'd rather stay and die fighting, then flee like a coward and leave a friend who would never leave me," Julie said, hobbling to Jennifer's bedside. She reached over the safety railing and took hold of Jennifer's hand. "There are some things worth fighting for."

Julie felt a subtle squeeze and gazed down into semi-conscious eyes. "Hey, welcome back."

Jennifer mouthed the words *thank you*.

Samir shook his head. "Damn, you are going to pull through." He shrugged and slammed down the hatch.

Colleen handed the shotgun off to Julie as she passed by and scrambled up the shelf. She gripped the wheel and spun it, locking it back into place. “Asshole.”

Julie squeezed Jennifer’s hand tighter as another puncture enveloped the door like a jackhammer. She looked at Lawrence and for once, there was no fear in her eyes. “What do you want to do when they get in?”

“Fight,” Lawrence said. “Fight like hell.”

* * *

Samir crawled through the darkened passageway with only a few sparsely-placed vents gifting air and light to keep him going in a forward direction. Besides, there wasn’t enough room to turn around and go back. No, he knew there was nothing behind him but death, although he felt somewhat trapped in an elongated coffin. The passageway was maybe two feet high and no more than three feet wide and seemed to go on forever. He broke through cobweb after cobweb with his face and they crinkled in his ears as he scooted along. Well, he hoped that’s what they were and not actual *spider* webs, especially the brown recluse kind. He hated spiders, the whole lot of them, but had an even deeper hatred for the *little brown bastards*. It wasn’t anything personal except for the thought of one bite, which was more poisonous than a rattler’s, causing tissue death at the bite’s site and no anti-venom to slow its rampage on skin, fat, and blood vessels. The poison literally would have to be cut out of him and that terrified him. He hated the idea of that more so than the thought of being eaten alive by the creatures.

Making slow, but steady progress through the passageway, Samir reached the end of the section he was traveling in. Now, he had to choose whether to go left or right. He chose right, which led away from the front of the house and his likely death. A concentration of creatures was most-likely gathered and waiting for their dinner to abandon ship like rats on the front lawn. He wasn't about to be a willing participant in that slaughter, but perhaps, he could become a major player in the genetics game. All he needed to do was slip away and disappear for a few years to study up without being noticed. The two vials of Jennifer's blood stashed in the front pocket of his shirt would bring in serious cash to finance his new endeavor and maybe he could reserve a little bit of it on the side for his own private use.

Lost in the idea of actually becoming a vampire, Samir passed by the next vent and barely caught sight in his peripheral vision of movement that interrupted the light's path passing through the metal slats. It was too late to react though as the creature's talons shot through and skewered Samir's arm. He let out a blood-curdling cry. The creature jerked him against the vent and tore his arm right out of the socket. Blood spurted everywhere.

Samir struggled to get his legs to work and push his body past the ventilation system, but had lost too much blood and it continued to spill from the gaping hole in his shoulder. "Please, God," he said, clutching his shoulder. "I need more time."

The creature's talons shot back through the vent and speared Samir in the spine, which severed feeling from his neck down. The creature ripped Samir's body through the vent without too much resistance. Besides,

Samir didn't even feel when his other arm was torn off so he could fit through the narrow space. It also meant that as unconsciousness swarmed like little black ants into the outer edges of his vision he had no choice, but to watch and listen to the disgusting creature as it skinned the flesh right off his bones and sunk its twisted fangs into the marrow with deviant glee.

* * *

Lawrence pressed his hulk-size back as flat as he could against the wall and slid down next to the submarine-like door without making a sound. The creature or what he'd initially thought might be a creature delivered its final puncture through the door and knocked out a large hole. As it reached in to crank the wheel to unlock the door, Robin launched forward and sliced her bestial claw down onto the creature's wrist chopping off its hand. Yet, it wasn't the mutilated extremity Lawrence expected nor did it show any signs of decomposition. In fact, it looked eerily similar to his hand, completely human, and though he yearned for a closer inspection, he didn't dare get too close to the gaping hole. He suspected whoever was on the other side was biding his time hoping for something just like that to happen. He wasn't about to start people-pleasing now.

After a few agonizing minutes where the tension was so thick it felt like the air was saturated in it, he motioned for Colleen to bring him a roll of gauze so he could wave it in front of the door. She was the closest one in proximity to the shelf jam-packed with medical supplies, so she set down the shotgun and retrieved the gauze. Then, she tiptoed toward Lawrence, but froze

suddenly mid-stride. A large drip of some warm liquid fell onto her cheek and was immediately followed by another. She wiped it off with a quick swipe of her fingers and stared at the crimson substance. “What the hell is this?” she whispered.

Everyone’s gaze rose to the ceiling and lingered unblinkingly there. Colleen cranked her head back as well to see what had them all so captivated. Along one side of the escape hatch, a dark substance pooled where the concrete and hatch met up. The liquid had soaked in through the microscopic gaps that seemed insignificant at the time of construction.

Colleen rubbed together the sticky liquid on her fingers, brought it to her nose, and sniffed the coppery odor. Her face instantly drained of color. “It’s blood,” she said softly. “Probably Samir’s.”

“Good,” Julie muttered beneath her breath. “It would serve him right.”

A creature’s hand shot through the opening in the door and latched onto the wheel. It was so quick that no one had time to even react. A second later, the door flew open and six vampires, one missing a hand, and a few creatures flooded into the room. Colleen instantly forgot about the blood on her fingertips and dive-rolled over to where she had left the shotgun propped against the medical shelf. She reached for it, realized she had the gauze still clutched in her hand, and released it. The shotgun was a true necessity for a situation like this. It had never failed her and she prayed it wouldn’t start now.

* * *

Another shotgun blast and the creature's decomposing brain matter splattered on the wall. Colleen chambered another shotgun shell full of buckshot and raced down the hallway to the blast-proof door. She didn't slow down as she darted by it and took the concrete stairwell steps, two at a time. Rushing into the Ryans' library via the almost completely open bookcase, her familiarity in battles for supremacy with the neighborhood kids in paintball wars, which she always lost, told her to keep running and not look back, but she spun around with the shotgun aimed at chest-level into the darkened space of the stairwell. She was no longer a child. "Come on out and face the music," she yelled. "I know you're there."

A creature staggered out from the shadows and held up a white strip of cloth, waving it in surrender. It could barely stand and it swayed from side to side like a weed caught in a storm after being sprayed with weed-killer. Colleen felt momentarily sorry for it and lowered the shotgun, but then caught sight of the beginnings of a grin at the corners of the creature's mouth. She re-aimed the shotgun. "I don't have time for this bullshit," she said, pulling the trigger. The blast knocked the creature back into the darkened stairwell where it tumbled to the bottom. When its head hit the cement floor, it made an almost identical sound to a pumpkin thrown off a second-story patio onto a sidewalk where it split open and all the innards spilled out. Colleen strutted over to the bookcase and shoved it close again. She couldn't rest... she could hear her friends needed her in the other room.

* * *

Lawrence glanced over at Jennifer who was having a hell of a time keeping one very determined vampire at bay. In fact, she probably wouldn't have the situation under control at all without Julie's help. Julie hobbled from one artifact case to the next and used its contents kept safe under plexiglass cases as weapons. From the fourteenth-century Mycenaean stirrup vase to ancient Mayan stoneware, nothing was sacred and Julie hurtled everything she could get her hands on with as much force as she could muster at the vampire. Jennifer took every spare moment to catch her breath as she fought against her own body's slow reaction time. It hadn't been given enough time to fully recuperate.

Lawrence recognized the two vampires pursuing him as former Triton University football players. They made the team because the offense needed strong, able men to keep the quarterback from being crushed by the opposition. Lawrence knew the fight to keep them from ripping his throat out like Jack the Ripper would be bloody and brutal, especially since the upgraded serum made them more like killing machines than vampires.

To make matters worse, Lawrence couldn't call out for Robin's help. Her plate was already full with a trio of vampires, including the one whose hand had been chopped off because of her quick reaction in the safe room. Yet, it was quite obvious he held a grudge as he persistently attacked her while the other two took turns resting. From Lawrence's position, the vampires hadn't succeeded in inflicting any fatal wounds on Robin's alter ego and that was a good thing. It meant they still had a chance to survive.

SEPTEMBER-WEDNESDAY- WASHINGTON D.C.

With one leap, Justin cleared the wraparound railing on the second-level balcony and dove to the floor face-first flattening his body as much as he could so as not to be seen by the Secret Service. He didn't move a muscle or even breathe. On his ascent to the balcony, he spotted who was responsible for triggering the alarm. Eno and Elizabeth had worked their way to the west side of the White House and amazingly managed not to trip any bells or whistles. Their downfall happened when they slipped a crowbar between the window and its' sill, and cranked down on it. That was what set-off a cacophony of ear-splitting security alarms.

By the time Justin saw them in his periphery, Eno and Elizabeth were high-tailing it over a tall, black iron fence with the crowbar left behind in the window. He wasn't fond of how close the two of them had come to actually infiltrating the White House. Regardless, his gut instinct warned that there was an even greater threat waiting to strike and he had better get inside to warn the president.

With the alarm's deactivation, the spotlights that swept across the property like a prison yard searching for an escapee ceased entirely. Justin moved closer, inch by inch, toward the balcony's door. He knew that the president would have a surprise visit from a well-respected doctor, according to some, and who also happened to be a Nobel Peace Prize Recipient. Of course, there was that nasty trait about the doctor being a werewolf, but Justin seriously doubted the president had the patience to believe in such wild, but very true tales.

Without warning, the glass in the balcony doors exploded like someone had set off a grenade from inside and shards of glass rained down onto Justin. He barely caught sight of the beefy secret service agent who was hurled out of it. He only had time to cover his head with his hands. When the agent landed smack dab on top of him, Justin did not make a sound. The warm, coppery smell of blood wafted in the air and was quite enticing. He couldn't help but think of his grandma's freshly-baked pies sitting in the window when he came to visit. The First Lady's loud sobs swiftly canceled his trip down memory lane.

Justin overheard the President of United States pleading with the intruder to have compassion for his predicament and let his family go so the two of them could speak in private and discuss whatever was on the man's mind. The invisible hand of fear took a hold of Justin's spine and shook it mercilessly. Goosebumps unleashed in waves across his body and filled him with trepidation, like the Hoover Dam suddenly developing a crack in it from an overload of water pressure and there was no way to escape the looming disaster because of a

traffic jam. Justin overheard the man's reply to the president's plea and it belonged to Dr. Grosse.

Justin placed his hands beneath his shoulders and pushed up to see if he could lift the agent's weight. He was able to without a problem. Dr. Grosse launched into a very heated discussion about the president's one-sided political views in regards to God and genetics. How Dr. Grosse even evaded detection by the secret service, the president's private security staff, and other failsafes was beyond puzzling. Justin surmised Dr. Grosse probably joined a touring group and when no one was looking, slipped away and hid somewhere within the president's living quarters.

Dr. Grosse's tone suddenly changed and became more animalistic. Justin knew it was now or never to make his move. He couldn't wait for Bradley though he promised him not more than fifteen minutes ago to do just that. He had a feeling that seconds counted now. As the *doctor's* voice rose steadily in aggression, Justin used it as cover to roll the agent's muscular body off him by simple doing a push-up. The deceased agent's body bumped against an outside table and the glass top rattled violently in its steel frame. Justin froze, but only angry words spewed from Dr. Grosse's mouth about the injustices of the human-infestation of the world and how it was the president's job to fix it. No one seemed the wiser.

Justin inhaled a deep ragged breath and let it out slowly as he tried to ease his nerves, but it didn't work. *Calm down. Just fucking calm down.* Colleen was right. He needed his posse's help to have a smidgen of hope in taking down Dr. Grosse's alternate, more evil side. He needed the U.S. Army or Marines to back him up,

too, but doubted either party would believe him without requisite proof. To provide that, he'd have to reveal his true self and that would likely prove fatal in a room crammed with armed men, their fingers itching at the triggers. Of course, it wasn't nearly as fatal as if he chose to go one-on-one with Dr. Grosse. Even if he recharged his body by sucking every last drop of blood out of the agent's body, it wouldn't change the probable outcome. He was going to die.

For a split second, Justin reconsidered his bold plan as the image of Jennifer's stunning facial features formed in his mind. He couldn't help but think about her waking up without him and the confusion she might feel. He still had time to catch a red-eye back to Los Angeles, grab the car, and speed down the freeway to be at her side by morning's light, especially with the three-hour time difference. The president had unlimited resources to defend his family against a madman. But, Dr. Grosse was so much more than a madman. He was a werewolf without an ounce of humanity left within his soul and nothing left to lose.

Justin knew what he had to do and was on his feet before he realized it. Jennifer was safe. Now, it was time to guarantee the president and his family stayed that way, too. He felt the heaviness of a powerful gaze boring into his skull and shifted his eyes to meet the evil ones that glared at him through the shattered door. "Good evening, doctor."

Dr. Grosse effortlessly began his transformation into a werewolf. His eyes transfixed on the young man who interrupted an ostentatious speech. "Justin, I'm surprised to see you here."

The distraction gave the president time to usher his wife and children out of the room. He locked the door behind them and searched for a place to hide. Dr. Grosse didn't notice or if he did, didn't care.

Justin's fangs shot forth through his gums. His nails grew into razor-sharp talons, but it was strikingly more painful than the previous evening when he'd killed Dr. Cohn. He raised his fingertips and stared at the talons. They were more steel in structure than keratin-base now. "What the hell is that serum doing to me?"

Dr. Grosse opened his mouth that was crammed full of wolf-like teeth. "Dr. Cohn."

Justin's brown eyes were suddenly swamped in inky blackness like an oil reserve was struck by filthy rich Texans. "What about him?"

Dr. Grosse's jaw jutted out and his ears grew larger. The terror inside him manipulated his bones, muscles, and stretched his skin, essentially shredding his clothes. "An upgrade."

Justin shifted his feet into a boxing stance and raised his fists accordingly. "What upgrade?"

Dr. Grosse bared his teeth. "Won't. Tell."

Justin stepped through the serrated pieces of glass that still remained in the balcony door and into the impressive room. "Man up," he said, his face morphing into a vampire. "Isn't this what you wanted all along?"

Dr. Grosse shook like a wet dog drying off after a bath and ruffled the thick coarse hair that blanketed every square inch of his body until it looked similar to a lion's mane. He grinned with an evil that most serial killers portray since they're blessed with no conscious

and have no remorse about the lives they shatter due to their heinous crimes.

Dr. Grosse ignored the question and took a step toward the silk curtains and American Flag where the president hid for protection. It was obvious he was there, but not because the tips of his well-polished black shoes stuck out from beneath the curtains or that the flag wavered unnaturally since no air flowed through the room. Justin knew the president was there just the same as Dr. Grosse because of the over-whelming scent of cologne, the one with a little white ship on the bottle, which barely masked the full-blown stench of nervous sweat.

Justin wasn't sure why the president had opted to stay behind once his family was safely out of striking distance. He knew the president would never survive an attack from a werewolf no matter how much faith he had in the red, white, and blue. It wouldn't protect him from Dr. Grosse, who didn't believe in patriotism. The doctor's sole purpose was to kill the president, take over the Oval Office, and rule one of the most powerful nations without going through the rigmarole of electoral votes. The American people would accept his command and his new order or die a horribly gruesome death on national television.

Justin felt trapped in a waking nightmare and for a moment, couldn't move his feet. He swore his tennis shoes had turned into concrete slabs. Dr. Grosse took another impressive stride toward the president, but Justin's fight or flight instinct suddenly kicked in. He leapt onto Dr. Grosse's back, wrapped his legs around the doctor's stomach, and plunged his talons repeatedly into the front of the doctor's chest.

Dr. Grosse reached over, seized hold of Justin's shoulder, and plucked him off his back like he weighed nothing more than a fly. Then, just as easily, he flicked Justin across the room where he crashed into a collage of silver picture frames of the president's family and crumpled to the floor.

Justin dragged himself back onto his feet as Dr. Grosse started back toward the president. "We have a mutual acquaintance," he said. "You remember Robin, don't you? Robin Michaels?"

Dr. Grosse pivoted aggressively and bared his wolf-like teeth.

"Oh, you do remember," Justin taunted. "Well, she packs way more of a wallop than you just did."

Dr. Grosse knocked a solid wooden table made of walnut aside like it was made out of nothing more than tinker toys. A werewolf had phenomenal strength and uncanny observation skills, but was hard to believe unless one witnessed it with their own eyes. Any other being, human or vampire alike, would die with so many strikes to the heart, but the doctor barely flinched as if each of Justin's talons were as lethal as a feather.

Werewolves were vicious, but it was their innermost selves that made them the man-killing kind or not. They would rise within seconds of taking a mortal hit and continue chasing their prey. The only way a human could stop it from devouring him, or her, was to have a gun strapped to his side filled with molded silver bullets and shoot one directly into the werewolf's heart or use a liquefied silver dispensing agent inside a hollow point bullet that upon impact the tip expanded and diminished penetration. It would disperse the liquefied silver and spread it throughout the werewolf's blood stream.

Justin learned a lot from Robin right before he and Bradley left for the LAX airport on what she called a suicide mission. She gave him a quick fact list on werewolves and the only two things known to kill them. She explained how silver in any form reacts with their composition and even being in contact with it for a short stint leaves first and second-degree burns, which aren't noticeable until the werewolf morphs back into its human form again. The only other way to assure its death is to cut off its head by any means necessary. She also told Justin to kick Dr. Grosse in the groin if he got close enough. It would piss him off, but would slow him down for a moment. And, she said, not to worry about Jennifer. She would protect her no matter what it cost.

Dr. Grosse raked a vicious claw across Justin's chest and not only tore his shirt, but filleted the flesh beneath it. Blood spilled from the wounds, gathered and spread into the cotton fibers like a wildfire. It trickled to the bottom of his shirt and dripped into a crimson pool at his feet. Dr. Grosse's next strike was drilled into Justin's abdomen and it punctured his intestines. When Dr. Grosse withdrew his hand, he licked each elongated claw almost as if he was savoring the flavor.

Justin didn't collapse to the floor, but might as well have as exhaustion drained the stability of his legs. "Go ahead, take your best shot," he said. "You can't kill me."

Dr. Grosse snatched Justin by the throat, shoved him against the wall, and lifted him effortlessly off the ground. "You. Are. Dead."

Justin felt the iron-clad grip tighten around his neck. Dr. Grosse reeled back with his other hand and

Justin witnessed his black eyes glance toward his chest. He knew Dr. Grosse's intention was to rip out his heart, so he wasted no time and kicked him in the groin. Pain registered in Dr. Grosse's eyes. "Fuck you," Justin yelled, kicking the doctor between his legs again.

For a brief second, the werewolf's grip around Justin's neck loosened, so Justin rammed his talons into the formidable arm and caused a howl of agony to escape the doctor's lips. "That's right, asshole," he said. "I'm not going down without a fight."

Instead of dropping Justin, Dr. Grosse threw him across the room where he crashed into the opposite wall, caving in some of the plaster. A werewolf's strength was insurmountable in legend, but more so in real life. Even Roman Gladiators forced to battle one in a large arena would have fear in their hearts as they witnessed the creature's awesome, but terrifying power.

Justin shook his head to clear away the darkness creeping its way into his periphery. He struggled to his feet and swiped away the blood trickling down his chin. "I'm still not dead, yet, asshole. Come on!"

Dr. Grosse's eyes narrowed. "Not. Yet."

A baseball-size, golden eagle suddenly exploded out of Dr. Grosse's chest and sprayed blood all over Justin's face like a high-powered sprinkler watering grass at a golf course. Justin seized the moment though he had no idea what was going on and used his talons like a pair of hedge shears, ramming them through the center of Dr. Grosse's neck. He jerked his hands apart and severed Dr. Grosse's head, which dropped to the floor and rolled only an inch or two. The rest of Dr. Grosse's body collapsed onto the floor and transformed

back into its human state. It also revealed the man responsible for helping Justin defeat the beast.

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

“The thanks is mine,” he said, releasing the end of the flag pole, which clattered to the floor behind the headless naked body of Dr. Grosse. “You saved my life as well as my family’s. I owe you my life, son.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Justin said. “Just keep an open mind when someone says vampires and werewolves are mindless monsters who terrorize cities and its citizens with no remorse. That isn’t true. Some of them fight for the good of mankind.”

The president nodded and glanced at Justin’s talons. “So where are you from?”

“Triton City, California, sir.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Yes sir, I am,” Justin said. “But I had to make sure you and your family stayed safe. There were two other vampires here earlier tonight that meant to do you harm, but your security system scared them off.”

“Oh, they didn’t trigger it,” the president said with a dismissive wave. “I learned there might be an attempt on mine and my family’s life by a certain, let’s say former leader of the toughest unit in the marines. Now, he’s Chief of Security for Ashton Enterprises. I’m pretty sure you know him.”

Justin grinned. “John Meade.”

“What the hell did I miss?”

Both Justin and the president jumped as Bradley entered the room from the balcony. “I thought I said to wait.”

“Dr. Grosse was a little early,” Justin replied. “I did what I had to do.”

Bradley rolled his eyes. “You are a rebel. I left for a whopping twenty minutes or so to go get us something to add to our arsenal and you take on Dr. Jekyll all by yourself. ”

“I hate to interrupt,” the president said, “but a few of my colleagues will be in here to make sure I’m still breathing. I say we keep your true identities secret for the moment and get our story straight about what happened here. Then once everyone has had a chance to calm down, we can come up with a plan to eradicate the walking dead in Triton City and anywhere else this virus might have spread to.”

Justin heard the heavy fall of footsteps rushing down the hallway and turned to Bradley. “Were you able to find anything?”

Bradley held up a serrated bread knife. “This was all I could find on such short notice. Well, it was this or a marble rolling pin. The owner of the bakery will probably be pissed when he arrives in the morning and finds his business burglarized, but thrilled when he realizes nothing was taken except a bread knife.”

Justin grabbed the bread knife out of Bradley’s hand and dipped it in Dr. Grosse’s blood. Then, he dropped it next to the body a split second before an army of secret service agents busted into the room with weapons drawn. “Here we go,” he whispered, raising his hands in the air. “Just follow my lead, Bradley.”

SEPTEMBER-THURSDAY-ROMANIA

Brenda paced in front of a row of five, hardback plastic chairs that were cracked, battered, and crammed almost on top of each other in the emergency waiting room. She gnawed nervously at her fingernails. The admitting physician had come in about an hour earlier to tell her and the others that Maria did have significant internal bleeding. If they had arrived fifteen minutes later, her odds of recovery would've been no more than two percent because the damage was so extensive. The E.R. doctor would've had to induce a medical coma to ease her suffering, but regardless, Maria would've died and that's with one of the best surgeons in the world on loan from another hospital in India.

Brenda was quite aware she owed her life as well as Maria's to C.J. In fact, if C.J. had not selflessly jumped into the ominous void, plummeted hundreds of feet, and been swallowed up by the Arges River, taking an overzealous werewolf with her, none of them would have stood a chance nor made it out of the damn forest alive. Still, she couldn't believe the other werewolf that Eric had taken on hadn't sprung from the bushes while they raced back through the trees, down the mountain. In her opinion, there was no way Eric could've survived

the encounter in his weakened condition and there sure wasn't enough left of him to fill a ravenous werewolf's appetite.

C.J.'s act of heroism was the beginning of their miraculous journey to the hospital. It was almost like C.J. had become their guardian angel. Everything went their way. They found their way out of the horrible maze of trees and were greeted by acres upon acres of farmland. Much of it was divided into two acre parcels farmed by owners using plows and hoes to tend to the fields by hand, but a few were lucky enough to have horses helping with the back-breaking work. Damon pointed out a couple tractors and one grape picker as a possible mode of transportation, but neither would give them the speed they needed.

On a faith-driven whim, Greg told everyone to wait, gave up his side of Maria's body to Brenda, and dashed across a perfectly-ripe vineyard following the guide wire and up to a man with a weathered face who he believed was the owner and a viticulturist. The man vehemently shouted in Romanian for Greg to get off his property. Greg had no idea what the man was trying to convey, but with hand gestures Greg managed to make the man understand that a friend was injured and in desperate need of a doctor.

The viticulturist stared at Greg with cold gray eyes and lingered on his bare chest and tattered jeans. Then, he placed two fingers to his chapped lips and whistled. Within a few seconds, another man wearing a cowboy hat rode up on a beautiful black stallion and they conversed in hushed whispers. They glanced intermittently at Greg and finally nodded in agreement. The viticulturist tossed a set of keys to the horse rider,

who slipped them into his pants pocket, and urged Greg to climb onto the horse behind the rider. Greg did as he was instructed and held on for dear life as the man slapped the horse's butt. It galloped across the field like it had been struck by lightning.

In under a minute, the modern-day cowboy pulled back on the reins and slowed the stallion down to a trot. He steered the horse inside a dilapidated wooden barn that smelled of large, steaming piles of manure and freshly-cut hay. Greg wondered if the cowboy brought him out of sight of the other workers so he could put a bullet in his head and not feel bad about it later, but a few more horse strides into the barn explained the cowboy's intention. The viticulturist had him take Greg to where there were lots of horses - browns, whites, and a young black and white pony - but in the last stall, a lot of horsepower was sitting quiet. It was a luxurious Infiniti M.

The cowboy said nothing at first and waited for Greg to dismount. Once down on the ground, he pulled out the car keys and tossed them to Greg. "Vă rugăm să aduceți-l înapoi într-o singură bucată."

Greg stretched out his arm and shook the rider's hand. "I don't have any idea what you're saying, but I'll do my best to bring the car back in one piece if that's any consolation."

The cowboy nodded, spurred the horse gently in the sides, and rode out of the barn. Greg climbed in behind the steering wheel and slid the key into the ignition. A gentle twist and the engine purred like a kitten. He carefully pulled out of the stall, through the barn doors, and headed toward the others. They still had

a long way to go, but as luck would have it, nothing slowed them down again.

* * *

When the surgeon glided into the waiting room with his assistant a few paces behind him, Brenda wasn't sure what to expect. It had been over five hours since Maria was rushed into surgery to try to fix the damage to her internal organs and set quite a few broken bones. "How is she?"

The fiftyish-looking surgeon swept his graying hair off his forehead and spoke English, but it still had a thick Indian accent. "She needs to stay here for at least a week before she can be moved at all. We will do everything in our power to make her comfortable. Then, we can arrange for medical transport to Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Will that work for you?"

Tears filled Brenda's eyes. "Yes, that's perfect."

"We will just need you to sign a consent form."

"No problem," Brenda replied. "When can I see her?"

"As soon as she's out of recovery."

"Sounds great."

Greg walked over to the surgeon and shook his and his assistant's hand. "Thank you. You have no idea how much we needed to hear that."

"Welcome," the surgeon said, brushing off his hand on his surgical attire. He turned abruptly without another word and strutted down the hallway with his assistant following like an obedient little puppy dog.

* * *

With the surgeon's prognosis about Maria's recovery and his plan to get her back to the States safely, Brenda felt a great weight lift off her shoulders. She could say farewell without feeling guilty about leaving Maria with the others to go search for C.J. There was no doubt they would understand her quest, especially Greg. For the rest of her life, which was more-than-likely a long ass time, would be spent scouring the banks of the Arges River for C.J.'s body. And truthfully, she didn't care what anyone else thought – C.J. deserved to have a proper burial service. Greg would support her in that endeavor. She was sure of it.

Brenda swallowed the lump of emotion that had suddenly arrived in her throat. "I'm going to take a step outside for some fresh air," she said. "I won't be long."

"I'll go with you." Greg said, winking at Emily. "A little fresh air sounds good."

* * *

C.J. struggled to open her eyes to see what was going on around her, but it was like a black veil had been knotted tightly around her head and she couldn't do it. Seemingly distant voices reached her ears and she strained to make out the words, but couldn't. In fact, it sounded a lot like gibberish and it dawned on her that perhaps people in the afterlife had their own language. Then, the dark stormy clouds parted inside her head and allowed the overhead lights of the hospital room to shine through like the sun.

A tall and very handsome doctor noticed C.J.'s eye's squinting against the brightness. "You had quite

the ordeal,” he said, in a tired Romanian accent. “You are lucky they found you.”

C.J.’s throat felt like she had downed a handful of broken glass. “Who?” she croaked.

“A group of vampire fanatics on a vampire bus tour,” the doctor chuckled. “They thought you actually were one when they saw you along the river bank. One even claimed you had fangs.”

C.J. ran her tongue over her teeth. “Did I?”

“No,” the doctor said with a genuine smile, “but you might as well be one. You were a mess when they brought you in or so I heard. The amount of blood on your clothes was enough to convince me that you were involved in some horrific accident. According to the emergency room staff, you had bruises the size of cantaloupes all over your body. However, I only see a few minor ones now and a few scratches. Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“I jumped into the river,” C.J. said.

“On purpose?” the doctor asked in amazement.

“Yeah,” C.J. said, trying to sit up with the use of the silver arm rails. “I was being chased.”

“By what?” the doctor asked.

C.J. hesitated. “More of by whom.”

“Well, they did bring a man in with multiple bone fractures right after you arrived, but he’s suffering from memory loss. He can’t even tell us where he left his clothes.”

“He came in naked?” C.J. asked, falling back against the mountain of pillows supporting her head as exhaustion swamped her body.

“Apparently,” the doctor replied. “So, who was chasing you?”

“A werewolf.”

The doctor patted her hand and stifled a grin. “I think you’re still rattled from the frigid water.” he said. “This time of year it gets so cold that it can cause a person to have hypothermia in less than ten minutes. How long do you think you were in the water?”

C.J. shrugged. “I have no idea,” she said. “It felt like an hour.”

“My dear, you wouldn’t be alive if that was the case,” the doctor said, sitting down on the edge of C.J.’s bed. “Your vital signs, although weak when you were first brought in, indicated more along the lines of five minutes.”

C.J. arched an eyebrow. “Unless I actually am a vampire and was being chased by a werewolf.”

An amused grin spread across the doctor’s face. “My dear, just like werewolves, vampires don’t exist.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I assure you that they don’t,” the doctor said, easing his body off the bed. “If something was chasing you, it was probably a black bear or a plain ole wolf. Don’t get me wrong, both can be quite intimidating but we don’t have any supernatural beasts running around rampant in these parts no matter what’s printed to the contrary. Now, get some rest and I’ll be back to check in on you shortly.”

C.J. fought to keep her eyes open as the doctor left, pulling the door shut behind him. “Don’t sleep,” she muttered repeatedly. After a full minute had passed, her eyelids grew heavy and she fell into a deep slumber.

* * *

Greg and Brenda sat on a concrete bench and stared out at the cars parked in the parking lot right in front of the glass façade of the Bucharest hospital. It reminded Greg of how similar the hospital and Ashton Enterprises were in their infrastructure. He could not deny how much he longed to be home, but it was nothing compared to his desire to have his sister return from the icy abyss of the Arges River, alive and unhurt. Hell, he'd be okay with her just being alive. Her wounds would heal with time and a steady blood supply... even if he had to be the one to donate it to her. Yet, he knew the woman sitting next to him felt the same way and would probably rip off her own arm to pour the generously flowing blood directly into C.J.'s mouth in an attempt to save her.

Brenda reached over and patted his knee. "You seem a million miles away. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said, giving her the best half-hearted smile he could muster. "I was just thinking about C.J. How are you holding up?"

"I'm going after her," Brenda said in a voice so low no one but another vampire could have heard her. "She would come looking for us, you know?"

"I know," Greg said. "So, what is your plan?"

"Don't have one yet," Brenda said, standing up and brushing off the back of her jeans, "but I will."

Greg studied her for a second and then stood up, too. "Well, I'm coming with you and we can just wing it if it comes down to that."

A rush of joy surged into Brenda's heart and she hugged him. "Thank you for backing me on this," she said. "But what about Emily?"

"She'll understand," Greg said. "I have no doubt about that."

* * *

When C.J. next opened her eyes, the same doctor was gently shaking her shoulder. “I’m sorry to disturb you,” he said, “but there are a couple people anxious to see you. Are you up for visitors?”

“Who is it?”

“A couple of school friends,” the doctor replied. “They said you ate wild berries and it apparently made you hallucinate. You took off into an old abandon mine or something, and then there was a cave-in. They said they were shocked to learn you were in the hospital, still alive, while having lunch earlier.”

C.J. was stunned that anyone in her group would claim something as ludicrous as her eating wild berries. “Are you sure that’s what they said?”

“Yes.”

“Did these two friends say anything else?”

“One of them told me that your name is Carissa J. Ashton, C.J. for short. I was very thankful for the information because I forgot to ask you when we were discussing the vampire thing earlier.”

C.J. pressed her fingertips against the side of her head and massaged her temples. “Yeah, so thankful.”

“You should be thankful that they were smart enough to listen to those vampire fanatics conversing at the restaurant and checked the hospital before heading back to the U.S.”

“Have they seen me yet?”

“No,” the doctor answered, somewhat surprised, “but one of the young men described what you looked like to the nurse at the emergency check-in desk and it

fit your description to the ‘T’. He said he was your brother.”

“Greg,” C.J. whispered, relief washing over her face as she relaxed her head back against the pillow. “He’s the only person who ever refers to me by my real name and it’s only when he’s really pissed.”

“I don’t recall their names, but they really are anxious to see you,” the doctor said with an easy smile.

“Is there anyone else with them? A woman, perhaps?” C.J. asked, silently congratulating herself at being able to put together a comprehensive sentence. “She’s tall and slim, dark brown hair and has the most magnificent green eyes.”

“I don’t think so,” the doctor said, tapping his chin with an index finger. “You know, now that I think about it, they did mention their names and neither claimed to be this Greg fellow.”

The room began to spin in C.J.’s mind and she gripped the one arm rail still raised to keep her from tumbling out of bed. “Do you remember what they told you their names were?”

“Doug and...oh yeah, Steven.”

C.J.’s jaw dropped open and she violently shook her head in protest. “Not my friends.”

“Is that anyway to talk about me,” Steven said, breezing into the hospital room like he owned it. “Why are you being so stubborn? I told you not to eat those berries.”

“I’ll be back shortly,” the doctor said, getting up so Steven could sit down beside C.J.

C.J. reached out and tightly grasped the doctor’s hand. “Please don’t leave me.”

Genuine concern washed over the doctor's face. "I'll be right outside the door, okay?"

Steven smiled as the doctor gently pulled his hand away and moved away from the bed. He took a seat where the doctor had just risen and flashed his brilliantly white fangs at C.J. "Why are you being this way," he said. "You know it's not healthy for those around you."

C.J. ignored the wave of nausea that crashed into her stomach. "Okay," she said, offering the doctor a weak smile. "Just don't go too far."

"I won't," the doctor said.

"Good girl," Steven whispered. Then, he turned his head slightly toward the door. "Doug, you can come in now."

Doug appeared in the doorway but refused to move aside as the doctor tried to exit. The doctor had no other choice but to back up, step aside, and allow Doug entry into the room first. "How is the good, little patient?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder to make sure the doctor had left the room and they were alone.

C.J. gritted her teeth.

Doug removed a syringe out of his pocket and slipped off the plastic tip. "I bet you're in need of some kind of toxic cocktail to help you sleep, aren't you?"

"No," C.J. said, fighting Steven in her weakened state as he held down her arms. "Leave me alone!"

"Stop squirming," Steven said. "It'll only hurt for a second."

Doug leaned over the railing and hovered the tip of the needle above the crook of C.J.'s arm.

"What the hell are the two of you doing?" the doctor interrupted, glaring at them from the hallway.

Steven whipped around and exposed his fangs at the doctor, who did a double-take before dashing down the corridor screaming hysterically. “We will be right back,” Steven said, grinning like a madman, “so don’t go anywhere.”

SEPTEMBER-WEDNESDAY- WASHINGTON D.C.

Justin and Bradley sat side-by-side in awkward silence at the far end of a long oval table and tried not to fidget in the lush leather seats. The president was seated in the center, on the East side, a long-standing tradition for the presidency according to Justin. He drummed his fingers impatiently listening to his supposed top advisors throw out ideas on how to contain the situation in Triton City without wiping out innocent civilians. There were no reports about the epidemic spreading to more populated areas like San Francisco, Sacramento, or Los Angeles, which was a good sign, but Justin knew it was probably too good to be true.

The advisors weren't told anything about the cave-in at the Ryans' diamond mine years earlier or what was found there. There hadn't been enough time to fill-in the president about much of anything before they arrived at The Cabinet Room. Justin still felt the president wasn't out of the woods yet and voiced his concerns as soon as they were out of earshot of the Secret Service. The president decided to limit divulging certain information until he knew for certain that there

wasn't going to be another attack on him or his family. He confided that he didn't put it past any of his advisors to be a mole.

"This is it?" the president asked, his voice rising uncharacteristically in anger. "This is the best you can come up with?" He looked each advisor in the eyes.

"Sir, you're asking us to do the impossible," one of the advisors replied, scratching the bald spot running straight down the center of his head.

Justin focused his attention on the advisor's bald spot and saw a mist of new hair rising from the scalp. "I might have a solution," he interrupted, "but it won't be a popular one."

"Go ahead," the president said.

"Get me and Bradley back to Triton as soon as possible. We'll need some extra help, like the National Guard or something, but we can sweep every house and every building to guarantee that every last non-infected resident gets out. Then, when we're sure everyone is in the clear, we'll give you the go ahead to level the city."

The bald advisor placed his elbows on the table and rubbed his hands vigorously over his face. "That only happens in movies, kids, not in real life. Besides, how would you know who was infected and who wasn't?"

"Did you ever hear the saying if it quacks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck," Justin said, "than it must be a duck?"

"Yeah, when I was a child," the advisor replied. "Probably around your age."

A few of the other advisors chuckled.

“Well, imagine if you had trackers that could spot someone infected even if their transition was in its infancy,” Justin said, with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

Bradley leaned over. “What are you doing?”

“Just wait.”

The advisor looked unconvinced. “Do you know of any of these supposed,” he started, holding up two fingers from each hand and using them as quotation mark symbols, “trackers?”

“Yes, for starters, me, and there are quite a few others.”

“Do you believe this punk?” the advisor asked, turning his attention to the president.

“I do,” the president replied. “He saved my life, remember?”

The advisor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Yes, that may be true, but perhaps he’s the one with an ulterior motive.”

“Like what?” Justin challenged. “Exposing you for what you really are?”

The advisor chuckled and leaned back in his seat clasping his hands together and resting them on his belly. “So what am I?”

“A vampire,” Justin said. “And, not the nice kind either.”

“Prove it,” the advisor replied confidently.

“Can you see yourself in mirrors?”

The advisor rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

“Can you handle the smell of garlic?”

“It’s not my favorite,” he replied, “but I don’t mind it from time to time in Italian dishes.”

Bradley snickered. *That’s obvious*

Justin saw the advisor sneer though Bradley never spoke the words aloud, only thought them. “Do you have an aversion to crucifixes?”

“Don’t you mean crosses?”

“No,” Justin said. “I mean crucifixes and there is a difference. Would you like to know what it is?”

“No!” the advisor said, slamming the palm of his hand against the table. “And, I don’t have an aversion to damn religious water, either.”

Justin had the advisor right where he wanted him. “Do you like the taste of blood?”

Stunned silence and a look of sheer aggravation.

The president tapped his index finger against his cheek as his thumb cradled his very sleek chin. The rest of his digits were curled up with the middle one planted firmly between his upper lip and nose. “He asked you a question, Tom. Answer it.”

Around the table, the other advisors had a mix of emotion on their faces. “It’s a stupid question,” Tom retorted.

“Just answer it,” the president said.

Tom shifted his focus back to Justin and rose from his chair. “You’re too young to understand what it’s like growing old,” he replied. “Your hair falls out, you can’t keep your waistline in check, and forget about your libido, there’s no way of getting it back.”

“Unless you sell your soul, right?”

“It’s called adapting.”

“No matter what you call it, it’s still selling your soul.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed and his fangs descended into full view of those in attendance. He sprang onto the table and rushed toward Justin with superhuman-like

agility. All the other advisors scattered in fright and took off out the door. The president didn't move a muscle. He simply waited and watched as Tom's nails grew into talons sharp enough to skewer any object. Bradley decided it was time to protect his offensive center instead of the other way around. When Tom arrived within striking distance of Justin, which was under two seconds, Bradley kicked Justin's chair out of the way and toppled Justin over onto the floor. Tom sailed into the empty spot, but his momentum was abruptly stopped mid-air by an excruciating pain in his chest.

Tom flailed his limbs in a desperate attempt to get unstuck from Bradley's talons like a fish on a hook. Bradley slung Tom into the nearest wall and in doing so, his talons slid out with ease since they were coated in blood. Tom stood up again, snarled at Bradley, and was ready to battle, but Bradley was tired of theatrics. With no hesitation, he rushed forward and speared Tom through the heart with one talon, penetrating the wall behind him. Then, he jerked his hand to the side and snapped off the talon. Blood spilled from his finger, but he couldn't help but smile.

"Good job," Justin said, picking up the chair.

Bradley waited to reply until he heard the final thump of Tom's heartbeat. Then, he brushed his hands off. "All in a day's work."

The president stood. "Son, I need someone like you on my private security staff."

"Are you offering me a job, sir?" Bradley asked almost giddy with excitement.

"I am," the president said. "In fact, I'm offering you both a job."

Justin stood a little prouder. “Thank you for the opportunity, sir, but I have to get back to home. My girlfriend will be waiting for me.”

The president nodded his head and turned to Bradley. “And you?”

“I’d love to,” Bradley said, “as long as my buddy here believes he can handle things back there by himself.”

“I can,” Justin stated firmly.

The president clapped his hands. “Fantastic,” he said. “Now, let me go round up the rest of the advisors and get their sorry scared butts back in here.”

As soon as the president left the room, Bradley turned to Justin. “I don’t have anyone waiting for me in Triton City, so it’s best I stay here and lend a hand.”

“That’s your decision,” Justin said, “but I think Colleen will be very disappointed if she doesn’t get a chance to see you again.”

“Colleen?” Bradley questioned in surprise. “The same Colleen who almost blew off my head the other night?”

“Yep, the same one.”

“Why would you think she’d be disappointed?”

“Because if she didn’t like you just a little bit,” Justin said, “she’d have pulled the trigger.”

Bradley stroked his chin. “That’s interesting.”

* * *

The president’s private helicopter touched down in the Ryans’ expansive lawn directly behind the helicopter pad. It was too large of a chopper to chance landing on it. The swirling rotors caused the surrounding grass to

bow down, and even as far away as the orchard, the leaves rustled in noisy protest. Justin saluted the pilot with the utmost respect though he had no idea if he was doing it correctly and carefully climbed out. When he was at a safe distance, the chopper took off and headed back toward Washington D.C.

Justin sprinted toward the Ryans' house and stopped short when he saw the front door standing wide open. He took a deep breath and barreled through the front entry expecting to be assaulted by creatures, but none stood in his way. There was a large amount of blood smeared across the floor-to-ceiling mirror and a significant crack that ran down the middle. Chunks of a creature littered the hallway like a shag rug and Justin felt its rotten flesh squish beneath his shoes as he traversed deeper into the house. There was no way of knowing how many of Dr. Cohn's creatures flooded in through the front door, but it was quite apparent how hard the others fought to keep them at bay. If they were still alive, it would be a miracle.

Justin glanced into the kitchen that had once been an executive chef's dream with top-of-the-line appliances and enough cabinet space to house all the necessities needed to feed a small army, but now it was as inviting as a butcher's meat locker. He proceeded into the dining room where the solid oak table had been smashed into pieces and resembled something more like kindling to help start a fire than an expensive piece of furniture. The living room's artifacts were severely damaged with most of the ancient vases decimated by whatever had happened in the room. It was like a small weapon of mass destruction had gone off and flattened everything in its path.

As Justin made his way into the library, he saw the bookshelf, which was supposed to be hiding the entryway into the basement, ajar. Then, he saw the destruction of the rest of the room. It reminded him of a scene from an end of the world movie where survivors locked themselves away in a library, burned books in the fireplace to stay warm, and waited for rescue. Of course, that movie ended happily with the heroic father showing up right at the end and rescuing his son. Justin wasn't so sure he'd get the same fairy tale ending by the looks of it.

* * *

Justin proceeded toward the room where he had left Jennifer over thirty-six hours before in the hands of almost complete strangers. Sure, they had been through a tremendous amount together over the past week, give or take a day, but loyalty didn't happen over night. He couldn't blame anyone but himself if she was ripped to shreds. He had been the one to leave her while she lay unconscious.

Each door Justin passed stood wide open with a circular chunk of metal torn out of it. A battle of epic proportions had taken place and he inevitably missed it. He hoped Jennifer had to, but from the looks of it there wasn't any escaping whatever had occurred and that terrified him. Whispers drifted through the stagnant air and several times he stopped and listened, but it was pointless. As he neared the room, the whispers evolved into full-blown human voices. He joyously recognized one of them right away. *Jennifer.*

Stepping through the open doorway, Justin laid his eyes on the beautiful woman who'd stolen his heart years earlier. Her dark brown hair flowed flawlessly off her shoulders and down her exquisite back. She was wrapping a stretchable bandage around the lower part of Colleen's forearm and the clean scent of rubbing alcohol dominated the room. When all conversation suddenly ceased behind her, Jennifer turned around to see why. Her eyes were clear and bright like a perfect blue sky.

"Jennifer?" Justin asked apprehensively. "Do you remember me?"

Jennifer cocked her head to the side and the makings of a smile pulled at the corners of her lips. Her teeth were brilliantly white and perfectly even, with the exception of a couple of them having sharper points. "I remember the butterflies."

Justin's heart sank.

As soon as Justin's face fell slightly, Jennifer added, "And, that you're the love of my life."

Justin swept Jennifer into his arms and kissed her passionately. Tears streamed down his face. "And, you're the love of mine."

Colleen eye's searched the empty space behind them. She glanced at Lawrence, and then stared at the floor. "Did Bradley not make it?"

"He was offered a job by the president and took it," Justin said.

"That's good news," Robin said, strolling into the room with a couple eight ounce glasses full of ice. "It's good to see you, Justin. Sorry I didn't say anything when you came in. We've had one heck of a parade of

unwanted visitors, so I made myself like a fly and clung to the kitchen ceiling.”

“An awfully big one,” Justin chuckled.

“Well,” Robin said, setting the glasses down on the edge of a shelf and tightening the white robe around her. “You are what you are.”

“True.”

“So what’s Bradley’s job title?” Robin asked.

Justin ran his fingers through Jennifer’s silky hair “Lead Investigator of White House Security, I think.”

“Very impressive,” Robin said, turning to Julie, who was restacking medical supplies. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Julie said, adjusting the crutches beneath her arms that helped support her weight and keep it off her swollen ankle. “I do have one question though.”

“Sure, shoot,” Robin said.

“Why is he standing in the doorway then if he’s supposed to be at the White House?”

Colleen instantly looked up. “Bradley,” she said though it was as loud as a soft breath.

“I’m here because we have a shitload of work to get done.”

“And what would that be?” Lawrence asked.

“We need to make sure the city is completely evacuated,” Bradley replied, before softening his tone. “Then, I’ll have time to take Colleen out on a date.”

“Wha...what?” Colleen stammered.

Bradley glided across the room like Fred Astaire and gently took hold of Colleen’s uninjured arm. “Just give me a chance.”

Colleen locked her green eyes with his and bit down on her lower lip. “At what?”

“Being a gentleman and accepting an invitation to dinner when this is all done.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say yes,” Bradley replied.

Colleen blushed. “Yes.”

Bradley’s grin spread across his handsome face as he slowly released her arm. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“I keep my promises,” Colleen said, “but don’t try any funny business.”

“You have *my* word.”

Justin lifted Jennifer high into the air. “So what happened? Where’s Samir?”

Jennifer wrapped her legs around Justin’s waist and gazed into his brown eyes. “We should all probably sit down and compare notes,” she said, an ornery smile gracing her lips. “I have a feeling there’s a lot of filling-in the blanks we’re going to have to do.”

“Have you heard from Eric or the others yet?” Justin asked hopefully.

Jennifer’s smile disappeared. Lawrence got off the black, leather-topped stool and placed a consoling hand on Justin’s shoulder. “No, we haven’t yet, but I’m sure we will.”

Justin nodded his head. “Good, because I really want Eric to be my best man.”

“Best man?” Jennifer said, her eyes sparkling.

“Life’s too short,” Justin said. “We need to live every day as if it were our last.”

“Because one day, vampire or not, it will be,” Jennifer finished, kissing him once again.

SEPTEMBER-THURSDAY-ROMANIA

Greg and Brenda stepped through the opening elevator doors and hurried down the hospital corridor toward Maria's room. They hadn't been in the waiting room when the doctor came in and informed the others that Maria was out of recovery and being wheeled to a room on the sixth floor. As they passed by the nurses' station, a man's terrified scream reverberated along the walls. It was so gut-wrenching it caused Greg and Brenda to immediately stop in their tracks as pulse-pounding panic rippled across almost every female nurse's face. A couple male nurses rushed to their side, while a few more jerked open drawers and rummaged around to arm themselves with syringes and scissors.

"This can't be good," Greg said, witnessing the terror. He nudged Brenda in the side. "Come on."

Brenda lengthened her stride to keep up with Greg's aggressive pace. "Where are we going?"

"To see what's going on," Greg said. "Maybe we can help."

There was no way for Greg and Brenda to know the doctor overseeing Maria's road to recovery was the same one treating C.J.'s as well. The doctor tore around

the corner as if he unexpectedly awoke to find himself as a participant in the running of bulls. He crashed into a metal cart filled with medical supplies and tumbled onto the floor, but was back on his feet in no time and raced toward them without any intention of slowing down. “They’re real!” he babbled almost incoherently. “I didn’t believe her! Oh my god, I didn’t believe her.”

Greg positioned his feet into a more solid stance and raised his arm out to the side so he could stop the doctor without striking him. Steven barreled around the corner right after him and Greg instantly dropped his arm to allow the doctor to pass without interference. Steven didn’t slow down, however. He simply lowered his head and kept going like a freight train. Greg braced for the hit and wasn’t disappointed. Steven slammed into the center of Greg’s chest and sent both of them sprawling across the waxed floor.

* * *

Time slowed for Brenda as she turned to help Greg and caught a glimpse of Doug sliding around the corner and immediately changing course. He ducked out of sight and raced down the hallway again. Brenda gave chase. He shot past multiple hospital rooms, turned a couple corners, and disappeared into the very last room at the end of the hallway. When Brenda reached the room, time suddenly sped up. Her heart pounded fiercely and she was certain it would leap out of her chest when she saw C.J. on the floor fighting for her life to keep Doug from stabbing her with a needle and some sort of liquid jostling around in the syringe.

Brenda snatched up a thermometer off a nearby counter, grabbed Doug by the hair, and yanked his head back. In one swift motion, she rammed the thermometer into his delicate eye tissue affording C.J. the time she needed to rip the syringe out of his hand. Then, as he lay writhing in pain, C.J. passed the syringe to Brenda, who drove it into Doug's thigh and pushed the plastic stopper until all the liquid was dispersed into his blood stream. Within seconds, he clawed at his throat as the liquid concoction suffocated him to death.

C.J. reached out to Brenda, but exhaustion took down her arm. "I'm so glad you're here," she mumbled, unable to keep her eyes open.

Tears flooded out of Brenda's eyes and plunged onto her cheeks. She scooped C.J. into her arms and lifted her off the floor. "Everything's going to be okay," she said, placing C.J. back into the hospital bed.

C.J. grimaced and her eyes turned glassy, but said nothing.

Brenda noticed C.J.'s reaction. "Are you okay?"

"I just hurt."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

Recently-healed injuries reappeared on C.J.'s arms and legs. A deep purplish bruise developed on her ribcage. "You need blood," Brenda said.

"I know, but no one wanted to believe me," C.J. said meekly. "Even the doctor doesn't believe vampires exist."

"Trust me, he does now," Brenda said, brushing a few strands of light brown hair off C.J.'s forehead.

C.J.'s words slurred. "You always know what to say."

Brenda held out her arm and placed her wrist beneath C.J.'s mouth. "You need blood."

C.J. turned her face away. "I can't."

"Yes, you can," Brenda said, tears welling up in her eyes for a second time. "You have to... I can't lose you again." She placed her hand on the side of C.J.'s cheek and gently turned her face until their eyes met. "Just drink enough to get some energy back, okay?"

C.J. was almost incapable of getting her fangs to break through the gums. "Okay," she said halfheartedly, piercing the thin layer of skin on Brenda's wrist.

About a minute later, Brenda pulled her wrist away as wooziness stole her confidence to stand on her own. She dropped into a nearby chair. "Sorry," she said. "I need to sit down for a sec."

C.J. laid her head back against the pillows that the nurses had propped her up with at some point earlier in the day and fumbled with the remote to raise the upper half of the bed. She found the button, pressed it, and rose until she could meet Brenda's gaze. "Thank you for... saving my life," she said.

"You saved mine, remember?"

A sheepish grin spread across C.J.'s face. "I did it for a selfish reason though, so it doesn't count."

Brenda leaned forward. "And what would that be?"

C.J. bravely held Brenda's gaze. "I wanted you to know how much I loved you."

Brenda pushed herself out of the chair and made it over to the side of the hospital bed where the silver rail was still lowered. She tucked a wild lock of C.J.'s hair back behind her ear. "Loved?"

C.J. swiped her tongue around her lips. “Love,” she said barely audible. “I love you.”

Brenda eased down on the edge of the bed and cupped C.J.’s face affectionately. “I love you, too.”

Their lips met and built-up passion surged, but from somewhere down the corridor, something metal clattered onto the floor and was immediately followed by the sound of breaking glass. Brenda pulled back and stared at the door as if expecting all hell’s demons to come busting through it. “Do you think you’re strong enough to walk?” she asked, grasping C.J.’s hand.

“I’ll give it my best,” C.J. said. “But what about Steven? He’s here, somewhere, too, and went after my doctor.”

“Yeah, I know,” Brenda said, helping C.J. swing her legs over the side of the bed and slowly sit up. “He ran into me and Greg a few minutes ago and it sounds like they’re still conversing about their differences.”

C.J. wrapped her arms around Brenda’s neck to keep from falling and placed her feet down on the ice cold floor. “Won’t he need our help?”

“He’ll be fine. Besides, you’re in no condition to do anything but get the heck out of this room,” Brenda said. “Right now, we have to get you out of here before the rest of Steven’s gang show their ugly faces.”

“Did Maria make it?” C.J. asked.

“Yeah, she’s going to pull through,” Brenda said, “thanks to you.” She helped C.J. toward the door and noticed her hospital gown was flowing open in the back. “We need to find you something else to wear other than this gown.”

“Try the cabinet,” C.J. said, bracing her body against the door frame as Brenda let go of her. “I think there are scrubs in there.”

* * *

Steven delivered another vicious blow with his razor-sharp talons into Greg’s abdomen. They sliced through Greg’s intestines with the ease of a hamburger grinder. “I’m going to kill you!” Steven shouted. “Then you can join your sister in hell!”

Greg felt certain if he reached up and touched his ears that brain matter would be leaking out of them. That’s how much his head hurt. Surely, this wasn’t his last battle. He had so much left to do with his life. First and foremost, find C.J., dead or alive, and then take Emily out on a date. *Wait, what did Steven say? C.J. was in hell? Does that mean she was here?*

As Steven retracted his hand, Greg cranked his head to the side, exposing the soft tissue of his neck. *Come on, you fucking asshole. Take a bite.*

Steven’s eyes locked in on the throbbing pulse of the carotid artery in Greg’s neck. They glazed over like he’d been hypnotized. His fangs grew longer as he neared the mesmerizing thump of the vein. Greg waited until Steven was less than two inches away before whipping his forehead and slamming it against Steven’s nose. Blood erupted like an active geyser at a well-known national park.

“Where’s my sister?” Greg demanded, kicking Steven in the crotch.

Steven dropped to the floor, but was instantly on his feet again. “Don’t play stupid with me,” he snarled.

It suddenly occurred to Greg that Steven had no idea they were actually at the hospital because of Maria. Steven thought they were there visiting C.J. and that meant she was still alive or at least had been.

“Did you hear that there was a strange cave-in at an abandoned diamond mine earlier today?” Greg said, attempting to buy some additional recovery time. “The entrance was obliterated by a prick with a couple sticks of dynamite, and we all know who was responsible for that, don’t we?”

Steven grinned. “Yes, we do.”

“But you know what I can’t figure out?”

“No, what?”

“How multiple explosions went off hours after that and what kind of person would do such thing?”

“To get rid of rats you sometimes need to crush them,” Steven gloated. He squared his shoulders and repositioned his feet. “Now, it’s your turn to answer my question.”

Greg and Steven circled around each other like competitors in a boxing match. “Which is?”

“How your sister ended up in the Arges River?” Steven said, baring his fangs. “Did you push her in?”

Greg’s adrenaline skyrocketed, but he channeled the energy in order not to waste it like his sensei taught him in karate. His hands burned terribly as though he’d submerged them in hot frying grease and when he glanced down at what was most painful, his fingertips, the talons were more steel-like and refined in structure. *What the hell is happening?*

Greg caught sight of the roundhouse whirling toward him, but couldn’t escape the path as it connected

with his jaw, jarring his teeth together. “You’ll pay for that!” he said, dodging the uppercut that followed it.

The upward force of the punch combined with Greg’s quickness in escaping it caused Steven to lose his balance. Greg answered with his own uppercut that sent Steven sailing off his feet and landing hard on his tailbone. He waited for Steven to get up. “Come on, big man,” he said, covering his mouth in a pretend yawn. “Show me what you got.”

“You’re a dead man!”

Greg waited as Steven charged him and at the last possible second did a quick sidestep, rammed his right hand into Steven’s chest, and found his mark. His enhanced senses had shown him the way. He used his other hand to spear Steven in the pelvis and lifted him off the ground.

* * *

Ray pounded the palm of his hand against the SUV’s steering wheel. “This is ridiculous. What’s taking them so damn long? I could’ve done that bitch by now with one hand tied behind my back.”

Debra snapped her cell phone shut, dropped it into the first of two center cup holders, and leaned over the passenger seat. She planted a kiss on Ray’s cheek, allowing her lips to linger for a moment. “Patience is a virtue, my darling.”

“For some,” Ray said, “but others don’t have any virtue. And, you should be more careful that your boyfriend doesn’t catch you canoodling with me. I might be forced to put him out of his misery.”

“Soon, baby, soon, you’ll get your wish,” Debra said, “but right now we need him for one last thing. The thought is nice though.”

Ray lifted his gaze from Debra’s very low-cut shirt that barely contained her breasts in her sequenced bra. “What last thing is that?”

“To finish a job that Dr. Cohn thought had been taken care of years ago.”

“And what would that be?”

“I have a friend that works in customs at the France airport,” Debra said. “A plane touched down a few nights ago with some crates on it.”

“So?”

“When they went to inspect the crates, a private outfit stepped in, seized control, and escorted anyone not affiliated with their organization to get out of the hangar or be arrested for refusing to cooperate in an official investigation.”

“That’s a little hokey.”

“Yes, it is,” Debra said.

“Do you think it’s the vampire remains?”

“Could be,” Debra said. “Right now, however, I don’t give a damn about that as much as I do the person who signed for them.”

“Who is?”

“You’ll see.”

Glass shards rained from the sky and sprinkled loudly on the windshield. “What the hell?” Ray started.

Steven’s body flew by the driver’s side window and slammed into the ground beside the vehicle. His head struck the pavement first, shattering his skull like a light bulb encountering a sledgehammer. The impact rocked the SUV so hard one would have thought it was

a bag of cement thrown from the top of the building or a minor earthquake. In fact, it set off quite a few car alarms.

“Holy shit,” Ray exclaimed, sticking his head out the window. “It’s Steven.”

“Is he dead?”

“Yes, very,” Ray replied.

“Drive.” Debra said calmly.

Ray shifted into gear. “What about Doug?”

Debra wrapped her hands around Ray’s well-defined bicep. “I think we can safely assume it’s just you and me traveling to Paris.”

Ray’s eyebrow rose. “So a romantic dinner is in our immediate future?”

“You know it, lover boy,” Debra said, laying her head on his shoulder. “Now, shut up and drive. We have a plane to catch.”

* * *

C.J. was half-dragged half-carried into the hallway by Brenda. She tried her hardest to keep her arm wrapped around Brenda’s neck, her knightress in shining armor, but it was extremely difficult. She knew how lucky she was to be alive, but also how lucky everyone else was on the team to be alive. Hopefully, her brother was still among them.

As they rounded a corner, a very welcomed face greeted them as he slid to a stop. “Oh, thank god,” Greg said, taking C.J. into his arms. “It’s so good to see you.”

C.J. tried to respond, but unconsciousness stole her away.

Brenda gripped Greg's arm. "We have to get her more blood or she won't make it. She took some of mine but it's not giving her what she needs. I think it has to be a full human's blood to work effectively."

"Let's get her to Maria's room and decide from there," Greg said, checking over his shoulder. "I'm sure that doctor will bring every single one of the hospital security force and possibly the cops with him when he returns."

"You really think so?"

"Yes," Greg replied, shifting C.J.'s body weight equally between his arms. "We need to be long gone before then or have some back-up plan in place."

* * *

Maria nodded her head in agreeance at Brenda's request and lay perfectly still. Emily carefully slid out the I.V. needle from Maria's arm and transferred it to C.J.'s. She unclamped the tube and allowed the blood from the plastic bag to flow freely into C.J.'s veins. Brenda held C.J.'s hand and simultaneously maintained pressure on the gauze pad covering where the needle had been in Maria's arm.

Damon watched through a crack in the door for men in uniform. Within minutes, he heard the thud of their boots as they clamored off the elevator and headed in their direction. He quietly closed the door, braced a chair beneath the door knob, and sat down. "They're coming this way and should be storming past at any moment toward C.J.'s room. Have you worked out that game plan yet?"

Greg glowered at Damon from where he stood at a rolling tray table for the patient's daily meals. "I'm working on it, but I can't get very far with you interrupting every five seconds."

Brenda squeezed C.J.'s hand as her eyes fluttered open. "Feel better?" she asked, witnessing the color return to C.J.'s cheeks.

"Yeah, quite a bit."

"Good," Brenda said.

"Alright, hold still," Emily said, withdrawing the needle and returning it to Maria's arm.

C.J. held the gauze pad against the crook of her arm for a fraction of a second and then gave it to Brenda to throw away. The entry wound was healed. "See," she said in a stronger voice. "There are some perks to being a vampire."

A frown tugged at Greg's lips. "Just remember, you're not a cat. You don't have nine lives."

"No, just five or six left after this past week."

"Shh, they're making their way back," Damon whispered, pressing his ear against the door. "It seems they're going room to room and clearing each one. We don't have much time."

"Go," Maria said hoarsely. "I'll be fine."

"We all can't go," Emily said.

"Why not?" Damon said.

"It would look too suspicious," Emily replied.

"What do want us to do then?" Brenda said. "Play cards?"

"C.J. and Greg need to make a run for it now. They're the only ones that can be positively identified by the doctor and nurses from what you told me," Emily said, cradling her arm. "If they get caught, they'll

be held in an interrogation room for hours, if not days, and neither can survive that long without blood.”

Greg moved across the room and gingerly took Emily into his arms. “I’m not leaving you.”

Emily pressed her lips against his. “It’s the only way,” she said, kissing him once more. “So you best sweep me off my feet when I see you next and I prefer it be sooner rather than later.”

“Oh, it will be,” Greg said, hugging her tightly.

C.J.’s face was twisted in agony as she stared helplessly at Brenda. “Why is this happening?” she said with sadness dripping off every word. “How can I walk away from the best thing that’s ever happened to me?”

Brenda grasped her hands. “I’ll wait forever if I have to,” she said, her eyes softening. “Just don’t make me wait that long, okay?”

Damon’s eyes grew wide. “They’ve entered the room next to us.”

C.J. touched Brenda’s cheek. “I meant what I said earlier.”

“So did I,” Brenda replied.

C.J. wrapped her arms around Brenda’s waist and pulled her close. “Don’t give up on me,” she said before kissing her passionately. “I’ll find my way back to you.”

Greg grabbed C.J.’s hand as he passed and led her over to the window. He slid the specially designed window open and was met by a strong breeze. It blew pieces of paperwork around the room. Brenda was suddenly behind them and slipped a folded-up paper napkin into C.J.’s blue scrub pants pocket. She kissed her on the cheek. “The napkin is from Maria and the kiss is for luck.”

“Guys?” Damon said, his voice faltering as he moved swiftly but quietly out of the chair.

Everyone turned and joined Damon at staring at the door. With one solid knock and seconds later a strong kick, the door sprung inward, knocking over the chair, and crashed into the wall. Men in swat-like gear stormed in with high-caliber weapons aimed at every person in the room. Brenda glanced over her shoulder and saw Greg and C.J. no longer in the room.

One of the men strutted right up to Brenda and rammed the end of a rifle into her gut. “Well, what do we have here?”

Brenda met his authoritative gaze. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb,” the man said, moving past her. “They’re out there, aren’t they?”

“Who?” Brenda challenged.

The man stuck his head out the window and glanced left and right, and then up toward the hospital roof. No one was there. He shrugged, backed away from the window, and signaled at the others to proceed to the next room.

“That’s it?” Brenda said in disbelief.

The man stopped midstride and pivoted toward Brenda. “Yeah, it is, unless you need to get something else off your chest?”

“No,” Brenda said, raising her hands in pretend compliance, “but there are sick people in hospitals, like my aunt here, so you should respect the patient’s need for privacy and rest.”

A startled scream rang out from the next room followed by the tell-tale signs of a verbal confrontation.

“There are very sick people everywhere,” the man said coldly. “Not all of them are so easy to spot.”

The man spun around on his heels and strutted out of the room. Brenda rushed over to the window and peered in all directions. When she looked back to the right, the man who had just been in Maria’s room was staring at her. His eyes twinkled like he had caught her with her hand in the cookie jar. “Are you looking for someone?”

Brenda rolled her eyes. “Like who? Superman?”

The man said nothing and disappeared back into the room. Brenda looked around one more time and ducked back inside. “They’re gone.”

Tears streamed down Emily’s face. “That’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

Brenda walked over, her own anguish evident, and wrapped her arm around Emily. “You did the right thing.”

“Are you sure?”

An undeniable ache lodged itself into Brenda’s heart. “Yes.”

* * *

C.J. crept quietly around the hospital room, which was one floor down and two rooms over from Maria’s and searched the patient’s room for some clothes though she already knew anything they found would inevitably be too big for her. She had no doubt that they were in a man’s room, though the patient was in a head-to-toe cast. The moment they entered through the window, his heartbeat went from resting to a gallop. The smell of sweat filled the room, a similar scent as Greg’s after

finishing a three-mile run. She raised her finger and pressed it against her lips. She sensed he understood her request and would stay quiet as long as they did not harm him.

C.J. stepped beside the bed and knelt in front of the white, hard plastic nightstand. *Don't worry, we're not going to hurt you.*

The man's eyes, the only part of him besides his hands, a small opening around his mouth, and nostrils not covered in plaster, grew wide. *How did you....*

C.J. suddenly realized she was conversing with the man through mental telepathy because neither of them had actually said a word nor whispered one. *Okay, she thought. All I need is something to wear. Where did the nurses stash your clothes?*

The man's eyes drifted to a narrow coat closet. *My wife brought me sweats. Help yourself.*

"Will the two of you keep it down?" Greg asked softly as he rummaged a three-drawer dresser. "You're making enough racket to wake the dead."

"We haven't spoken a word to each other," C.J. whispered, striding over to the closet. "Yet, I won't deny that we were engaged in a meeting of the minds."

Greg shoved the bottom drawer shut and stared at his sister. "I think you've lost yours."

She hasn't.

Greg looked at the man in astonishment. "How did you do that?"

Don't know.

"Okay, get out of my head."

I'm not in your head, you're in mine, the man replied without moving his lips. *I'm just as blown away as you are.*

Greg almost dropped to the floor as the support of his legs vanished beneath him. In fact, he probably would have if not for C.J. placing a steady hand on his elbow and keeping him upright. “I need a minute to change then we can get out of here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Greg said, unable to peel his eyes off the man lying in the bed. He waited for C.J. to disappear behind the bathroom door. “How did you end up like that?”

The man’s eyes glazed over. *Don’t remember.*

“Think,” Greg said, stepping closer.

I don’t remember. Just remember falling for a very long time. It was like I was chasing something and then the ground went away.

“Do you remember anything prior to that?”

My wife. And, something attacked me the other night in the woods when I went night-fishing with my buddy, Rick.

“Where’s Rick now?”

Don’t know. I haven’t seen him.

Greg sensed this stranger was getting agitated. “Sorry,” he said. “I just... need answers.”

You’re not the only one.

C.J. stuck her head out. “Hey, can you take this for me?”

Greg walked over and accepted the napkin. He unfolded it and stared at the number. “Do you want me to see if I can get a hold of whoever this is?”

“Sure, but don’t give too much info away until we know if we can trust whoever it is.”

“Don’t worry,” Greg said, picking up the phone next to where the man lay in bed. “I barely trust myself anymore.” He dialed nine and the international set of

numbers and waited for someone to answer. When they did, he heard an almost forgotten voice pick-up on the other end. His eyes widened as they locked with C.J.'s. "Dad?"

FOUR MONTHS LATER

For once, the speed of the media could not keep up with word-of-mouth or at least the rapid succession of text messages. Many people heard about the devastation that occurred in Triton City the modern, old-fashioned way, by their cell phone apps, before any news stations even had a chance to break-in with a special report. When they did, however, it was Julie's face viewers saw as the special correspondent relaying the play-by-play action of the destruction. The entire area was flattened, a virtual wasteland, by a weapon of mass destruction. No one was taking credit so far for the terroristic attack, but the president assured the nation and the world that once someone did step forward to claim responsibility, the full might of the U.S. Armed Forces would be upon them.

Only a select few knew the truth, including Julie. When Brenda and the others landed at the private airstrip in Triton City, three and half months earlier, they were greeted by Justin, Bradley, and John Meade. Justin told them about the mandatory evacuation order and that they needed their help in insuring all residents who hadn't been infected by Dr. Cohn or Dr. Grosse were escorted to evacuation zones. Entry and exit out of

the county on all roads were being controlled by the National Guardsmen and anyone not approved to be in the vicinity was ordered away and refusal to follow such orders would result in death.

Damon broke the news about Eric as gently as he could to Justin. There wasn't much he could say except that Eric's selflessness saved their lives. They had gone back to look for him when they returned the viticulturist's car, actually found the clearing, but there wasn't anything to find: no blood, no clothes, nothing. He divulged everything he could think of that happened while they were in Romania and Justin, with a heavy heart, did the same with his and Bradley's adventure to Washington D.C.

When they returned to the Ryans' estate, Brenda's mom, Diane, greeted her with a warm, loving embrace. Brenda told her mother everything that had happened, including what happened to Thomas, and surprisingly, her mother believed her without question. Together, they packed up a few keepsakes from the house, shoved it into a van that Brenda had hotwired at the airfield, and headed to their beach house in Santa Barbara. Everyone was invited to join them.

Julie and Emily stayed in Triton for a few extra days. The president asked Julie if she would like to further her career and be the spokeswoman for a special assignment, which inevitably landed her as the only news reporter who had a one-on-one with him after the supposed terroristic attack. Emily drew up search grids so it would guarantee that every house in the county would be included, but most people had already gotten out of the county after the mayor's warning. Then, she headed to Santa Barbara with promises from Justin and

Jennifer that they would be along soon. Damon called his parents upon landing and told them he was coming home in a month or two, and did so once everything had been confirmed by John Meade to be in order and that his family would remain safe under the watchful eye of the F.B.I. Lawrence and Robin took it upon themselves to track down Eno and Elizabeth, who were rumored to have rendezvoused with Debra and Ray overseas somewhere after spotting Greg and C.J. arrive in France. And, Colleen accompanied Bradley, who had proven to be excellent boyfriend material, back to Washington D.C. so he could give the all clear to the president that every *human* was out of the county.

With no witnesses to argue differently and a solid, understanding supporter of burying the truth for the sake of mankind, Julie, to report it, a lonely stealth bomber delivered a payload of mass destruction and wiped out the entire city. The impact shook the ground violently for miles. In fact, San Francisco reported it as an earthquake until seismologists refuted the claim. The steel in buildings liquefied, trees were decimated, and water evaporated instantly from all sources. Nothing remained in the aftermath, not even a butterfly.

* * *

Brenda and Emily laid side-by-side on their brightly-colored beach towels in front of the Ryans' private strip of beach as Justin and Jennifer splashed around in the water shimmering in the late afternoon sun. It was a beautiful spring day with temperatures in the seventies and evolved into a gorgeous evening as the sun slipped further and further into the sea. Its warmth radiated off

the sand. It would be the perfect night to walk hand-in-hand with someone special.

Emily sighed and rose to her elbows. "I wanted you to know that I've decided something."

"Okay," Brenda said, matching the seriousness she heard in Emily's voice.

"I'm going to go look for him."

"Greg?"

"Yes," Emily said.

"Do you think they're still in Paris?"

"I don't know," Emily said. "But I think about him all the time and well, it doesn't feel right just hanging out here. It's already April, and well, May is right around the corner. Time is slipping away."

Brenda removed her sunglasses, tossed them onto the sand next to her, and sat up. She stared out into the ocean. "I've been thinking about that a lot myself lately."

"Really?"

"Yeah, just wasn't sure how to breach the topic with you," Brenda said. "I miss C.J. so much."

Emily stayed quiet for a moment. "I thought they'd be back by now."

"Me, too."

"Maybe they have no idea where we are."

"Maybe."

"I can't imagine their shock when they learned their dad was still alive," Emily said, removing a brown ponytail holder from her long, chestnut-colored hair. "I can't believe Maria didn't tell them right away."

Brenda shrugged. "She made a promise."

“But still, to think that neither of your parents survived an ambush and then to learn years later one of them did, well, I’d be pretty pissed off.”

“I can’t imagine you pissed off,” Brenda said good-naturedly. She snatched up her sunglasses as she stood and reached down for her towel.

“It isn’t pretty,” Emily replied, joining Brenda in shaking off the sand from their towels. “Do you think finding that out changed their minds about coming back for us?”

Two arms slipped around Emily’s waist. “Not a chance,” Greg said.

Emily jumped, but cooed with excitement when she turned and saw Greg’s face.

Brenda pivoted around and stared longingly into deep blue eyes, the ones she’d seen every night in her dreams. “You’re here,” she said softly.

“Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world,” C.J. said.

“What took you so long?” Brenda asked, unable to keep the overwhelming emotion from causing her voice to crack.

“We were forced to wait until the scare from the annihilation of Triton City eased, so we could come back without getting thoroughly harassed by Homeland Security about the legitimacy of our passports. Thanks to our dad, they look pretty authentic. Then, trying to figure out where you all went was tough, but a little research and we figured with all the properties your family owned, you’d probably choose the closest one.”

Greg took Emily’s hand and brought it to his lips. “I’ve missed you.”

Emily giggled. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“Do you want to take a stroll with me?” Greg said, nodding his head down the beach.

“I’d love to.”

C.J. turned to Brenda. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Would you like to take a walk with me,” C.J. asked, “in the completely opposite direction the two of them are going?”

“Absolutely,” Brenda said, wrapping the towel around her warm, sleek bikini-clad body. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

C.J. took a gentle hold of Brenda’s hands and held her intense gaze. “Where else would I be?”

“With your father,” Brenda replied, biting down on her lower lip.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” C.J. said, tucking a dark strand of hair behind Brenda’s ear. “I don’t want to be anywhere else than with you. I love you.”

* * *

Justin and Jennifer emerged from the Pacific Ocean and collapsed onto the warm sand. They watched Greg and C.J. walk in opposing directions, hand-in-hand with their true loves. “They’re back,” Jennifer said.

Justin rolled onto his side. “Yes, they are.”

“When are you going to tell them?”

“Tomorrow,” Justin replied. “There’s no sense in ruining their first evening back. It seems both of them have other things on their minds.”

Jennifer shifted uncomfortably. “But you’re still going to tell them about what Lawrence and Robin learned about Debra’s next move, right?”

Justin pulled Jennifer into his arms. “Yeah, but before I open that can of worms, I want them to have the opportunity to at least experience one night of what I have.”

“Which is what?”

Justin kissed her cheek. “Love,” he said simply. “Pure, unadulterated love.”

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