

1 Ella

Nauset Beach, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

One day before Thanksgiving

I HAD A KILL MARK.

At least, that's what Christian had called it.

He said mine was darker, deeper . . . more distinct, even than my 4th great grandmother, Elizabeth's. From what I had managed to see, the small brand on my back that deemed me a murderer had also begun to change, growing upwards on my spine like a gnarled vine.

Christian said it was normal, considering what I had done a few weeks before. Considering how many I had slaughtered inside the coal room of the Newport mansion. A kill mark, he said, was the badge of the truly lethal and appeared only on those like me - those who could torch soul thieves and nearly flatten a national treasure, though I was sure my

wrecking-ball capability was a shocker for Christian.

I've got to say, I could do without it.

In fact, I could do without the whole assassin gene in general. It would be awesome if we were given a chance to choose our gene pool. A chance to mull over the options and pick what we wanted and what we would pass on, like the ability to channel the energy of souls and thus, fry soul thieves.

That would have been a big, fat pass for me.

I remember watching Sleeping Beauty as a child with Mae, and the Three Good Fairies chose what the princess got for endowments. They opted for a fabulous singing ability and babe-worthy good looks. Apparently everyone in the kingdom was stupid, because no one gave the poor girl any BRAINS and she went and touched the damn spindle. I mean, for crying out loud, if you get to choose the genetics ya get, belting out show tunes and rosy lips should be low on the list of must-haves.

Sometimes I felt like I too was destined to screw up and touch the proverbial spindle . . . unless I could torch the spinning wheel first. The only problem was a certain soul thief, who didn't seem too keen on having me test my wheel-frying abilities at all, especially after the Newport fiasco five weeks ago.

I needed a do-over from that night. We all did.

I glanced at Ana standing next to me. The snowflakes had begun to coat the top of her jacket's hood. A few brave flakes descended onto her long eyelashes and she blinked them away as she rolled her lips, willing them to not freeze off.

She huffed out her disgust at our current state, the cold air turning her words into slanted puffs of smoky vapor. "This is the dumbest

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pastime on the planet. I mean, who thinks up activities like this? Does some moron decide that hypothermia prior to turkey is a great idea and everyone jumps on the bandwagon?” She brutally scrubbed the flakes off her parka, evicting them without remorse.

Truth was, as a Kansas native now calling Cape Cod home, I didn’t see the logic of surfing on Thanksgiving Eve either. Especially prior to the Nor’ Easter that was heading towards us and churning up some monster waves. That said, however, this brilliant plan to freeze our butts off at Nauset beach was her idea. I decided not to remind her of that bit of info, since she was looking like a fairly pissed Popsicle anyway. I didn’t think that the stiff walking boot encasing her left leg helped either.

She wouldn’t have the darn thing if it wasn’t for me.

Of course, she might not have her life anymore either, if I hadn’t done what I did. Luckily, she only had to wear it when we went out of the house for any length of time, as she was basically healed.

“Let’s give them ten more minutes, and then we can head back home,” I replied, giving her a small smile. She eyed me with a steely glare and then just shook her head, resigned, her eyes going back to the two soulless surfers in the waves.

I must admit that when I first moved to the Cape, nearly three months ago, I didn’t think Ana Lane and I would ever be more than classmates. But now? Now I couldn’t imagine life without her. Through all the chaos that rained down on our lives over the past couple of months, she became more than just a short-statured blonde with a sharp tongue.

She became my best girl-pal ever.

She became the one I could divulge secrets to, horde chocolate with,

and spill my guts to in the dead of night. And we stayed up late every Friday night, watching movies in her room.

Her room, which was now across from mine, since she had moved into 408 Main Street with me and my legal guardian Mae. She was my mother's best friend until the night both my parents were killed in a car accident. I was only two when they died, and Mae had only just graduated high school, but she took me in. She loved me as her own and I have never seen her as anything other than a sister-like Mom whom I have loved for the past sixteen years.

As for Ana, she wasn't just a live-in BFF either. She was also one heck of an asset, especially in our motley crew. She was like an emotional psychic with a super-charged mind. She could understand what a person FELT, deep inside. Pick apart their true desire and either blab about it or modify it. She could take someone who was simply miffed and make her a raging maniac. She could take someone who was shy and make him crumble into oblivion. Or, she could make that one quiet wallflower become a fearless captain.

She was also getting better and better at reading memories. A few weeks ago she was able to link to my mind and view my nightmares regarding Elizabeth's death. A death that happened nearly two centuries ago and that I had begun reliving in my dreams.

Unfortunately Ana couldn't read the future, nor see the train wreck we hit head-on during the Fire and Ice Ball at The Newport Breakers.

Hey – nobody's perfect.

If there was a plus side to my body going nuclear in the coal room of the Vanderbilt's summer mansion, it was the simple fact that the bad guys were dead. Fried into dust by the soul-channeling energy I

command.

Well, “command” may be a bit too strong of a word. I think I more or less barfed up a solar flare.

Luckily I didn’t remember much of it.

On the downside, I did nearly croak. Plus, I put a hole in the mansion that looked like a comet had struck. And while the mansion and I were finally on the mend, the fallout of what I did with Raef’s help was not soon forgotten.

Since the ball, Raef had been treating me with kid gloves and avoiding all physical contact – as if I resided inside a glass bubble. I was also sure he was haunted by the fact that he basically killed me that night in Newport. He never talked about it, which I didn’t think helped when it came to his new title: Worry-Wart of the World.

I’ve gotta say, having the boy who previously could make a kiss scorch right to your toenails, now start acting like one giant mother hen, was SO not sexy.

I missed his touch, his kisses, and the way his face became marked with beautiful black symbols when we were in one another’s arms. I missed him, all of him, but he seemed lost in his own painful world and he wouldn’t let me in.

In the first days after my weeklong hospital stay, it was a miracle if I was even able to escape to the bathroom alone. Mae was hovering, Raef was obsessing, Kian was patrolling, and poor MJ was semi-grounded. But Ana? Ana found it downright hilarious until she became more mobile and instantly joined my ranks in the dreaded “buddy-system.”

See, this was the problem with having immortal semi-boyfriends and an ice-cream wielding shape-shifter as bodyguards – they are great at

their jobs, but go a bit overboard. Determined to not have Ana and me in danger again, the boys had devised the “Buddy System,” which basically meant we needed a male sidekick wherever we went. The feminist in both Ana and me bristled at the mandatory babysitting and defiantly referred to the boys plan as “BS.”

They weren’t amused.

So it was with no small amount of arm-twisting that we had managed to get Kian and Raef to go surfing, a whole sand dune and 50 yards of rolling ocean away from us. I think the only reason they finally agreed was because no one else was out here, freezing to death prior to a storm, and therefore the threat was minimized. We were also instructed to STAY at the top of the dune’s staircase, where they could easily see us. Of course, such a demand made the devilish urge to go and hide all the more tempting.

Like I said – it was all BS.

I watched as Kian and Raef sat on their new surfboards out in the water. They were talking to one another as they straddled the boards in their wetsuits, though Raef kept looking at me every two seconds. Technically, as immortal soul thieves, they didn’t need the protection from the frosty Atlantic, but flinging them out there in just some swim trunks would have drawn attention if anyone else had been as insane as we were.

Luckily, we were the only psychos on the beach.

The thickening storm clouds had blocked out the sun, and the brilliantly blue sky from earlier was now a brutish gray, speckled with hyperactive snowflakes. Ana said that a Thanksgiving storm like this was a rarity on the Cape. Of course, she also had extolled the virtues of

surfing prior to pumpkin pie and, well, that wasn't exactly accurate either.

"What do you think they're talking about?" I asked, watching the waves where our bodyguards bobbed up and down.

"Pfft – wadda ya think? What they always obsess about. You. Me. How to lock us up in a tower with ten-foot thick walls and a fully outfitted army." She stepped back slightly and brushed the snow off a small bench to sit down. I noticed Kian and Raef instantly stopped talking the second she moved, and were now watching her and scanning the surrounding area. They really needed to chill.

"How's physical therapy?" I asked.

Ana sighed as she sat, "It's fine. I swear though, they book me more often than everyone else just because of Kian. All the therapists just want to see him leaning against that damn back wall, looking all sorts of sexy. Drives me nuts. And he insists on taking me. Honestly, I don't even think my therapist knows my last name! She sure as hell knows Kian's though. My last session is Monday afternoon, thank goodness."

I gave a small chuckle and she glared at me. Kian O'Reilly and Ana had met the summer before I came to Cape Cod. While both were somewhat tight-lipped about what had happened that summer, I knew one thing for certain: Ana and Kian had been desperately in love . . . until her abusive father had a heart attack and Kian refused to save him.

As soul thieves, Kian and Raef could steal the life force of their victims, but they also could share what they had stolen in a filtered form to heal a human. Kian had told Ana that her father was too weak to be saved and would have turned into a soul thief, like him. Ana didn't believe him, calling him a murderer and banishing him from her life.

A year later, I arrived on the Cape and they collided once again. Kian

had returned to sell his yacht, Cerberus, and Raef had come along. Raef soon figured out that I was the 4th great daughter of his former friend, Elizabeth, and he decided to protect me – because he failed to protect her in 1851. Kian had zero interest in the protection detail thing until he realized Ana was hanging out with me and she became a target by association. Pretty soon, I had two immortal guards that were technically my genetic enemies.

Fate works in some crackpot ways.

As for Ana and Kian . . . their relationship was a work in progress. I suspected Raef and I had a long way to go as well.

2 Raef

FIVE WEEKS AGO, I NEARLY KILLED the girl I loved.

It wasn't an accident. It wasn't a mistake.

I did it deliberately, and the feeling of her body weakening in my arms haunts me still, as if branded into my hands. The sound of her last, thin breath replays over and over in my mind, a taunting reminder of what I am capable of and what I had done.

She carries the mark of where I had forced a stolen soul into her - a thin, finger-long scar engraved between her breasts.

She tries to hide it, but I know it's there.

She will carry that scar to her grave, a permanent reminder of who I truly am - a killer, designed by the darker hand of fate.

The scar had bled down her beautiful, fair skin that night, turning the bodice of the white ball gown she had worn into a sickening, mottled pink. In my mind I see her, lifeless, tucked under me as I try to shield her from the pieces of falling stone and wood that rain down around us.

Debris that was from the massive hole her energy had drilled through the

Breakers. Energy that was unleashed when her body switched to overload, and her DNA hit the self-destruct button because of me.

Her power had wound around us like a snake of light and rocketed through the ceiling only to fall back, collapsing onto us. It had killed the clansman instantly . . . and halted Eila's heart.

I tried to go with her. Tried to poison myself with her life-force by drawing it into my body, but I failed. She wasn't toxic to me – she never was and never could be. I was left alive, desperately trying to restart her heart with MJ and Kian frantically attempting to help. Trying to save this one girl who had so profoundly changed all our lives, and who had sacrificed herself to protect us. To protect me, her historic enemy.

She had whispered into my cheek that she loved me, moments before I caused that scar. I hear her voice speak those words when I stand, alone at night, watching over her home. Praying I will catch anyone who means her harm before they come too close.

Before they have a chance to take her life . . . as I had.

I watch her now, standing with Ana as the snow swirls around them. She seems happy, healthy, and against all odds, alive.

She has told me, repeatedly, that it wasn't my fault. That we had no choice, that night in Newport, surrounded by Mortis who wanted her power. She said she was dead no matter what, but at least she could give the rest of us a fighting chance at survival.

But I was, and am, her guard. I should have been more careful, more vigilant. I should have known, somehow, but I didn't see a friend's betrayal coming. None of us did, and it was Eila who paid the price, and I the one who demanded the ultimate payment.

She was, is, my everything. My need to love her is like a physical

demand that must be met for my survival, and for that reason, the fear that I may hurt her again is crushing. The terror that I may fail her again, as I failed her grandmother a century and a half ago, weighs more than the world.

She trusts me, loves me, and I *will not* lose her again.

But to protect her, I know I need to be stronger. Faster. A perfect killer. I needed a Dealer, no matter the cost, no matter the risk. I would do it for her.

I wasn't sure if I could tell Kian, because he may try to stop me, though he had no problem picking off a few people if it were necessary. And Christian I still didn't quite trust, though I was certain he had the right connections to introduce me to the darkest corners of our kind.

So for now, I do what I can. I am hyper-vigilant, I try to stay nearby, and I try not to breech the wall I have built between us. A wall that is a necessity, because when I hold her, kiss her, and run my hands down her slender frame, I forget who I am. In her soft lips and breathy gasps I lose myself, and in doing so, she becomes vulnerable. Unprotected, because I am entirely distracted when she presses her beautiful body against mine. That wall, however, was beginning to feel more precariously erected with every passing day. As Eila grew stronger, my will to keep her at arm's length weakened.

In the hospital we had made a deal: keep our hands off one another until she could use her power like the dangerous weapon it was designed to be and protect herself. I assumed I wouldn't worry so much about her if I knew she could defend herself and I could draw her into my arms once again. Unfortunately, I overlooked one thing: I would NEVER stop worrying about Eila Walker. Even if she could crush the planet, I would

still worry.

As I watched her in the center of the swirling snow, her chocolate hair twisting around her face, I knew I was in trouble.

She wanted to fight. I wanted her safe.

As she grew stronger, she began talking about training more and more. She wanted to attempt to call her power again and see if she could control it. But I had seen her power nearly kill her and take out half of a mansion. I saw it kill her grandmother, Elizabeth.

Kian, traitor that he was, told Eila it was her birthright to learn about her gift and protect herself. I wanted to stab him, even though I knew he was right.

But I couldn't let her use her gift again, for I feared what her power could do to her. What if it collapsed on her again, and this time I couldn't restart her heart? What if she practiced when I wasn't there, and it injured her? Or even worse, what if she failed to protect herself from one of my kind and she was killed? The vision of her dying at the hands of a Mortis ran a bitter knife through my heart.

"What's going through that thick head of yours?" asked Kian, rapping his knuckles on the edge of my board. A froth-tipped swell raised us a few feet and then dipped us into a watery valley, obscuring Eila from my view for a moment. I craned my neck to see her.

"She's fine Raef. If you stare at her any longer, your eyeballs are going to burn a hole through the atmosphere."

I glanced at Kian, his blond hair swept back from his face, and wondered how he could be so calm. Ana had nearly died two days before the Fire and Ice Ball, attacked by a Mortis who had gotten into Eila's house and threw her down a flight of stairs. He too knew what it was like

to watch the girl he loved nearly fade from this world.

He had saved her life by sharing his pilfered life-forces with her, nearly ending his own in the process. She didn't know how far he had pushed himself to save her that day and he didn't want her to know. I knew he had wanted to also heal her leg, but Eila's energy release inside the Breakers had temporarily disabled our ability to heal . . . both ourselves and others. Thus, Ana was on the mend the old fashioned way, which bothered Kian more than he let on.

While there was no arguing that Kian could be a complete egotistical ass, he was loyal to our dysfunctional crew and endlessly devoted to keeping Ana safe. And because Ana went where Eila did, he guarded them both, and for his help, I was truly grateful.

To say we were tight friends however, would be seriously overstating our relationship. We tolerated each other, disagreed on most things, but when it came to Eila and Ana, we were in perfect sync.

I also knew that his mind drifted to Ana like mine did to Eila. How far they got physically last summer was something he did not discuss. Yes, he was a jerk on occasion, but he also protected Ana's privacy. God help the man who ever dared to touch Ana wrong . . . or Eila.

My Eila.

Not long ago, a drunken footballer named Teddy Bencourt nearly took something from her that she wasn't willing to part with. I was almost too late, and seeing her fight him off caused the killer in me to burn like an Olympic torch. She had calmed me and I had yet to see the kid again, but if I did . . . not good.

"Do you hear me, man? You've got to ease up a bit. You look like roadkill."

I turned to him, giving him an unmistakable gesture with a certain finger.

He glanced over at Ana. She was talking to Eila and dusting off the pine bench near the top of the dunes. She moved to sit down and we automatically shifted our gazes to watch her and scan the area for any threat.

He looked back to me. “I’m serious though. When the hell was the last time you slept?”

“The night before the Breakers,” I replied, fully aware that even for my kind, 35 days without sleep was pushing past our supernatural limits. It was also the one and only time I had slept beside Eila. The memory of that night rushed into me and I closed my eyes to clear my head.

Complicating my fatigue was the fact that I wasn’t hunting animals very often. I never liked leaving Eila in anyone’s care but mine, but not stealing animal life-forces on a regular basis was wearing me down. When I was truly desperate for a hit, injecting myself with corpse blood, which contained traces of a human life-force, would work. Briefly.

But what I really needed was a pure hit of power. I needed the soul of a living person.

“You are some kind of stupid, you know that?” grumbled Kian, shaking his head, which caused his board to subtly bounce in the water. “I know you are obsessed with her safety, but you are going to crash and burn at this rate, and you’ll be of no use to anyone. Get it together before you become a liability.”

I shook my head, “I’m okay. I’ll be fine.”

Kian looked at me and his face was serious, “No you’re not, and soon you won’t be.”

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I knew he was right, but more importantly I knew that only as my true self could I ever be Eila's savior. Only as a killer of mankind could I fully protect the girl I loved.

Which was why I needed to find a Dealer . . . and soon.

3 Eila

BY THE TIME WE GOT BACK to my house, the snow had really begun to fly. Thankfully my awesomely awesome Wrangler navigated the white roads easily. Our secret service duo followed us in Kian's new Range Rover, complete with surf-boards strapped to the top.

It looked entirely ridiculous.

They were about as stealthy as a hippo riding a tricycle.

Kian had bought the black, rock-stomper of a vehicle soon after his immortal ex-girlfriend, Collette, had taken his Corvette. It was a trade he grudgingly agreed to in order to acquire designer clothes for all of us when we went to the Fire and Ice Ball. The clothing was fantastic, but Kian was pissed about the loss of his fast machine. Luckily, he still had Cerberus – his multi-million dollar yacht that had become, briefly, our home away from home. It was the ultimate clubhouse, rolling on the sea.

Cerberus, however, had been shipped down to West Palm Beach for the winter and I honestly missed the yacht and the memories it held. MJ

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was supposed to check on it while visiting his family in Florida for Thanksgiving – lucky.

The yacht also became our salvation when my house was breeched by an uninvited visitor with lethal intents. While Cerberus was technically just a boat, it was also a weird sort of pal and we all missed her fabulosity.

I pulled my Jeep up to the side door of the house and cut the engine. The boys pulled in behind us just as I was getting out of the car, and I watched as the two killer bodyguards stepped out of the Rover and walked towards us in the falling snow. Their presence seemed almost surreal – my whole life did.

I was the owner of a magnificent Sea Captain home on Cape Cod, built by my 4th great grandparents, including Elizabeth who was one of the fiercest rebel fighters the Lunaterra and Mortis had ever known. I had inherited her dangerous talent, plus that of her guard and lover, Christian Raines. Supposedly I was a hybrid – a mix of two warring enemies, thanks to their forbidden affair.

Unfortunately, all I really wanted to be was a Barnstable High School senior and not look like an idiot in my school picture. Instead I was a rare, zillion-watt light bulb. I bet if I shook my family tree hard enough, Big Foot, Nessy, and even the Sea Witch would come tumbling out and squash me.

I got up close and personal with the Lunaterra side of me when I went all “mega-bomb” inside the Breakers. The Mortis part, however, didn’t seem to show itself. I had no desire to suck the soul out of anyone, and I wasn’t fast or strong . . . or immortal. At least I didn’t think I was immortal. I was 17, soon to be 18, and “immortal” was decades away.

Raef and Kian were thankfully immune to my power, though they did

have a few dings and dents after my epic light show. We had known they were unaffected by my power since they had witnessed Elizabeth's death when she called on the limitless energy of the Core within the Web of Souls. Her lightning-like energy incinerated nut-job, Jacob Rysse, but didn't kill Raef or Kian – a fact for which I was extremely grateful. Her death sparked the local town myth that claimed she was struck by lightning.

Yeah – not quite.

It was entirely possible that the healing ability of the Mortis part of me allowed me to survive the Core collapse of my power inside the Breakers. When Elizabeth had tried it in 1851, she had been killed. Christian said he had found her, lifeless, in the harbor square after she had eliminated Rysse. He said he took her body and buried her and sent her necklace back to the young woman named Katherine who had altered it for her.

A necklace that unlocked Elizabeth's diary, and was now in the hands of my most loathed classmate: Nikki Shea.

I could kiss that sucker goodbye.

I slammed the driver's door shut and walked around the back towards Ana who was sliding out her side. Her walking boot was awkward, but soon would thankfully be retired. She wobbled slightly on the slick ground, but Kian was quickly next to her, one broad hand on her back.

“I am not a total klutz you know?” she protested, cursing the slushy driveway.

Kian slid her a sly smile. “Yeah, well . . . knowing your luck, you will slip and break the other leg and then I will be giving you piggy back rides

everywhere. Actually, I could get down with that arrangement.”

Ana punched him in the arm, but then slipped. He grabbed her quickly and pinned her to his side. “Jeez woman! It wasn’t a dare!”

“Will you just help me get inside already?” she sighed, gripping the front of his leather jacket tighter as she slowly made her way across the slick ground to the door. I followed, trying not to smile as she and Kian continued to argue about everything, including the size of the snowflakes.

Raef stepped in next to me, his hands in his black coat pockets. “So Kian and I are going to head back to Torrent Road briefly, get changed and then we’ll be back.”

I nodded, but a biting wind tore around the house and I tried to tuck my face down into my coat. Raef moved in front of me, shielding my face and body from the brutal gust. The treetops slashed back and forth violently in the gale, as if an invisible giant was pounding through the woods, but just as suddenly as it started, the wind died, and I was mere inches from Raef’s chest.

He looked at me while he dusted the snow from my jacket hood. “I have a feeling we might lose power tonight. I’ll make sure the fireplaces are ready to go, just in case.”

“Mae will appreciate that. Thanks, Raef,” I replied as we finally made it through the side door to the house.

Mae appeared from the laundry room, a basket of folded linens in her arms, her crazy red hair pinned up in a bun. “Hi Guys! How was the surfing?” she asked, sliding the basket onto the counter.

“Excellent, Ma’am,” replied Kian, helping Ana to sit at the table. He knelt before her and started unstrapping the walking boot from her leg. Ana, never one to be pampered, immediately leaned forward to help, but

instead cracked heads with Kian. She bit back a swear as Kian sat back on his heels, “Can you just sit still for two seconds?”

“I can do it,” she demanded, rubbing her head.

“I KNOW you can, but there is snow caked in the buckles. Just chill for one moment. Please.”

Ana slouched, resigned, as Kian continued working on the boot. I hung my jacket by the door as Raef walked over to Mae. He smiled at her as he reached for the basket. “The waves were terrific. Perfect swells. Do you want this on the second floor landing as usual, Ms. Johnson?” he asked, shifting the basket in his hands.

“For the twentieth time, it’s Mae. Please. And you don’t need to do that. You and Kian have already done so much these past weeks. I would have been lost without you. All of you. Even Mr. Raines.”

Ugh. The way the word *Raines* curled off her lip, I knew she had a serious crush on my soul-stealing, ultra-great grandfather.

I laid down the law with Christian Raines weeks ago; Mae was off limits. And while Christian had obeyed, having him a few miles away at his new Torrent Road home was causing quite the kerfuffle in both our house and throughout the town. He was, after all, Newport’s Most Eligible Bachelor three years running, and now he was living in a massive stone villa known to the locals as the Island House, though we called it simply Torrent Road. Mae had no clue about Christian’s darker side – or mine for that matter.

MJ argued that Raines should be disqualified from Newport’s hot-hunk competition, since he was a Mortis. Soul-sharks, he said, had an unfair advantage in the looks department and as I studied Kian and Raef, I knew he was absolutely right.

Raef, with his very dark-blond hair, chiseled physique, flawless face, and stunning deep blue eyes, looked as though he fell off the front of a Hollister shopping bag. Kian, equally perfect, was taller, with blond hair that fell straight near his broad shoulders, as if he was a posterboy for a surfing company. Like Raef, his deep blue eyes hid a blackness that could blot out the blue, and his hands, so gentle with Ana, were capable of incredible violence. I saw him kill someone in front of me with those hands and witnessed the rage that encompassed his body when he did so. No remorse, no regret, but he saved my life and Ana's.

I wasn't super keen on having Christian so close, especially with the adoring stars in Mae's eyes. But Christian had helped us, enormously. He paid all my medical bills and he opened his house to both Kian and Raef, who needed somewhere to stay now that Cerberus was in southern waters for the winter.

Christian had also managed to charm the crap out of MJ's folks, convincing them that he would be an excellent silent partner at the Milk Way – basically he was their personal bank at a zero-percent interest rate. I'm pretty sure he did it to smooth over MJ's mom, whose anger about her son being involved in my crazy life was still at Code Red level.

Raines's home was also where all the books and papers from Dalca Anescu's shop, the Crimson Moon, were stashed. A shop that no longer existed, because Kian and Raef had burned the building to the ground, after removing any shred of evidence that could reveal our world to the FBI.

Torching the building was a risk. FBI Agents Mark Howe and Anthony Sollen had visited me in the hospital and several times at my house. They asked many questions, over and over, about what happened

in the Breakers and if I knew what happened to the Crimson Moon. I was worried that somehow, some way, they would realize I was the cause of the damage to the Breakers. But who in their right mind would ever believe that a teenager could channel a mythic power so brutal that it shattered a large portion of a famed, national treasure?

Yes, the FBI was sniffing around, but they were also chasing their tail.

I nodded to Ana, who was finally free of her black boot. “Want to go change? It’s a fuzzy-pjs kind of day.”

“Hell yes. I’m frozen,” she replied as Kian pulled her to her feet. He pouted and Ana gave him a questioning look, “What?”

He shook his head, “I don’t have any fuzzy PJs. I’m bummed.” He gave her a smile and she shook her head, but a twisted grin escaped her lips. He turned to Mae and began chatting about the storm as Ana and I followed Raef out of the kitchen and up the main staircase to our rooms.

Raef set the basket of laundry near the door to the bathroom, which Ana and I shared. I pushed open my bedroom door as Ana did the same across the hall from me.

“You feeling okay?” asked Raef, as he leaned back against the wall next to the bathroom. To anyone else, Raef acted like a polite, helpful high schooler, which was what made his true identity all the more chilling. A Mortis was impossible for anyone to identify until it was too late. Mortis couldn’t even pick out one another from a crowd, just as humans can’t identify a convict in a room full of bikers.

“I feel good. I’m going to get into some cozy clothes and help Mae prep some food for tomorrow. You know she expects you and Kian to come to dinner, right?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Not sure how we are going to work around the food thing though.” The reality was, Mortis didn’t eat food. They noshed on life-forces, and the turkey downstairs in the fridge was definitely lacking in that department.

“Just come. You guys can make up an excuse – some strange fasting for an unknown religion or something. She is so excited to have company for Thanksgiving. We never do. It’s always just the two of us, and Ana hasn’t celebrated Turkey Day or Christmas since her dad died.”

“I haven’t celebrated either holiday since 1850,” replied Raef, a smile pulling at his mouth. He stepped over to me and leaned down so he was eyeball-to-eyeball with me. “I’m actually looking forward to it.”

“Really?” I squeaked. I was super excited to be having the holidays in my new home with my friends, Mae, and Raef. Sometimes I even laid in bed, thinking about finding that ideal tree with my four friends. Of course, Ana and MJ would argue over which evergreen was perfect, and she would make him spin each frothy spruce about 100 times, but I was silly-giddy about the whole season. I shook my fists dweebily and started to squeal, thrilled that he was happy.

“Okay – well it’s not THAT exciting,” he laughed and I couldn’t help it – I crossed our hidden line and hugged him.

He stilled for just a moment and my heart damn near stopped, but then he wrapped his arms around me and pressed me into his solid chest. My throat tightened and I managed to whisper, “Don’t take too long at Christian’s.”

He pulled back from me, just enough to see my face and my glassy eyes. “Am I ever gone long?”

I laughed, “No, I guess not. Am I just that addictive?”

He swallowed and looked more serious, “I’d say that’s an understatement.”

I heard the door click shut across the hall, and Raef released me, turning to see Ana in a pair of mis-matched PJs. Raef nodded to her fuzzy pants, covered with a certain green, Dr. Suess character. “Is that Elmo?”

Ana looked horrified, “Elmo? Are you color blind? Elmo is red and this . . .” she pointed to one of the emerald faces, “ . . . is THE GRINCH! You know, for someone who has been around for almost two centuries, you really are lacking in your furry-monster identification skills.”

“I’ll be sure to work on that,” replied Raef, amused. He looked back at me as I bit back a smile. “I’ve got to go so I can get back before the storm really hits. Do you two want anything while I’m out?”

“Christmas Tree Peeps!” said Ana, raising her hand.

“What in the world is a Peep?” asked Raef.

Ana slapped her hand to her forehead, “Oh my god, you guys are like aliens. How do you not know what Peeps are? Are you from another planet?”

Raef just shrugged, “I don’t exactly go the grocery store.”

“It’s okay, Raef. Ana and I are going to help Mae, and maybe overdose on some cookie dough, so forget the Peeps,” I smiled.

“Okay then. I’ll be back, sans Peeps . . . whatever they are.” He turned to Ana, “And I’ll see you soon as well, Elmo.”

He headed downstairs, while Ana protested fiercely, “IT’S NOT ELMO!”

4 Raef

I CROSSED THE LINE. Ran clean through my wall.

But the worst part was, I didn't care, because for one moment I had Eila in my arms. As Kian and I drove over to Torrent Road, I reran how she felt against me over and over. Allowing myself to be distracted by my feelings for Eila could only lead to disaster, but I could feel how desperately she held onto me. How could I ever rebuild the wall between us without breaking her heart?

I looked over at Kian, and realized he had done it. He had left Ana last summer, despite how much he loved her. He left because she told him to, knowing that there were random Mortis trolling the Cape waters for victims. How was he so sure she could defend herself?

“I know I am way better looking than your sorry ass, but staring is annoying,” said Kian, never taking his eyes from the road. I gave a clipped laugh.

He ran a gloved hand over the Rover's black steering wheel. “Did

you kiss her?” he asked, never one to skirt the issues.

“No,” I replied, refusing to ever divulge details of what Eila and I shared when we were alone. I protected her, privacy included.

“Liar. You came down from her room like a man reborn. I heard something about Elmo, but I sure as shit hope that has nothing to do with your lighter mood.” When I didn’t reply, a knowing, devious grin curled onto his lips and I wanted to punch him in the head, though that desire was nothing new. “You bloody well kissed her. You have zero self-control.”

I turned slightly in my seat, anger slowly rising inside me. I had more self-control than Kian could ever drag out of every cell in his body. “Is that what allowed you to leave Ana behind? Self-Control? Or did you just not really give a damn last summer at all?” Okay – I knew that last part was a lie, but I just wanted to piss him off.

Kian’s head swung sharply in my direction and his glare was like steel, “Don’t you ever accuse me of not worrying about Ana. She is all I care about. All I think about.”

“Oh really? Because you seemed to walk away last summer without looking back.” I was on a roll, frustrated and angry, and Kian was an easy target.

“Because it was what she wanted!” he hissed back, as he hooked a left into Torrent Road. Christian’s home appeared like a crouching giant at the very end of the lane.

He pulled up to the front entrance and slammed the shift into park, turning to me. “Yes, I left her because she wanted me gone. But in the time I had with her, I showed her how to protect herself. I encouraged her to practice her psychic abilities and use them as a defense system,

which you are NOT doing for Eila. I still worried, every second of every day, but I loved her enough to believe in her, and I left her with all the knowledge I could.”

I growled in frustration as I rubbed my forehead. Deep down I knew Kian probably climbed the walls once he left Ana behind. There was one huge contrast between the girls though. “It’s different with Eila. What if I encourage her to train and she kills herself?” I questioned, staring out the snowy windshield at Christian’s house.

“Then I guess we better figure out how to train her without her dying. You put her in danger when you show no confidence in her and leave her with no weapons. Right now, YOU are her biggest safety threat, Raef. She was strongest going into the Breakers because you believed in her and the two of you didn’t try to box away that freaky connection you both share. You’ve cut her off from your confidence *and* your love, moron. I would never do that to Ana.” He yanked the key from the ignition and stepped out of the SUV, slamming the door shut in his wake.

I sat in the silence of the Ranger’s black interior and watched Kian walk through the snow and up the granite stairs to Christian’s house. Could he actually be right? I liked to think I always knew best when it came to Eila’s protection, but what he said did make some sense . . . and holding her again was a lot more appealing than keeping her at arm’s length.

Could we have both? Did strength and courage only grow when we were connected? Maybe she only needed me, backing her up and believing that she could be a brilliant fighter, just like Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, whom I watched die.

I literally felt ill when I remembered back to what Elizabeth looked like, dead on the cobblestone street in 1851. Eila had looked so similar that night at the Breakers.

My stress level jumped clear off the chart at the thought of Eila attempting to call the Web of Souls' energy. We had no clue how a Lunaterra commanded the Web. The disaster in the Breakers was an overload of her power and entirely uncontrolled. An allergic reaction to what I had done to her.

Through the windshield I saw Kian staring at me. He thumbed back at the house, signaling me to get inside with him. I growled as I pushed out the passenger door and walked through the snow to where he stood. I was exhausted, hungry, and angry that I didn't know how to help the girl I loved.

Kian was still glaring at me as the snow fell around us. His look was hard, but he finally sighed and ran his hand down his face. "Look, man, we'll figure it out. We have all of Dalca's crap here and Elizabeth's diary. Once we get the necklace back from Bitchy-Pants and unlock the book, I am sure there will be a written recipe for frying soul thieves inside that Eila can follow. Until then, we just keep an eye out for anything odd and give the girls some self-defense training, human-style." Kian grinned, "Plus, rolling around on gym-mats gives me a chance to pin Ana to the floor."

"Ana knows all about your wandering hands. She'll neuter you before you can even call for mercy," I replied.

"Yes – but then hopefully she will be guilt ridden, and pamper me."

I just shook my head. Even though Kian and I were living at Torrent Road, we didn't get to just talk much. One of us was usually around

Eila's house, so we barely passed one another. Our days and nights were filled with searching through Dalca's books and papers, tracking the occasional visit from F-B-Irritating Agent Howe, and keeping a watchful eye out for any visiting Mortis.

Christian, who had a larger presence in the soul thief underground than we did, also kept tabs on any possible chatter related to the Breakers. He was concerned that if other Mortis realized the explosion was due to a Lunaterra, Eila could be targeted for elimination. There were many soul thieves who had fought against the Lunaterra and would no doubt freak if they knew one lived.

Christian, I had to begrudgingly admit, was an asset.

I, however, was becoming a liability. I hadn't hunted since the Breakers and I needed to hunt. Now.

Kian was about to unlock the deadbolt, but I stopped him, placing a hand on the mahogany door, now lightly painted with snow. "I'm in the mood for dinner on the run. Care to come?"

Kian looked at me, surprised for an instant, but then a cocky smile spread on his face. "Hell yeah. Sandy Neck?"

I snatched the keys out of his hand. "I'll drive."

5 Raef

THE AREA KNOWN AS SANDY NECK stretched miles along the northern coast of the Cape. While some portions were accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicles, most of the land was an untouched, sandy forest. It also contained herds of deer and packs of coywolves. For soul thieves trying to stick to an animal diet, it was an excellent place to hunt Bambies, since the carcasses would be finished off by the hungry, coyote-wolf hybrids.

On the downside, animals were harder to sneak up on than people. Animals could sense our approach – could sense that though we smelled and looked like humans, we were anything but human. They sensed the void of a soul, unlike a human whose higher brain function was too busy processing the world around them to comprehend our true, dangerous intent.

But unlike an animal, a human soul was the purest hit of power. A rush, like injecting adrenaline and cocaine into your heart at once.

Those Mortis who killed people on a regular basis were able to seamlessly control the voids of light that the human world saw as shadows. To a Mortis, a shadow looked like a transformable liquid midnight – a living smoke that whispered temptations to us and obeyed our demands. It could coat our skin in blackness, enabling us to hide where the light did not breach.

True Mortis, who killed humans, were perfect stalkers and untouchable in strength. They were living nightmares, both intoxicating and deadly. They were whom I feared the most when it came to Eila and Ana, because as I was right now, I doubted my ability to kill one in a fight.

Hunting deer would give me short-lived strength and energy, but if I wanted to be an equal match to the most dangerous Mortis, I needed to return to my roots and seek out a human hit. It was something that I knew Eila would *strongly* object to.

Kian and I had been walking through the scrub pines silently, checking for signs of deer in the landscape. Hunting was something we both had done when we were human, though back then we both favored a bow as our weapon of choice.

Nowadays we favored our bare hands.

I heard the soft snuffling of something farther in the woods – a noise far too quiet for human ears, but easily heard by both of us. I slowly crouched to the ground looking in the direction of where the deer was foraging. Kian backed up slowly into the shade of a pine and seamlessly called the shadows over his body, disappearing into the darkness.

I knew he shouldn't be able to control the shadows when he supposedly hadn't been hunting humans. I glared at the darkness of the

tree where I knew he stood, now almost completely invisible, and understanding took hold, fueling both my anger and envy.

Kian had apparently been sneaking around killing people – a tidbit of critical information he had not shared with me. I was going to force a confession from his lying lips, but right now I needed the life-force of this one doe who was pawing at the underbrush below the snowy blanket.

The animal turned slightly from me and I saw my chance. I bolted across the small clearing, moving at a speed that was nearly impossible for an animal or human to track. The doe caught scent of me just as I was upon her, but I swung up and over her back before she could flee, grabbing her soft neck and hauling her to the snowy ground with a crash.

She had no chance the moment I touched her.

Holding one hand to her chest and the other to her muzzle as she wailed, I immediately began drawing her life-force from her, weakening her quickly and calming her pleading calls. While velvet fur covered much of her graceful body, the area around her eyes showed the soft ripple effect of gentle light that pulsed beneath her skin as I pulled the energy from her body. Her free-running soul, her essence, felt like fire in my veins.

My own skin, now covered with Fallen markings, flared like a heartbeat as I drank in her soul through my touch alone. Her huge, brown eyes, so terrified when I first touched her, now softened. Her breathing slowed and her body relaxed as she weakened towards death. I pulled from her gently, doing my best to control my need, which urged me to brutally rip her life from her. To sate my hunger instantly, rather than in slow, controlled drags.