

Uncloaked

A re-imagining of Little Red Riding Hood

By Wendy Owens

Chapter One

Today is my twenty-second birthday, and I've been dead for exactly twelve months. Technically, Grams calls me reborn, but let's be real, no heartbeat equals dead in most people's books. My best friend from my living days was given a car by her dad on her twenty-first birthday. Mine... nothing nearly as cool. No, my old man abandoned me when I was little, and then, in case that wasn't bad enough, he left me with the hunter's curse.

Reborn. Please.

Being reborn would imply that I have a life, there's nothing about my new existence that resembles any life I've ever imagined wanting to live. While my friends have been spending the last year partying at the Alpha Chi Omega sorority house, or getting their drinks paid for by hunky college guys at the local bars, I've been training. It's not like I had high expectations of college life, even campus slut would have been better than what I got stuck with. Just as campus hottie, Kane Weathers took notice of me, I got the surprise of a lifetime. I found out I'm a hunter. Now getting too close to humans means an uncontrollable thirst to drink them dry. Draining your boyfriend of all his blood isn't the best way to find a lasting relationship.

Day in and day out, it's the same thing. A balanced diet of type A, B negative, or even the occasional treat of RH negative blood. I'm awake by early afternoon, though truth be told, most mornings I have trouble even falling asleep. Until the sun is down, it's studying the history of the hunters with Grams: who we are, who our enemies are, and what makes us the chosen ones. As far as I can tell all we've been *chosen* for is a miserable existence.

These so-called wolves we've been supposedly chosen to defend the world against seem to be nothing more than a long forgotten fairytale. I've never seen one except for in the books I'm forced to stare at for hours.

I guess it's not all bad. At least that's what Grams keeps telling me. Hunters can be in the sunlight for limited periods of time. The exposure is like a bitch of a sunburn for us. If you're unfortunate enough to be bitten into the Society of Red Hoods, more commonly known as Vampires, as opposed to joining by birthright, UV rays are an instant ticket to ash city. I think if I were bitten in, I would have already offed myself permanently.

I run my fingers over the worn spine of the book in front of me. "Grams?" I call out to the empty cabin. There's no answer. Some days I don't see her at all. She'll just leave a stack of books for me on the table. Today appears to be one of those days, not that I'm complaining. She can be a bit intense sometimes. We've never been close. I still wonder how I let my mom convince me to head out to the Big Wood and check in on her on my twenty-first birthday. Grams greeted me with a smile that day before locking me in a windowless room. She told me it would all make sense in the morning.

I'm still a little pissed about it all. Hell, I haven't seen mom since, well, since I died. It's not all by choice, though. Grams seems to think the safest place is under her thumb. All that changes today; today I get my first break. I get a small taste of freedom in the form of a visit to my mother. After a year, I've got control over my blood lust, not that mom wouldn't deserve a good bite after conspiring to seclude me out here with Grams.

There's at least one highlight to my day. He's six feet, four inches tall, a jawline that could cut glass, and his name is Flint Huntsman. Not only is he my combat trainer, but he might well be the sexiest creature on the face of the earth. Of course, he's a by the book kind of guy, so there's never any funny business, but it's still fun to watch him work up a sweat.

I jump when I hear a knock at the door. Pulling it open, I mentally prepare my taunts to Grams for forgetting her keys yet again. The door opens, my mouth opens, but the words never leave my throat.

Flint's absinthe green eyes are staring back at me, that same intensity in them he always has and that I'm pretty sure I'll never get used to. There's only quiet between us. If I didn't know Flint so well I would think those eyes were telling me he wanted to kiss me. I know better, even if my eyes are screaming for him to 'take me already.'

Grabbing his arm, I pull him inside, pushing the door closed. I notice the skin on his arms turns white where I just touched him, a red glow surrounding each fingerprint. "Jesus, Flint," I huff before rushing towards the sink. Dampening a cloth with cool water, I ask, "How long were you out there?"

He doesn't answer me, "Where is she?"

"Who?" I inquire, placing the damp towel gently across his skin. "Grams?"

He nods, pulling uncomfortably away from my touch.

I shake my head, shrugging my shoulders. "Hell, if I know. She's probably avoiding me."

"Why would she be avoiding you?" Flint has never seemed to grasp the complicated relationship Grams and I have.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I'm supposed to leave to see mom tonight."

His tongue clicks against the roof of his mouth. The sound tells me he disapproves of me leaving as well. "She only wants to keep you safe," he reminds me.

I toss the towel into his firm chest, flopping back into the high back dining room chair. "Yeah, everyone seems to know what's best for me, except for me."

"She's been at—" he starts, but his eyes lock onto my glare, stopping him short.

"I don't know where she is," I say again.

"You think you're ready for the smell?" He asks, and though I refuse to look into those piercing eyes, I can still feel them on me.

"I'm not going to eat my mom's throat out if that's what you're worried about," I growl.

"Fear's in the air those mouth breathers suck in day after day. It can be intoxicating for someone like us." He sees I'm only half listening. "I'm serious Ruby. The human world can be just as dangerous as the wolves."

"What wolves?" I quickly snap. "And in case you didn't notice, I'm still human." A truth I've insisted on since I took my last breath. I may have grown an entirely new respiratory system, have no heartbeat, and can smell blood up to a mile away, but I was born a human. I'll continue to identify myself as such until I cease to exist, even if they insist otherwise.

Flint shakes his head as if he's trying to clear away what I just said, "Can we please not get into a debate today? I need to be in control of my senses if you plan to go through with this insanity."

"Not you too," I groan.

With swiftness I almost don't see, he pulls a nearby wooden chair up to where I'm sitting. He's close, so close I can feel the heat from his sunburn. He scoops my hand up into his and pulls it against his chest, then up to his lips. He doesn't kiss it, only lets it hover in front of his lips. "I care about you."

Ugh— talk about mixed messages, this guy is the king of them.

I swallow hard, take a deep breath and with the most bite I can muster, ask, "And?"

His guarded eyes lower, then lift again to meet mine. "I don't know what I would do if something ever happened to you."

Damn it! Do you want me or not?

"I'd never forgive myself. I'm responsible for you," he continues.

And there it is. All duty, no feelings. I pull my hand from him, crossing my arms over my chest. "Well, let me ease your conscious; I'm the only one responsible for me."

"Fair enough," he nearly whispers, but I can tell that's not what he's thinking.

My face is hot, still embarrassed by the inappropriate secret thoughts that have been rushing through my mind about him. I shake a finger in his face, "I hope you don't think for one second that you're coming with me."

"We've already decided this," he stands, obviously panicked.

"You and Grams may have decided that, but I never agreed." I remind him.

"It's not the same as you remember—" He continues.

"It has only been a year, I doubt that much has changed." I snap back.

"I'm not talking about the world; you're the one that's changed."

I want to throw my fists into his chest and beat him wildly. I want to scream at the top of my lungs that I'm not a monster. I'm not going to lose control and kill everyone just because I've become a hunter. I want to scream that I'm not some freak, a bloodsucking vampire rearing to kill everyone, but I don't because... because I know he's right. Most of the time I toss and turn kept awake by the pangs of hunger. I don't tell anyone about it, but I know they know.

"Forget it!" I shout.

"Calm down," he pleads, reaching for me.

I pull away, "Stop! You can tell Grams she got her way, alright? I'm not going."

"Ruby please," his fingertips graze my skin. A barely there touch, but I feel it to the tips of my toes.

I shake my head, my eyes narrowing, "Don't!"

Before he can attempt another word, I dart into my small bedroom, closing the wooden door, clicking the lock to the right. He's Flint Huntsman, if he wants to get through the door, a silly little lock won't stop him, but I know he won't try. It's not him. It's not who he is. He is who he is and, well, no matter how painful it is to admit, I am who I am. Maybe Grams and Flint are right, perhaps it's time for me to start acting like the hunter I am and forget about my old life.

Chapter Two

“Ruby! Hey Ruby, please can you open the door?” Flint’s voice cuts through the silent images racing through my mind, the memories of a life that seems so foreign now. My fingers curl into white knuckled fists at Flint’s persistent banging on the door. I leap up from the bed with a heavy and irritated sigh, rushing over to give him a piece of my mind.

Ripping open the door with such strength, surprising even myself, I bite my tongue as I narrow my gaze on his face. He stares back at me. My nose wrinkles involuntarily at him when I see the despair in his eyes. This isn’t about me being pissed; something else has him concerned. He rubs his hands over his face, his fingers dancing across the stubble on his chin. He looks like he never left last night. *Flint is always freshly shaven. Grams would never have...*

My thought trails off as I finally find my words. “Where’s Grams?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer me. I lift an eyebrow, curious what’s happened when I see him glance over his shoulder. I follow his eyes across the room, my breath catching in my throat when they settle on two unfamiliar faces. A petite redhead, with pale skin and a smattering of freckles, is standing in front of the door. My eyes travel over her quickly, though, as the other stranger’s presence is much more notable.

Her hair is as white as snow, contrasted by her full and bright red lips, but what is most mesmerizing is the subtle hints of flames flickering all around her, like an aura. I move past Flint, unable to look away from the creature in front of me. She watches me just as intensely. *Snow White’s here to see me*, I realize before wondering, *why?*

My body feels like it’s being bathed in ice, and I have to concentrate on just standing. Looking at the woman feels as if in one moment I’m cocooned in the comfort of my mother’s womb and the next as if I’m staring death in the face. My training runs through my mind. A hunter is always alert. A hunter is patient. A hunter observes, always searching for the upper hand.

She watches me as a hunter would, and suddenly I understand what it’s like to be the prey.

“Who are you?” My voice is shaking, *damn it, I hate that*. My throat tightens, the angst inside me squeezing the oxygen from my lungs. Sometimes I still forget I don’t need that air inside me. While breathing occurs, it’s not necessary anymore.

“Are you Ruby?” The red head asks, taking a couple steps forward.

“Who’s asking?” I press, annoyed.

“When’s the last time you saw your grandmother?” The red haired girl asks, again ignoring my question.

Flint is standing next to me now, but Snow White’s eyes don’t shift from me.

“I already told you, she left yesterday, and we haven’t heard from her since,” he offers.

His response doesn’t seem to have any impact on the glowing stranger. Her eyes narrow further. I blink long and hard, assuming I must be losing my mind as I see a flicker of red dance around her irises. My skin, no longer icy, suddenly feels hot under the intense scrutiny of her gaze. Her skin is so pale it looks like porcelain. Her jaw is clenched so hard you can almost hear

her teeth grinding, but there is no sign of life in her body. Not even a blink or the twitch of a random muscle. Inside my head, I can hear my voice screaming, demanding she stop her burning glare.

My knees are weak, and my legs wobble as if they're turning to ash beneath me. I can't speak or scream. A thumping sounds in my ears, but I know it can't be my heartbeat, I don't have one. Pressure mounts all around my head, crushing pain, pushing inwards. *Why won't you look away? A witch! You must be a witch!*

I need to make the pain stop. There's no thought in my mind except to make this moment end. I lunge forward my hand raised. Snow White may have chosen to remain silent to my multiple requests for her identity, but she won't be able to ignore me as my hand swipes across her cheek. *Will it burn?* I wonder just before my hand makes contact with her skin.

My hand jerks back sharply, my wrist aches from the tight fingers wrapped around it. *Snow White, she's fast.*

"Ruby!" Flint exclaims from behind me. You'd think he wouldn't be surprised after a year of my impetuosity. Apparently that's not the case.

The witch's eyes are still locked on mine as I feel my body thrust backward. *Floor. Pain. Ouch.* A fog hangs around my head for a moment, before I see a hand in front of me. Following the long and lean limb up to the trunk it's attached to, my eyes lock onto the redhead. Reluctantly, I take her hand and stand.

"You're lucky she's in a good mood," the girl laughs. "I'm sorry, I just assumed you'd understand who she was when you saw her."

"What?" I shake my head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

The red head with freckles cocks her head; I do my best to focus on her and not at the creature I just failed to attack. "You can see her in her form, can't you?" She seems concerned now.

"What the hell are you saying?" I shout, not shielding my frustration.

Freckles looks to Flint, "I thought you said she was a hunter."

He nods. "She is, but she doesn't understand how the rest of the Fae world works."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," I warn.

"Ruby, can you see her glow?" Flint asks, motioning with his brow in Snow White's direction.

"You mean that weird freaky fire around her? Yeah, I'm not blind. What is she? A witch or something?" They all laugh, only serving to make me angry. "What's so funny?"

"I'm the witch," Freckles offers. "My name's Piper."

"She's been training for the past year, but she hasn't ever actually encountered any other Fae." It feels like Flint is apologizing for me. He shouldn't apologize for me, it's just pissing me off.

I step away from him, crossing my arms. "Maybe if you and Grams weren't so damn protective I'd understand what the hell is going on."

"Look, we don't exactly have a lot of time," Snow White speaks at last. Her voice is normal, not that I'm even sure what that means anymore. "Do you have any idea where your Grams is?"

Stay calm. Breathe. Don't get worked up again. Don't let her see you're afraid. "I'm not telling you anything until you explain what this is all about." A bead of sweat gathers on my

upper lip. I contemplate wiping it away, but don't want to bring attention to my obvious discomfort.

She turns and sits in the high back chair at the end of the room, positioning her arms behind her head and crossing her ankles as she props them up on the dining table.

"Comfortable?" Flint snarls.

She grins, "Very, thanks." Her eyes move back to me. "Name's Tynder Crown. I'm what the Fae call a Magistrate. I investigate crimes committed against any of the Fae kind."

"Are hunters Fae?" I ask hesitantly, wishing I had asked Grams more questions.

"Ding. Ding. Ding. I think she's putting it together." Tynder says sarcastically.

She's asking about Grams. She investigates crimes against Fae. "Is Grams okay?" I ask, glancing down at my feet, making sure gravity is still doing its job.

"That's why we need your help. Her superior reported that he received a dispatch from her yesterday. Apparently she's seen some suspicious pack behavior in the area."

I shake my head wildly, "No, that can't be right. The wolves are long gone."

Tynder looks at Piper and laughs, "You're new to this hunter game, aren't you?"

"They're all dead!" I insist.

"Look, sweetie," Tynder's voice shifts from one filled with humor to one that is pointed. "Try to pay attention, the wolves are far from dead. They're hungry, and they're growing in number. If your Grams is on the trail of the monsters we're looking for, she's most likely already dead. If you can help us, maybe we can prevent a lot more deaths."

My body jerks, and I stiffen upright. *Adrenaline. Do I create adrenaline anymore?* I wonder. I turn towards the door, but as I move my feet forward, I can feel that I'm not moving. I turn and see Flint has me anchored in place with his large beastly hands wrapped around my deceptively delicate looking wrists.

"Let go," I demand coolly and firmly. "I need to find her."

"What exactly do you plan to do?" Tynder scoffs in my direction.

I pull my arm free of Flint's grasp, then rush up to the wooden table and slam my fists hard onto the surface. Staring directly into Tynder's gaze that is now burning with the intensity of the sun, I reply, "More than you apparently."

She glowers at me, pulling her lips tight. As she moves forward and stands I notice her moves are each measured and calculated, like a cat on the hunt. "No, I'll tell you what you're doing. If there's any chance your Grams is alive, you're going to get her killed."

Anger washes over me. "She's likely already dead, right?"

The fireplace spills a soft and glowing yellow light, similar to that which illuminates Tynder. *What is she? Can I even trust her?*

"We want to help her," Piper interjects.

"Oh yeah? How's that exactly?" I bite.

"Ruby, let them explain," Flint pleads with me.

"We think your Grams is mixed up in something that she doesn't fully understand," Piper continues.

"See all these books?" I snap, shoving a stack of them in Tynder's direction, watching as they scatter haphazardly across the tabletop. "Grams knows more than anyone I've met. I seriously doubt there's anything that would surprise her."

Tynder's tone softens, "These aren't like any wolves she could have ever experienced."

I shake my head, rolling my eyes, "I've been out here for a year, and I've never even seen a trace of a wolf. They're fairy tales. There are no wolves."

Tynder moves in closer, "Are you and your Grams close?"

"What?" I gasp, surprised by her question. Close? Close probably isn't the right word to explain my relationship with the woman who helped steal my entire existence. It was her son, her genes that handed me this hunter's curse.

"I'm just wondering if things were strained between you two," she adds.

I shrug, "What if they were?"

"I'm just trying to figure out if she even made it out of this house." Tynder growls at me tauntingly.

"Go to hell," I shout. Wishing I could connect my hand with her face, just once, but I've already seen how that turns out.

"I've been there, I don't recommend it," she laughs. "It's rather hot and untidy."

"Tynder," Piper whines in a pleading voice.

"Oh come on, I'm just having a little fun with her," Tynder huffs in response.

I stall, my jaw dropping as I look at her in disbelief. *Cruel. Bitch.* So many words race through my mind to describe her.

"Suck it up, Buttercup," Tynder chides me. "I'm just messing with you."

"I'm glad while my Grams is out there with God knows what, you can still manage to entertain yourself," I snap. My eyes are fixed on her now. I'm no longer afraid, the anger has drowned it away. She shifts and the coolness has seems to fade briefly. For a moment I think I might see a glimmer of empathy. She glides across the room, standing directly next to me. I freeze, my jaw clenches as I see her hand move swiftly towards me. This time, when her hand connects with my skin, I feel a rush of calm, followed by an empty aching inside my chest. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced. An undertow is taking me under, my limbs lose their ability to fight against it, and it's leading me where it wants. Delivering emotions the current wants me to feel. I'm helpless against the force, her touch.

"If she's out there, we'll find her," she says.

"If?" I choke out the word, moving my arm out of reach, trying to regain control of my senses.

"What she means is we're going to find her," Piper interjects. "All we're asking is if you know anything that might help us track where she was headed, please tell us. She was vague in her last report. We thought maybe—"

"Well, sorry," I interrupt, shrugging and waving my hands in the air. "Grams would have never shared anything like that with me. I doubt she would have thought I was ready or that I could even handle that kind of information."

Piper's eyes scan to Flint. "What about you?"

I turn my head sharply, glaring at him. Unsure if he even knows anything to keep secret, I warn him with my eyes to reveal nothing.

He looks at me, then to Piper. "If she was tracking a pack, she sure didn't tell me about it."

“I don’t think you understand what you’re dealing with here. These aren’t your random run of the mill Lycan Wolves. If that pack your Grams was onto were the same ones we’ve been hunting, her only chance is if we find her and fast.” Tynder warns.

“What’s so bad about this pack? I mean, a werewolf is a werewolf, right?” Flint inquires as I stand and listen silently, biting my unruly tongue.

Tynder laughs under her breath, rolling her eyes at our naiveté.

“They were made under a Blood Moon,” Piper explains.

Flint gasps, shaking his head. “That’s impossible, it’s against Fae law.”

“Since when does a mad man respect Fae law?” Tynder asks in an almost whisper, her arms crossed tightly across her body.

“You’ve seen proof?” Flint asks doubtfully.

I don’t even see her move, then Tynder is standing in front of Flint, her face inches from his. “We’ve seen them— their victims too.”

“She killed the man responsible.” Piper boasts proudly.

“What? Who would—” The words slip from Flint’s lips before he trails off with his mouth hanging wide open. She enamors him like a child enthralled with a street performer.

I listen for Tynder to answer him, but there’s only silence. Turning my head to look in their direction my stomach twists sharply when my eyes lock onto hers. This time there’s no mistaking the flickering colors of orange and red in them. Her nostrils flare. Locking my knees tight, I stare back defiantly.

“Don’t even think about it,” she directs me in a low growl.

“Think about what?” I ask, lifting my shoulders innocently, but I can tell she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

She squints, “The last victim of a blood moon wolf had to be carried away from the crime scene in dozens of zip lock baggies.”

“Tynder!” Piper exclaims, before reminding her, “Her Grandmother.”

“Exactly,” she continues defiantly. “These animals will smell you coming, and if your Grams is still alive, they won’t hesitate to end her. So let me do my job, got it?”

“If you’re trying to scare me it’s not going to work,” I lie.

She licks her lips, comes in close to my ear and whispers, “Then you’re even more stupid than I thought.” She waits for me to react, and when I give her nothing, she moves with that same cool quickness to the front door. Pulling it open, she offers over her shoulder, “Whatever you do, stay out of my way.”

Piper glances back at us apologetically as she scurries out the door after Tynder.

Chapter Three

I shut the door, securing the lock, and immediately turn, walking to the cabinet on the far wall that sits between the bedroom doors. Pulling open the door, I remove the mother of all knives and strap it to my long, slender thigh using a leather holster.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Flint asks, over my shoulder.

“Did you know?” My question is simple.

“The magistrate will find her,” he assures me, avoiding my question.

I pause, turn my head, sharpening my focus on him, “She’s out there, all alone. She’d never leave one of us out there.” I turn back to the cabinet, pulling out the rounds of silver dipped bullets and feed them, one after the next into a clip.

“She would want me to keep you safe.”

“Then come with me,” I suggest.

“Where?” He asks.

Slamming the full clip into the base of the gun, I ensure the safety is on before tucking the weapon into the waistband of my skinny-fit jeans. My eyes lock onto his, “You tell me.”

“How would I know?” I knew from the moment I met Flint he was one of the good guys. Though it was a particular talent of mine to sniff out a liar, he never could tell a decent lie.

I shove a pointed finger firmly into his shoulder, “Because I know the old bat wouldn’t have gone anywhere without telling you first.”

“That’s not true.”

“And because your ass has been planted here for the last day waiting for her. You knew she was gone, and the only way you could have known that is if she told you ahead of time.”

Flustered, he huffs, “Damn it Ruby! It’s my head she’ll have if anything happens to you.”

I run my fingers into his thick hair on the back of his head, my mouth moving in close to his. I feel him stiffen underneath my touch and think this is probably the most reaction I’ve ever seen from him. But no matter how fun they might be, I’m not here to play games. I need answers, and fast. Tightening my grasp on his hair, I tilt his head back with a firm tug and warn, “Just imagine what I’ll do to you if something happens to her.”

His neck strains showing the corded muscles there, and his face pales. I know he can escape my grasp, but he doesn’t. He goes limp, and his eyes tell me he’s about to tell me exactly what I want to know.

“Krocker’s Bar,” he offers finally.

I pull away and look at him incredulously, “What? That dive off Route 42?”

He nods. “She heard about some disappearances over the last week. Something about it wasn’t sitting right with her.”

“And you let her go out there on her own?”

“She’s been at this longer than any of us Ruby, she can handle herself.”

“Obviously not.” I don’t wait for the conversation to continue. I have nothing left to say to Flint and a bar I need to go crash.

Chapter Four

I hated Saturdays as a kid. Mom would take on an extra shift at the local bar to help make ends meet. Tips for an attractive female bartender on a weekend night could rival what she worked all week long to make. But just as I could rely on her leaving every Saturday evening for her shift, I could also count on being awakened by a raging argument between my parents when she got home. Mom used to tell me that Dad yelled because he loved her so much. God, I hated Saturdays. Oh yeah, and my dad died on a Saturday. Of course, that was after he bailed on my mom and me.

Luckily, today's Friday. *Nothing bad can happen on a Friday.* I shiver as I cross the gravel parking lot. Krocker's Bar has had two different owners in the year I've lived with Grams and at least a dozen more in the ten years before that. The interior rarely changes, down to the partially burnt-out neon in the window. Rumor has it, the last change of hands was due to a lost bet.

A cool breeze sweeps across the ground, licking at my ankles before I enter the establishment. If I believed all the ghost stories I've been fed over the past year, I might have taken it as some ominous warning, telling me to turn around and go home. It felt like I just walked over someone's grave, but everyone who knows me knows that despite being a blood sucking vampire, I don't believe in all these paranormal fairytales. Perhaps Tynder is right, and I am an idiot.

I shift my knee-length leather jacket, ensuring my concealed weapons remain that way, then let the door shut behind me. I look towards the bar. *What the hell am I looking for?* Did I expect to walk in and see Grams sitting there with a disapproving glare staring back at me?

The smell of burnt chicken wings fills my nostrils, and I make a mental note to avoid anything that comes out of the kitchen. Based on the slob in the corner pawing all over the forty-something in the way too short mini skirt, I doubt many of the patrons are here for the food.

I lean across the bar, motioning for the short man dressed in what looks like a women's leisure suit to make his way down to me.

"What can I pour you?" He asks in a low crackly voice.

I pause. *Blend in.* "Vodka with club soda." He stares at me for a moment, then begins to pour the mix. Discretely I pull out a photo of Grams and me from my pocket. As the bartender places the drink on the counter, I flash him the picture. "Have you seen her?"

He furrows his brow, glancing up at me, "I'm looking at her."

I sigh, feigning a smile at his attempt at humor, or perhaps it is just stupidity. "The other one. She's my Grandma; sometimes she gets a little... confused and wanders off."

He tilts his head, examining the image one more time. Pulling his lips tight he shakes his head, "Sorry, can't help you."

I notice the man to my left is staring at me now; I flip the image in his direction, assuming he's been listening. He shakes his head as well. I continue, making my way around the bar, repeating the feeble minded Grandmother story to anyone that will listen. The last thing I need to do is attract unwanted attention.

I catch sight of a young man across the room. Immediately, I notice he's far too handsome to be keeping company with anyone who is a regular in this establishment. Feeling his eyes on me I shift uncomfortable and move my gaze to the ground, hoping it isn't obvious I was staring. From the corner of my eye I see him moving towards me and a stirring occurs deep in the pit of my stomach. He has a slight limp, dragging his left leg ever so slightly behind him. To most, I think, the awkwardness of his gait would go unnoticed.

I should leave. The thought shoots into my mind when I realize he's headed straight for me. *Be strong, stick to the story.* I remind myself that I'm no longer a weak or fragile creature. No matter how many times I make other people call me human, I can't deny one simple fact, I'm a hunter and hunters are far from weak. My body stiffens; I lift my chin upright, locking eyes with the stranger. He's standing in front of me now, no longer moving and I wonder if my face tells the story of the myriad of emotions coursing through me.

Opening my mouth, I'm prepared to deliver the feeble Grandmother speech once again when my eyes catch something surprising. Peeking out from beneath the stranger's shirt cuffs, I spy a glimpse of multiple scars. They aren't the kind that one gets from a weekend's recreational bike accident. There's a story behind those scars, and I'm left wondering what secrets those dark brown eyes might be hiding. His gaze follows where I'm looking, and my face flushes red when I watch him as he uncomfortably yanks on the fabric to conceal his past.

Before I can stammer an apology, I feel the same scrutiny in his gaze. He looks to my fingers, then to my feet, observing me from the base of my body all the way up to my blue eyes. If most men had looked at me the way he just did, I probably would have delivered a swift knee directly to their nether region. But the way he looked at me... examined me... it's like he was trying to figure something out. Perhaps he too is curious as to what I'm hiding. I've wanted to tell someone for the past year. Anyone. *Secrets are dangerous*, I remind myself. *Never let yourself be uncloaked.*

"I think your Grandmother might have you fooled," he says at last, leaning in close to my ear.

My head jerks, my fists tighten into two balls, one crumpling the photo of Grams. "You better tell me where she is."

He shakes his head, never losing his cool for even a second. "I don't know, but my guess is, wherever she is, she doesn't want you to know."

"Excuse me?" I gasp.

He's watching me. Waiting to see if I'm going to react physically. I loosen my fists. *Stay calm*, I keep reminding myself. He moves in even closer, uncomfortably close, but I don't move an inch. I stay completely still as he lifts my hand and unclasps my fingers to reveal Gram's picture. He takes it between two fingers, lifting it up to examine it, looking back at me, then at the picture once more. "I don't see the resemblance."

"There's more than you could ever imagine," I answer.

"I overheard you asking around about her," he continues. "But the woman I met wasn't feeble minded."

My body involuntarily jerks as I snatch the picture from his hand. "So you've seen her?"

He nods with a half smile; he's enjoying this. "Last night."

I wait for more, but he's not the type to say too much. I can't decide if this is infuriating me or turning me on. "And?"

“She was in here, but not for long,” he offers.

“So you’re in here a lot?” I probe. *You’re not here to find out about him! Find out what he knows about Grams.*

“I stop in occasionally...” he says in a near-growl, slowly licking his lips. “To quench my thirst.”

Grams! “Did she happen to say where she was going?”

He tilts his head, strokes the five o’clock shadow on his face, as though he’s deeply pondering my question. Shrugging his shoulder, he presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, creating a clicking noise, and adds “Sorry, I don’t remember.”

He’s hiding something, but what? Why?

His jaw steels. I can see him looking at something over my shoulder. Suddenly I feel a firm grasp on my arm as I’m turned around with a jarring jolt. The room flashes past me until my eyes collide with Flint’s stern glare.

“What are you doing here?” I ask in irritated disbelief.

“What am I doing here?” He sounds just as surprised. “Ruby, I told you it’s not safe.”

I jerk free from his grasp. “I’m fine. Leave me alone.”

I move to turn my back on Flint, but he doesn’t let me, gripping my shoulders now. “You’re not fine. We need to get out of here.”

“Hey,” the brown-eyed stranger steps into the conversation. “The lady says she’s fine.”

Flint doesn’t hesitate, taking a fistful of the handsome man’s shirt he pulls him close. “Walk away,” he warns in a harsh tone.

I fight the smirk that’s trying to tear across my face, hidden pleasure aching with glee inside of me. The man I’ve wanted to notice me for a year seems like he might be jealous.

Grams! You’re here to find Grams!

Thrusting my arms between the two delicious men I shout, “That’s enough!”

Make it convincing. He’ll never leave if you’re not convincing.

I turn and face Flint, furrowing my brows. “You go home. That’s not my home anymore. I never wanted to be there. I never wanted that life. And now that Grams is gone, nobody’s going to keep me there.”

His expression of shock causes a pang of pain in my gut, but I won’t show it. I can’t. It’s all lies, but this guy, he’s not going to let me get close enough to get answers unless I’m alone.

Flint stumbles back a few surprised steps. “You’re just upset,” he insists. “Let’s go back to the cabin, I’m sure we’ll hear from Grams soon.”

“You’re not hearing me,” I snap. “I hope she’s dead.” The lie is the most painful words ever to leave my lips.

“I’ll... I—“ Flint stammers in incredulity.

“You heard her, now beat it.” The handsome man adds from behind me where he’s hidden safely.

Flint growls, but I lean in, breaking his concentration, motioning with my head and eyes in the direction of the door.

“You can’t mean this stuff,” he says, wounded.

I bite my lip, knowing I shouldn’t waver in my sternness I compromise “Look, I need a night off, okay? How about you go home and wait to see if Grams shows up?” I don’t wait for an

answer, turning and placing a palm on the chest of the handsome man, “And how about you buy me another drink?”

We walk back over to the bar, and I can feel Flint’s eyes burning a hole into my back.

Just leave damn it. Go home Flint.

The man next to me continues babbling on about things that don’t interest me. I should be asking questions about Grams, but all I can do is think about how mean I was to the only friend I have in this world. Is he standing behind me like a hurt puppy? The bartender places a fresh drink in front of me, I smile and nod my thanks. The handsome man tells me his name is Brett. I knew a guy in college named Brett. He was a tool. It seems only appropriate it’s this guy’s namesake.

Is he still there? Watching me, waiting for me to tell him I’m sorry.

I can’t take not knowing if he stayed, I have to look. No matter how many times I tell myself not to turn around, I need to see if he’s still there.

I spin on the bar stool, expecting to see Flint glowering at me from across the room, but he’s not. He’s nowhere. He left. He left me here.

Isn’t that what you wanted?

I feel sad, relieved and pissed off all at the same time.

I shift back around slowly, my jaw hanging open in disbelief. He left. Brett isn’t talking, I suddenly realize. I glance over at him and notice he’s staring at me. *Oh hell, did he ask something?* “I’m sorry, what?”

“Is there something wrong with your drink?” He inquires.

Grams! Don’t forget why you’re here.

I wrap my hand around the glass and take a big gulp before slamming it down on the bar and staring at Brett defiantly. “So, my grandmother,” I continue.

“Who knows, maybe you got lucky, and somebody murdered the old hag,” he snickers.

As if by instinct my fingers release the glass in my hand and wrap themselves around his throat. “She’s my Grams, only I can say—“ My words catch in my throat as my vision blurs. I squint, loosening my grip when I see the veins bulging in Brett’s forehead.

“I don’t feel right,” I mumble, unsure if the words are even understandable, my arms falling to my side.

Motherfu— Brett is grinning a hazy and devious toothy smile at me. *Why are his teeth so big?* The question stumbles through my thoughts.

“Looks like you need a ride home sweetheart,” he announces loudly.

“What did you put in my—“ the room fades away as I feel his arm wrap around my hips.

Damn it.

And just like that, everything goes silent and dark.

Chapter Five

I sit upright, opening my eyes. I'm alone. My hands and feet are free, even though I half expected them to be bound. I'm still dressed, again a surprise based on my last memory. I pat my side pocket. *Damn, phone's gone. It couldn't be that easy, could it?* I lick the roof of my dry mouth, trying to remember when I last fed. I touch the back of my hand to my forehead; I'm cold ... wait, I'm always cold.

I spring into action, taking in my surroundings, just as all the training I've received has taught me. There is a door, heavy, with a small 4-inch window in it that's currently shut. I pull on the handle. It's locked, of course. My eyes dart to the left, there's a fireplace that appears to have been bricked over years ago. The walls are covered in a peeling floral wallpaper. On the far side of the room, I see the curtains and cross over to them hastily, ripping them open, only to reveal that the window has been bricked over as well. I slam my fists against the center to check for stability; they're meant to keep whoever is in here right where they are, supernatural strength or not. My knuckles tingle and I can feel the panic creep in. I stretch out my fingers and shake them wildly. *You've got this. Calm down. You know what to do. Think.* Quickly I search the room for anything I can use as a weapon. A couch, two throw pillows, and a blanket. Nothing else. *Think. Think. Who the hell is this guy? Grams. He has to know where she is.*

Suddenly a pain splits down the middle of my forehead. *What the hell?* I haven't had a headache since I became a Hunter, now whatever this creep gave me has me waking up with the mother of all headaches.

The small window inside the door opens. I turn cautiously, staring into the eyes looking back at me. Dark hazelnut, there's no mistaking who they belong to.

"Brett," I groan.

"Good morning beautiful," he says. "I've got a treat for you."

Oh, have I got a treat for you too, you piece of— I glare at him, backing up slowly.

"If you could just sit down, I can unlock the door," he adds.

"I'm all the way over here," I protest.

"And like any other Hunter, it would only take you a few seconds to make your way to the door."

Pfft. As if me sitting would slow me down. I'm unable to hide my smirk as I slide down the wall. *Lucky for you, I need answers first.*

I listen as the key slides into the lock and clicks, the tumblers falling into place. As he said, any good Hunter has a set of skills, and one of those is lock pick. You'll never know when that craft will come in handy. I'm suddenly glad Gram insisted I continue to practice.

He moves into the room with a tray and secures the door behind him. He doesn't seem to be working with anyone on the immediate other side of the door. Either he's alone, or his accomplices are in another part of the building.

He places the tray on the couch and motions me over. "I know what you want, but I just can't have you regaining your strength, so I'm afraid a strong cup of coffee will have to do."

“What I want?” I innocently ask as I stand and make my way to the arm of the couch.

“Blood.” He answers coolly.

He knows exactly what I am. “Who are you?” I ask.

“We’ll get to that.” He answers, then his voice twists. It’s now full of hate and his brows narrow as he commands me, “Now sit, drink, it’s rude not to partake of something your host offers you.”

“So you can drug me like you did at the bar? No thanks.”

“Fine,” he snaps, standing and leaving the tray with the single mug where it sits. “I’ll leave it with you then. Drink or don’t, it makes no difference to me.” This guy seems to have more personalities than I have pairs of underwear.

“Maybe I’ll just get what I need to drink from you.” I suggest.

He laughs mockingly and looks back at me. “Oh please, try.” He offers me his neck. Normally, this would be the part where I cross the room, using my super-speed skills and sink my teeth into his throat, but my lack of feeding has left me far too weak for such theatrics.

I stand and glide casually to him, “Don’t tempt me.” He doesn’t move as I close in on his location.

“Go ahead, I won’t stop you.” He taunts me, the corners of his mouth curling into a smile.

This is far too easy. It has to be a trap. Why would he— “Of course. You’re a Lycan.”

He tilts his head upright, “You are quick, just like your Grams said.”

I bite my lip, resisting the urge to snap his neck. I might need him to find her, and I’m in no condition to take on a werewolf. *Damn it! How did I miss he’s a wolf?* Because he doesn’t act like most wolves, that’s why. I run through the list of things that indicate what a wolf ‘looks like’ in my mind...

1.) *Unibrow. Apparently the longer a man has been a werewolf, the closer the brows grow together. I look closer at him. No, not even a hint of poor grooming. Perhaps he’s newly bitten, or maybe I happened upon one of the Lycans into manscaping. Jesus. I can’t believe this is my life now.*

2.) *It’s a well-known fact that any person who has a ring finger longer than their middle finger is likely a werewolf. That happens as a result of the first shifting.*

I run my fingers across his chest flirtatiously, unsure if he will buy the routine. He allows my digits to dance their way down to his hand. I run my fingers over the tips of his. *Bingo!*

3.) *Aggressive behavior. Hmm ... he did get into it with Flint at the bar, but he backed down. It’s my first encounter with an actual wolf, I wouldn’t call myself an expert, but they never back away from a fight. Unless maybe—perhaps their objective was bigger than a bar fight. Me. I was his objective.*

4.) *Excessive Body Hair. I saw the scars, no telling what else he’s hiding under that suit.*

5.) *A heightened sense of smell and hearing. He did say he heard me telling someone at the bar about Grams, but I don’t remember seeing him before that first time. Could he hear me from across the room? Of course he could, filthy Lycan.*

“Your mood shifted quickly,” he notes.

I tilt my head, still running my fingertips along the flesh of his hand. He doesn't stop me.
"Any friend of Grams is a friend of mine."

He laughs, "Oh, I never said we were friends."

I feel a knot in my stomach. It tightens as it shifts up my throat, "Oh no?" *Control yourself. Don't let him see he's rattling you.*

"No, in fact, I was sent here to kill the two of you," he states casually.

I stumble back a couple steps, looking into his eyes for a glint of humor; there's nothing but coolness in them. "Kill us?"

He nods as if the information he's just imparted to me is nothing more than the simplicities of a grocery list. "Yeah, but—" he hesitates.

Hesitation is a weakness.

"But what?" My tone is soft and sweet, my eyes are wide. I can even lie well with my face. He swallows hard, "When I saw you in the woods I knew I had to see more."

"Saw me in the woods?" I ask. I need more information.

"I've been following you for almost a month now," he admits with a lopsided grin.

"Why?" The question slips out before I can think about it.

"Because my master told me you were the last of your kind, and you were a danger to us."

"Last of my kind?" I whisper to myself. Confused.

"Oh yeah, and trust me, you were not easy to find."

That's why Grams has always been so psycho about me not going out alone. "I bet." I bite at my tongue for the uncontrolled sarcasm.

"But then I saw you, and I knew I had to get to know you."

"Is that why you approached me at the bar? Do you know where Grams is?"

He places a hand on his chest and feigns an expression of discomfort, "I'm deeply disappointed that you think I would make such a shallow attempt at getting to know you. Oh no Ruby, I know everything about you. I know that you like to take baths that are nearly boiling because you miss the heat on your skin. I know that you like to drink your nightly blood rations in a wine glass because you want to pretend you're not a monster."

I can tell he has more to share, but I need him to stop. "How?"

"I've been living alongside you for this past month. Looking through the window of your bathroom. Outside the wall of your bedroom. I can smell you in whatever room you're in, I've even crept into your bedroom to read your journals."

"You what?"

He looks confused, "I knew you'd want me to know everything about you."

He's flipping crazy!

"But that, of course, was how your grandmother caught my scent. I shouldn't have gotten greedy. I should have known she would smell me."

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Don't worry, she won't be keeping us apart any more." I want to read hope into his statement. I want to think that he has her locked up somewhere. He'll let her out if I beg him, but I know the truth. Not only is he a Lycan, he's also mad. Pure crazy-town.

Grams is dead.

Think. Think. You have to get out of here.

“When’s the last time you kissed someone?” I ask boldly. *He can’t be this stupid.*

“What?”

“You know, sucked face, made-out, frenched, tongue wrestled. Perhaps had a bit of snogging?”

He flushes red. *Wow, he’s stupid. Of course, sex or anything resembling getting to sex always makes people stupid. Especially crazy irrational people who think they’re in love.*

“I don’t know, why?” his voice cracks. There’s that weakness again.

“Because I want to kiss you for finally ridding me of the old bat.”

He closes his eyes and presses out a set of pouty lips. Jesus. It would be so easy right now to kick his ass, but I can’t take the risk. It’s been at least 24-hours since I last fed. I need to feed if I’m going to have any chance of killing him. I can’t feed on him; Lycan blood is toxic to Vampires.

I swallow the sour bile that has risen in my throat and taken up residence inside my mouth from the site of his pouted lips. *He’ll want to save you, I think. Men always want to save the damsel.* Leaning in I let my lips just barely graze his, then fake a fainting spell, falling to the floor with a thud.

He’s on his knees next to me in a moment, scooping me up into his arms. I keep my eyes closed. *Three more seconds. Don’t open your eyes yet. You have to make him worry. One. Two. Three.*

“Ruby!” He gasps. The sound of his genuine concern alarms me, like he’s certifiably a psychopath. I don’t respond. He shakes me gently. “Are you okay? Damn it. Damn it. Damn it,” he mutters under his breath.

I gasp for air I don’t even need, and then wilt away into a helpless and fragile heap, coughing as I repeatedly wince in pain.

“What’s wrong?” He asks.

“I haven’t eaten in days,” I moan. “But I’ll be okay as long as I’m with you.” I don’t open my eyes. I’m afraid if I do he’ll see the truth. I know I’m good, but not sure if I’m this good.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, can you just help me to the couch?” The entire time his hands are on me I have to fight the urge to rip his throat out.

He carries me to the worn and weathered sofa, securing a blanket around me. His caring and sensitivity might have scored points with me if I didn’t know he was a murderer.

“Wait here,” he commands tenderly.

Minutes pass. I hear scuffling in the hall. The door opens, and a terrified young woman who appears to be injured by the amount of blood on her, enters the room, followed by my handsome monster. Then the door shuts.

What the hell is this? He better not even think I’m up for a threesome, creep!

He’s pleased with himself. It’s obvious from his expression that this moment is bringing him close to ecstasy. I understand now. My darling creeper has just brought me dinner.

“Can you see it?” He asks me. “Her whole world crumbling. Can you hear her lungs heaving, burning with panic? She wants to run, but there’s nowhere to go. She’s unsure, but pretty certain being here means she’s going to die.”

“Please,” the woman pleads, falling to her knees, bits of spit spraying out from her bloodied lips.

“Why the blindfold?” I ask.

His dark, cold glare tells me the answer before his words, “It’s all part of the game. The dark is a scary thing for most.”

My mind runs through the kaleidoscope of options I have at this moment. I need strength. I need him to trust me. I need to eat. I lick my lips, my eyes fixated on the offering crying in front of me. “Do you mind if I eat alone?”

His eyes fix themselves on me, studying me, a glaze of mistrust clouding his pupils. There’s a moment of stillness. *You’re losing him.* “I don’t want you to think of me differently,” I add.

I look at my captor. He’s still watching me, and I’m unsure, but it appears the mistrust may be fading. He motions for me to move in closer. *Make him trust you.* I glide over to his side, doing my best to shield my face from revealing the loathing and disgust in my gut. He ignores the weeping blindfolded woman, now cowering in the fetal position on the floor and instead wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me in against his body. He’s aroused. “Don’t you see, I love you because of the monster inside, not despite it.”

I feel the air shift around me, and then his breath on my neck. *Grams. He took Grams from you. If he knows how much you loathe him, he’ll take your life from you too.* I remind myself. Leaning into his grasp, I close my eyes, touching my lips to his, slowly and gently, counting in my head the seconds that pass. *Not too quick or he’ll know. Not too slow or he’ll know.* I feel him shake beneath me. Perfect. I pull back and open my eyes slowly.

“I’ve never been with anyone so romantic,” I choke out.

“You deserve it,” he breathes. I can feel the acid of hate churning in my stomach.

I swallow hard and look away bashfully.

“What’s wrong?” He asks.

So easily manipulated.

“Nothing,” I whisper.

“Please, tell me,” he begs. The whimpering of the wounded women starts to fade as she has found something to occupy her thoughts.

“It’s just—” I shift my eyes around anxiously. “I haven’t eaten in so long. I’m afraid I might—never mind.” I shake my head and blink heavily.

“No, please tell me,” he grips my wrists and tries to get me to look into his eyes.

“I’m afraid I might get sick, you know— throw up or something. It’s important to me that you don’t see me like that.”

“You’re stubborn,” he says firmly, before tracing the lines of my cheek with his fingertips. “And so beautiful.”

Without another word, he turns and leaves the room. I wait and listen for the click of the lock. But there’s nothing. I smile. *Last mistake you’ll ever make asshole.*

The facts of the situation haven’t changed. I’m still far too weak to fight him in hand-to-hand combat. I need to eat. My eyes move to the whimpering creature on the floor. But unlike what I led him to believe, I won’t get sick. I’ll only get stronger. I’m on my knees, running my hand across the woman’s oily hair. She convulses, pulling away from me until her back is against the wall.

“Please, no,” she whimpers.

“Don’t worry,” I whisper. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

“What?” And there, in her voice, as she speaks to the darkness, I hear a hint of hope.

Hope, what a silly human emotion. There’s survival, and then there’s darkness. The grayness in between disappeared with my heartbeat. “I just need to eat first,” I tell her. She’ll understand. Eventually.

Chapter Six

A motionless body lies on the floor across from me. I feel a slight and vague sense of remorse over what I've done, but nothing significant. Not like the first time I fed on a human. Perhaps this is normal. I can expect to lose a little more of my humanity each and every time I sink my teeth into the soft and supple flesh of a human. *Aren't you still human?* I stare at the body. *Aren't you still human?* I ask myself again, more unsure of the answer than ever before.

I miss the nagging phone calls from my mother. Was I keeping up with my laundry? Because you know, you never want to be in an accident while wearing dirty underwear. I laugh softly to myself, wiping at a drop of dried blood that settled in the corner of my mouth. She always worried about the most insane things.

I miss the way I used to agonize over that latte because of the calories. I miss that mindless joy I got from shopping trips with my friends. I bite my lip to remind myself that though I am dead, I still exist. *No, you're not human. You haven't been human for a long time.*

My thoughts shift to Flint. Will I see him again? Does he know how I feel about him? Does he know I couldn't have made it through this past year without him? He has this ability to tap into my brain, and hone in with great precision on how I'm feeling.

I look at my arms where earlier the flesh had been littered with random slashes and bandages on my wrists from my struggle during the abduction. The feeding is already doing its work. Only small pale white veining remains as a reminder.

"You'll heal quickly now," Grams had explained to me when my transformation into Hunter first happened.

Grams. I spent so much time hating her and blaming her for what I'd become, I didn't realize how much I needed her. And now... now I may never get the chance to tell her that. There's so much more she'll never have the chance to teach me. *Damn it! I hate Brett. I'm going to kill him.*

"What are you?" A voice cracks from the corner. The woman is stirring. Her hand slips to the puncture wounds on her neck.

"Today, I'm your savior," I answer, standing up and dusting the dirt from my bottom. Her eyes widen, fear dancing in them. "Do you want to live?"

She hesitates, then nods.

"Lay completely still, play dead."

"What?" She gasps.

I cross the room, place a hand on the door handle. "If you want to live do as I say. Whatever you hear outside of this room, don't move."

I don't wait for her to respond. She has no idea how lucky she is that I stopped feeding on her before I consumed her life as well. If she listens to me, she might have a chance. If she doesn't, her blood will be on her hands, not mine.

The door is still unlocked, I pause, surprised by the trust Brett has so easily given over to me. *Does he trust you? Maybe it's a trap.* As I walk cautiously down the long and narrow hallway, I unwrap a bandage from my wrist. I assume it's the remnants of a deeper wound from the

abduction. Brett wouldn't have bandaged me if he really just wanted me dead, would he? It can't be an act. He doesn't strike me as that clever.

The cut that was once on my arm has healed significantly, just as all the other scrapes have. I move into another room, a main room of the house. There's another fireplace, but this one has small flames flickering from within it. A couch and chairs are positioned in front, I lean forward onto my toes to ensure the seats are empty. Behind the couch is a desk, littered with papers and debris. The edges of the room are covered in trash and show the disrepair of the building, but this small concentrated area appears to be used regularly. My eyes dart around the space.

The far end of the room opens up into what appears to be the entryway. Just beyond that is a large wooden door. An exit. A way out of my captivity. *It has to be locked*, I think. *But what if it's not?* I need a plan. Clenching my fists and stretching my muscles outright, I roll my head in a circular motion. Listening to the popping sound of my bones I take stock of my condition. I can feel the feeding coursing through me, waking the beast inside, suffocating the weakness that was starting to emerge.

Can you take him on? Are you strong enough? Maybe you should get Flint and return.

I move towards the door, pausing next to the desk, my eyes catching a glimpse of a bright red piece of fabric from inside a black sack that's been tossed among the items on the weathered desk. Instinctively my hand glides to the familiar color. My fingers wrap around it, pulling it slowly from the hiding place. I swallow a vile and putrid regurgitation of blood climbing my throat. It's a hooded cape from our clan. I bite my lip as I flip the hood back, knowing full well what to expect. Stitched in the lining are Grams initials, just as mine are stitched into my cloak back at the cabin.

"I thought you'd like to have it," Brett's cool voice announces from behind me.

I'm starting to shake. Everything that has been hovering just below the surface begins to rise inside of me. A desperate desire to relieve his body of his head is overwhelming me.

I've got this.

I turn to face him, holding Grams' hood in my hands. His eyes settle on me, then he looks back down the hall quickly.

"I saw what was left of your dinner. Feeling better?" He's smiling like an eager dog, wanting praise from his owner for offering them a dead bird. I force a smile, there are so many other things I want to say, but I want to rip out his throat more than I want to unload the sarcastic snippets racing through my mind.

"Much, thank you," I answer.

"I wish you would have let me watch," he growls.

"What?" I ask.

"Mmm... To hold life in your hands, wrapping your fingers around the heart as it takes its last few beats—" he begins, clearly excited. "Nobody else can understand that feeling of euphoria, you know?"

He thinks I killed her. He thinks I'm like him. He has no idea I'm about to kill him. He's nuts.

"Where's Grams?" I ask, unsure if he'll lead me to a corpse, a shallow grave, or worse. Pain and loss are shredding their way through my insides, but I hide the daunting grief with a tight-lipped grin.

His nose is sharp, just like his jawline. His jaw tenses, his eyes squint causing his black lashes to twitch in front of his dark eyes. “She doesn’t matter anymore. She can’t control you now.”

He thinks he knows me. He knows nothing.

I force a smile, and swaying my hips from side to side I move with as much swagger as I can muster, gliding up to him. I am no longer thinking of running out that door to Flint for his help. *No. Brett’s mine.* He’s right about one thing, I was excited about holding a life in the palm of my hands... his.

Eagerly, he places a hand around my waist, pulling me close, pressing the evidence of his desire for me against my thigh. I twist my body, our hips grinding against one another. He smells of the outdoors and wild animal. He buries his face in my neck, kissing it repeatedly, while his fingers entangle in my hair, “I knew when I was watching you all those nights that we would have this connection.”

I let him snuggle against me, whispering his sweet nothings, building that trust while looking forward to ripping it away from him soon enough.

I need to know. I have to know if she’s dead or if she’s wasting away in a cell somewhere.

I untangle myself from his grasp, pulling a fistful of his hair in return. He looks shocked at first, then grins before lunging forward and sealing his lips around mine. A groan of ecstasy slips from his mouth, and I can feel how eager he is. Tugging on his hair sharply, I pull him into a submissive position while making certain it still feels playful.

“I want to see her body,” I say.

He bites his lip, a twinkle in his eye, and I think he might explode in anticipation in front of me.

“You’re more twisted than I thought,” he starts. “I knew we were a match made in heaven.”

“I need to see her body before I can move past this—before we can have some fun.”

He laughs.

“What?”

He shakes his head, “It’s just funny how well I know you.”

I can’t wait to kill him.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

“I had a feeling you might want the final blow.”

She’s alive. Thank God, she’s alive. “She’s alive?” I gasp, his eyes reveal there was too much hope in my voice. I lace my arm around his back and hug him close, leaning in and nibbling on the tip of his ear. I growl, “You do know me, don’t you.”

He kisses me again, his mouth tastes of death and I wonder if the most recent kill on his breath is animal. From the lingering hints of iron, I recognize the distinct flavor of human. When our lips part, I see foam has gathered around the corners of his mouth. His excitement has worked him into a frenzy, and I can see glimpses of the beast lurking within him.

“Will you take me to her?” I ask.

“In time,” he grins deviously. “I have other plans first.”

I shake my head, I can handle a little touching, the occasional kiss, but I’m not sure how much longer I can pretend. How much longer I can stop myself from ripping his heart from his chest.

“I hope she didn’t give you too much of a challenge.”

At that he laughs, “No offense, but I don’t understand why my master is so worried about your kind.” He looks disbelievingly in my direction.

A knot forms in my stomach, an invisible hand gripping my throat, tightening with every breath he took. I need to kill him. I need to end him in a way like I’ve never felt. I feel like at this moment I’m strong enough to rip his head clean off of his smug shoulders with my bare hands.

“I know, seems silly to me.” *Better he thinks we’re weak.* “So what did you do with her?”

He looks at me, his eyes widening, “She’s in the belly of the beast.”

I shake my head, “What?”

He grins, “She’s locked in the cellar. Between the cocktail I injected her with and lack of feedings she’s a mess.” He’s laughing. No. Cackling. I take a step back from him. He doesn’t seem to notice, his head is tilted towards the ceiling, as he’s still delighting in his cunningness.

The time’s come. This nightmare needs to end.

I glance around the room. No silver. Without silver, beheading is the only way.

I’m smiling now. *This is going to be fun.*

Suddenly he falls quiet, he’s staring at me, and it’s at this moment that I realize it’s impossible to know truly what a psychopath is thinking. His eyes tell me he wants to cut me open and surround himself with the warmth of my blood and body parts, while the bulge in his pants tells me he wants to ravish me in a completely different way.

Whomp. A thudding crash pounds down the door behind us. We’re both frozen where we stand as we watch.

I spin around and see Flint, standing in the doorway. There’s a golden light from the porch that’s framing his body, and damn does he look good. He has on a pair of dark denim jeans that hug him perfectly in every place I always admire. He’s wearing a gray V-neck T-shirt, with a black leather jacket, and for a moment I feel like the floor might fall away from under me.

Brett! I have a job, a mission.

“Ruby, are you okay?” Flint asks. Behind him, in walks Tynder and the witch, Piper. At Tynder’s side is a long silver sword. I close my eyes. I can’t let her take this from me. He’s mine.

“No. Stop!” I shout, raising my hands up waving them wildly.

I feel an arm across my chest, pulling me back. “Get behind me darling.”

Even now he thinks I’m his.

My eyes dart to Flint, the confusion reflecting in his stare causes a pang in my chest. “Ruby?” This time his voice is almost a whisper. I disappear behind Brett. “Let her go,” Flint adds in a more demanding voice.

Brett laughs, “I’m not keeping her idiot. She loves me.”

I say nothing, none of this can be easily explained. I don’t need to explain, I need vengeance. All that matters now is ending Brett and freeing Grams. I tighten my fists into two balls.

I am not a paper doll. I am not fragile. I don’t need to be rescued. Damn it, Flint, I just wanted you to want me, not to try and be my knight.

“Your master’s already dead.” I hear Tynder shout from across the room.

Brett’s eyes shift to me anxiously, then back to Tynder. “You’re lying!”

Piper steps forward, shaking her head. “She’s not lying. All of the Blood Moon wolves are being hunted down, but if you surrender now, maybe we can—“

“You can what? Work out a deal where I live out my days in a cage!” Brett shouts.

Flint’s eyes are still fixed on me. *Stop staring at me, damn it.*

Slit his throat? With what? Will my hand be able to rip through his chest? I’m stronger than humans, but Lycans have a harder than average skeletal structure. What about a bash to the head? Could I knock him unconscious? Then I could steal that sword from Tynder and—

“How about we calmly talk about the options?” Piper asks in a squeaky voice.

Brett glances back at me. I wonder if he can see the plotting in my eyes. I doubt it based on his gaze. He looks back to the three visitors, “How about I kill you all and we be done with this?”

A grinding and clicking noise begins to grow from deep within the bastard I was just contemplating on how best to kill. My jaw drops as I watch motionless. He outstretches his arms, his back arches, the vertebrae spiking upward out of his flesh and his head pops. His jaw gruesomely dislocates, tearing and distorting into a large, long muzzle. His knees unhinge, clicking into a position that makes no sense for a human. It’s as if his bones simply dissolved, falling apart, and something completely new and terrifying sprouted up in their place. His razor sharp claws emerge from where his hands were, and now paws exist. As his massive form takes its bone-crunching shape, I watch his now ill-fitting clothes fall away to reveal the thick, coarse hair that is now covering what used to be bare skin.

I’ve seen the Lycans in books, but none of it could have prepared me for seeing it in person. I can hear Tynder and Flint shouting something, but it’s muffled in my ears. Brett lets out an ear-bursting shout, and where the psychopath who loves me once stood, there is now a predator. He turns to me; the small dark pools have disappeared, replaced by narrowed and viscous animal eyes. Much to my surprise, I still see the desire reflecting in them. Brett’s still in there. The man I need to kill is there.

His head snaps, he’s glaring at the intruders, ready to pounce and tear them limb from limb.

Tynder moves forward, lifts the sword and shouts, “Stay behind me, in his current form only this silver can penetrate his flesh.”

He pats his foot along the old and dusty wooden floor. *I’ve waited too long, I think. I’ve missed my opportunity.* He leans in low, his teeth bared.

I don’t think, I only react. Leaping onto the beast’s back, I wrap my legs around his ribs and squeeze as firmly as I can. He stumbles, falling onto his side and with both hands I grip his chin, pulling up with a blood ravenous scream, “Now!” Tynder crosses the room swiftly, and with a quick sweep, slides the silver blade across the wolf’s throat. A dark warm bath of red washes over me as the body beneath me falls limp.

Shoving the corpse aside, I look up at Tynder and motion towards the sword. Without a word she hands me the blade and I free the animal the rest of the way from its head. Kicking it swiftly in the chin, I send it across the room.

“Love’s a bitch!” I snarl, spitting on the body at my feet.

“Ruby, are you okay?” Flint asks.

I’m coated in blood, it can easily be assumed I’m in the most disgusting state I’ve ever been. I look up into his eyes and there, reflecting in them is a truth I’ve never been able to see before. My heartache. He wants to be my knight, not because he thinks I’m weak, but because he loves

me, even if he doesn't realize it yet. He's hovering just above my lips, I close my eyes, thinking he might kiss me. But he doesn't. *Of course not.*

"I will be as soon as we free Grams," I answer at last, opening my eyes again.

His eyes widen as he asks in disbelief, "She's alive?"

I nod and smile, "She's in the cellar."

"How about you two go and set her free while we clean up the mess?" Piper suggests.

"Um, yeah, I'm not touching that," Tynder snarls pointing at the bloody corpse.

Flint and I laugh at the disgusted look on Tynder's face, then turn towards the hall.

"Wait," I hear Tynder's voice behind me. "That was smart work."

"What was?" I ask.

"Gaining his trust like you did." She explains. "We should talk more. I could use someone like you on my team."

I turn to continue towards the cellar, careful not to reveal her comment has flattered me. Right now, at this moment I just want to reconnect my dysfunctional and completely perfect family. We can talk about killing wolves later.

Release Grams first.

Flint's fingers grasp my shoulder as he pulls me to a stop.

"What is it? Do you see how to get to the cellar?" I ask, eyes wide.

He shakes his head as he loosens his grip, concern creasing his brow.

"What's wrong?" I ask, clutching his arm.

"Ruby I thought--" he starts, while grazing my skin with his thumb. The tenderness is new. I like it.

I smile and nod. "I'm fine." I can see his concern wrinkling his nose. His eyes move to my neck, then up to my chin, and linger on my lips. I part them, waiting with fullness and longing, but as quickly as his gaze settled on my pout, it darted away and bonded to the floor.

"Flint," I whisper. His chin slowly lifts as he bends towards me. *I've waited long enough*, I think. Pressing upward onto my toes, my mouth brushes his. His lips are soft at first and as they touch mine it's like a tender caress. The kiss is sweet, and nothing like I'd imagined it over the past year.

Just as I'm about to relent and slip away from him, he pulls me back with a possessive grasp that sends a chill up my spine. The kiss changes to something deep now, his fingers entangling into my hair, gripping me firmly as he explores me. His lips leave my mouth, but not my body, burning a trail down my neck and resting in the crease on my shoulder.

He disconnects, the desire still burning in his eyes. I steady myself against him and grin. Maybe being immortal isn't going to be as bad as I'd thought.

**If you enjoyed this fairytale retelling, be sure to check out more fae inspired tales in the serial series, The Tynder Crown Chronicles, by Wendy Owens. They can be found on Amazon.
<http://amzn.to/1PFAisw>*