



# Bold Mercy: An Urban Fantasy Wolf Shifter Series (Kait Silver Book 3)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** It's hard to concentrate on work when you've just moon-shifted with your alpha...

But the council that recruited me doesn't waste any time handing me my first assignment—and it just happens to be personal to me. I have to slay the warped evil that is Avis Vine—a human servant so twisted and changed by her former master's bad blood magic that she's no longer really human. She's a powerful, raging creature bent on revenge and filled with darkness and bloodlust.

And making me suffer is her only goal.

But my wolf and I, we know about goals. We have goals. And we're just a little twisted ourselves. We aren't about to wait for Avis to find us. We're going to hunt her down, and we're going to end her miserable life before she can achieve her only purpose in life—killing the people I love, the same way I killed her master.

Frederick Axton was her only reason for living, and I took him away from her. You can see how that might piss a girl off. And the longer I battle Avis Vine, the more I realize she's not going to be easy to end. As she blows through my city like a violent, destructive cyclone, I have to wonder...

Can I stop her before she shatters me and destroys my entire world?

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

## Chapter One

I stood at my door and waited for the alpha to kiss me.

It hadn't been a real date, exactly—we'd run through the woods under a full moon and had done things no human would ever have done, like chasing, catching, and eating our food raw, for instance. Afterward, when the moon drifted away and the sun came, signaling an end to the most amazing night I'd ever imagined, I'd showered and brushed my teeth at Shadowfield before Jared had brought me home.

It felt like the end of a date, and though it'd been a long damn time since I'd dated anyone, I was pretty sure a kiss at the end was the thing to do. At least, I was hoping it was.

My heart was bursting with the joy of the previous night, and I was so happy I was giddy. It didn't matter that my body was exhausted. I'd never felt better. I'd finally gotten my first full moon shift, and there wasn't anything better than that. That night had changed me, and in only good ways.

And before the harsh realities of my world intruded, I wanted a perfect ending to that perfect night. Jared knew that.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled down at me, and I returned that grin, my breath catching. The alpha was a beautiful wolf, and an even more beautiful man.

"I don't think I've ever seen you looking so happy," he said, his low voice rumbling into the chilly and foggy dawn. "You look...carefree."

I thought about and then discarded several replies, because none of them accurately represented what I wanted to say. How I felt. How full my heart was. Finally, I simply said, “Thank you, Jared. For...” I tapped my chest. “For everything.”

If not for him, I’d still be a hobbled, crazed wolf, unable to shift, full of agony, running from the moon. He’d saved me. He knew I was beyond grateful for that, and he didn’t seem inclined to take advantage of that situation, damn him.

He was a good guy, and I was full of complicated emotions. It didn’t help that he was the hottest man in Jakeston, that he was my alpha, that I was as physically aroused as I’d ever been in my life.

I lifted my face, my breathing shallow, my stomach tight. One damn kiss. That wasn’t going to hurt either of us, right? But he only stared down at me, his eyes glittering, and his mouth didn’t move any closer to mine.

Fine. Tired of waiting, I stepped in. I moved my hands up over his chest and to the back of his head, then stood up on tiptoe and slid my lips against his. His entire body stiffened, and though he didn’t actively participate, he didn’t resist, either.

My wolf woke up purring, stretching and languid, her head full of alpha. God, he smelled good. He tasted good. We wanted to devour him.

And finally, for all of a few seconds, he pressed his hand against the back of my head and took control of that kiss. Almost before I could process that he was kissing me, he gripped my shoulders and set me away from him. He half turned and ran his hand through his hair.

I stared at him, just a little dazed.

“Kait.” He gestured, almost angrily. “You’re high, exhausted, and...”

“Horny?” I said helpfully. I didn’t know what had gotten into me. I was behaving more like Lucy than myself.

His laugh whooshed out of him. “Vulnerable. Last night was significant. Everything you’re feeling right now is because of who I am to you and your first full moon shift.”

“Last night was the most important moment of my life,” I said. I took a step away from him, a little embarrassed. I understood that he believed I was still confused and didn’t know what I really wanted. And he saw me as one of his wolves, not someone to have casual sex with.

Unfortunately.

Perhaps later I’d be relieved and grateful for his restraint. Right now, I was just aggravated. I mean, he was right—did I want the complications that would come with screwing the alpha and the pain and problems that would cause?

Well, yes. Right now, I did. But right now, I wasn’t myself.

When I started to open my door, he shot out a hand to grip my arm. “Kait.”

“It’s okay, Jared. I’m...” I shook my head. “I need to get some sleep.” I glanced at him, smiling slightly. “I’ll blame my wolf. She’s still bouncing off the walls, half feral and full of...”

Need. Sex.

“The moon,” I finished. “Goodnight, Alpha.”

But he wasn’t done. “When you are truly ready for me,” he murmured, his voice dark

and low, “I will know.”

I stood frozen with my hand nearly touching the doorknob, my heart pounding, my entire body throbbing as he—and his voice—brought something to the surface inside me. And it wasn’t all good. There were tendrils of fear and hints of resistance, and he was right. He was fucking right.

I was not ready for it. For him.

Deep inside, if I shoved away my wolf’s savage need and my gratefulness and awe and natural feelings for my alpha, there was conflict. I didn’t know why. I needed to be sure of something, and I wasn’t. Problem was, I had no idea exactly why I was so doubtful.

Maybe because I didn’t believe he saw me as his equal. I was one of his new pups. Or maybe I just didn’t trust him. Not completely.

“Fuck,” I whispered. I could not be casual with Jared, and he was right. It wasn’t time, and I wasn’t ready.

Finally, whatever he’d called from my wolf dimmed and settled, and I relaxed. The urgency of my lust gentled, and I took a deep breath. There was no hurry. My body might think otherwise, but the truth was, I didn’t know Jared. Not really. And he didn’t know me.

He slid the pad of his thumb over my lips, and I couldn’t help but shiver. “When it’s time,” he murmured, “You will know, as well.”

“And then?” I couldn’t help but ask, as breathless as a young girl with her first crush.

His smile was small and didn’t quite reach his glittering, fierce stare. “I will be

waiting.”

Then he strode away, leaving me staring after him with my heart in my throat, uncertain of whether I was more turned on or terrified.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

The house was blissfully silent when I slipped inside—for about two seconds. Then Ash came barreling around the corner, sliding over the shiny wood, and slammed his wiggly little body against my legs.

“Hey, buddy,” I crooned. “First sleep, then play.” I was so tired my eyes were crossing. He followed me to my bedroom and waited for me to fall into bed before he jumped up on the mattress, then turned in a circle for what seemed like three days before finally, he flopped down atop my feet and fell immediately to sleep.

I’d only managed to take off my shoes before I went into my coma, but the instant I closed my eyes, my cell began to ring. I vaguely remembered it ringing as I’d fled with joyful abandon into the woods with my alpha and my pack, and I knew it would continue to ring until I shut it down. With way more effort than it should have taken me, I pulled it from my pocket and then peered blearily at the screen before putting it on silent.

I didn’t recognize the number, but something bothered me—maybe the fact that I hadn’t listened to my messages and something was quite possibly wrong. And maybe someone legitimately needed me...

So I answered.

“Kait Silver,” a man said.

I yawned so hard my jaws cracked. “Yeah?”

“My name is Saul. I am your handler. We need to talk.”

I frowned at the phone. “My handler.”

“Yes. I was assigned to you.”

“Oh. The council. Look, how about we call you my contact. Handler sounds distinctly...stupid.” I was a little cranky from lack of sleep. “Can you call me back in a few hours when I’m awake?”

“You’re awake,” he pointed out, “and I’ll brief you now. Frederick Axton—”

“Is dead,” I interrupted.

“—created a human servant named Avis Vine. She didn’t die with her master, which is both unusual and regrettable. Your task is to terminate her. Call me if you need something your friend Sixten can’t deliver.” His voice went dry and somewhat mocking, as though he were slightly contemptuous of my relationship with the odd Sixten.

As my muddled mind was sifting through his words and his attitude and my own immediate anger—and the fact that he even knew Sixten existed—he continued. “I will send all the information you need to your phone. Axton infused her with his own scent, of course, and it has twisted with hers to create a unique smell you will track. A box will be delivered to your home in four hours.” He hesitated. “Prepare for what’s coming. Avis Vine will not die easy, and you may lose people you care about before you can neutralize her. You can’t allow that to hinder you. You can work your job during the day and hunt at night. It is important that you find her soon, as she is already taking the lives of innocent humans.”

“Look, Saul. I—”

“You belong to the councils now,” he said calmly. “And you have been ordered to



find and kill a very dangerous vampire. This is your purpose. You must not allow someone else to kill her. Do you understand?"

My anger woke me up. Despite the fact that there was something frightening in his voice, I was abruptly furious with every word he'd just spoken. "I belong to no one," I told him, my voice hard. "And Axton's human servant is a human servant, not a vampire. My purpose is to get some fucking sleep before my brain explodes. So fuck off, Handler."

He was silent for a few seconds. "The council made a bad decision, but it was their decision to make. If you are not careful, Ms. Silver, they will show you how wrong you are, and believe me when I tell you that is not a lesson you want to learn."

I tried to breathe, but my lungs didn't want to function. As I attempted to absorb his words and their rather dire meaning, he continued.

"And Avis Vine was once human. Now she is simply a twisted aberration who will make you suffer before she kills you. If it were only you she focused on, we would allow you to handle it your way—but as I have said, she is killing innocents. We protect innocents. People are dying, and you will handle the situation."

My phone chimed as a message came in from him, and then he was gone. I fell asleep with the phone clutched in my hand, worry gathering inside me like the heavy darkness from a looming storm.

I didn't dream or even move until Ash's incessant barking jerked me abruptly from my sleep. He didn't bark a lot, and there was a tone to his voice that let me know he believed something urgent needed my immediate attention.

I grumbled, but I got up. "Ash. What is it, buddy?"

He sat before the front door, and only stopped barking when I walked up beside him and put my hand on his head. Then he gave me a dour look, wondering, probably, what had taken me so long. He put his serious stare back on the closed door and waited.

I peered through the fisheye, half expecting to see a demon on the other side. There was nothing and no one, so finally, I twisted the knob and opened the door. When I saw the plain box on the porch, I remembered that Saul had promised to deliver it in four hours. Ash growled and got up to watch me haul it inside.

“Come on, Ash. Let’s get this to the kitchen and see what’s got you so upset. Is there a severed arm in there? A tongue, maybe?” I was still feeling the effects of my first full moon shift, so I wasn’t overly concerned. Not with the box, Saul, or Frederick Axton’s human servant.

I yawned as I set the box on the countertop, then grabbed a knife to cut through the thick tape. I pulled the flaps back. “Are you ready, Ash?”

He barked eagerly, dancing a little as he waited for whatever was about to leap from the box. Unfortunately for Ash, it wasn’t anything exciting—most likely his growls and barks had been more about the delivery person than the actual box.

I lifted a piece of somewhat heavy fabric from the box. Black, tightly woven, and just a little shiny. It was a protective vest, resistant to blades, bullets, fangs, and claws. I could feel the magic twisted into the threads, especially potent where the fabric would rest over my heart.

Cool.

There was a slip of paper, as well. Do not leave your house without putting this on. This is not a suggestion. It’s an order. The other item is self-explanatory.

~Saul

Saul was turning out to be a bossy son of a bitch. I was surprised he hadn't signed it, "Saul, your handler."

The other item was a folded piece of cloth. When I unfolded it, I found, directly in its center, a spot of blood. I stared at it for five minutes before I was able to force myself to bring it to my nose.

I inhaled deeply, pulling in Avis Vine's awful scent, and even when I had to fight not to gag, throw up, or pass out, I didn't take the cloth from my nose. I had to get that scent so deep it wouldn't leave for a very long time, and I had to give it to my wolf.

Avis smelled of old blood and the putrid scent of a dead animal left to rot in the sun, but she also smelled of the cold brisk wind of power. The ugliness wafted in on that wind, chilling me to the bone. Finally, I flung the cloth back into the box, then shoved it away.

I downed a couple of glasses of ice water to wash away the scent, but deep inside, where it mattered, the memory of that scent would linger.

Five minutes later, Ash gave an almost human squeal and raced from the kitchen, and in the next second Lucy yelled, "Who's hungry?"

Not a question she really needed an answer to, as she knew I was always hungry—as was Ash. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table as she walked into the kitchen.

"What's up with your bad self?" she asked me, dumping three white paper bags on the table.

“You spend too much time around my mother.” I tore into the bags. Meat first, then sugar. “Where’s Zach?” I took a giant bite of a cheeseburger, then unwrapped a burger for Ash. I put the bun aside and cut the meat into small chunks as he watched impatiently, a look of fierce concentration in his eyes. “I woke up and everybody was gone.”

“He left with Max—they didn’t say where they were going.”

I frowned. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Zach, but just because Axton was dead didn’t mean Zach wouldn’t withdraw from his magic. And if he started having trouble, I didn’t know what he might do. Or who he might hurt.

Lucy sat down across from me. “Kait, listen.”

I cocked an eyebrow when she didn’t continue. “What am I listening for?”

She didn’t smile. “I have a bad feeling. My dreams...”

“About you?” I asked calmly, though my heart began to thud. I knew it was her. I had known for a while that Jakeston’s killer was going to go after Lucy—because I’d had a bad feeling too—though I hadn’t wanted to consider it.

“Yes,” she murmured. “It’s me. He’s going to take me, Kait. So we need to prepare.”

I shoved my breakfast away. “You shouldn’t have gone out for food. You can’t take chances, Luce. You’ll stay in, I’ll hire a guard—”

“My dreams don’t lie,” she said. “I’m going to be taken. It doesn’t matter if I hide or hire a bodyguard or lock myself in a tower...he’s going to take me.” She squared her shoulders. “So here’s what we’re going to do.”

“We’re not using you as bait,” I said.

“Detective Moreno—”

“Is unwell. He can’t help.”

“He has to help. He’s involved in what happens, as are you. I’ve seen it. We’re all in this killer’s sights, and he’s coming for us.” She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes, looking so unlike herself that it took my breath. She was...grim. And Lucy was never grim. “I’m not afraid. We’re going to catch this killer, Kait. Because if we don’t, he’s going to catch us.”

I knew she was right. I didn’t like it, but she was right.

We had to get him before he got us.

I nodded, then stood. “I’ll go talk to the detective.” Then I glared at her. “You don’t leave this house. Don’t open the door for anyone but me. If you end up with that bastard, it’s going to be because we hand you to him—not because he takes you.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Detective Rick Moreno dropped a key into my palm.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Key to my front door.”

I stared at him, unsure. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Beth is coming home soon. I want to know that if the supernatural world finds her, you’ll be able to get to her quickly.”

“Why would you think anything supernatural would come looking for Beth?”

“Because you’re in our lives,” he said simply.

“You think I put your family in danger.” Yeah, my feelings were a little hurt, even though it was because of me that Rick had been tortured and nearly killed. “You think I’d lead them to your door?”

“Not deliberately.”

I ran my stare over his face, which, though drawn, looked about a thousand times better than it had even the day before. “You look good.”

“I feel better. I’m going back to work.”

“Maybe you should take it easy for a few more days.”

He almost smiled. “I have a serial killer to catch.”

“Rick, I need to tell you something.” I’d known all along I’d tell him the truth—at least part of it. He was going to be pissed, but not nearly as pissed as he’d be when he discovered I wasn’t human—and I’d keep that little nugget from him as long as possible.

We sat across from each other in his living room, and I couldn’t hide from his eyes. I wished I’d brought Ash—then I would’ve had a legitimate excuse to look away from a slightly quizzical stare that would soon turn accusing. “Tell me,” he said.

“Your serial killer didn’t attack you. The vampires got you. The master shaded you so you wouldn’t remember. He’s dead.” I lowered my gaze, I couldn’t help it. But only for a second. “I killed him.”

“Vampires,” he said. “Kait.”

I stared at him until finally, I saw belief enter his eyes. And then he was the one to look away. “Like with Remy Simon’s sister,” he said.

“Yes. And you were right to worry about me bringing the supernatural to your door. It’s because of me that the vampires took you. Tortured you.”

I doubted he was even aware of it when he leaned slightly away from me. “Don’t make me drag it out of you. Tell me.”

“I don’t only hunt demons. I hunt vampires. Bad ones. The vampire master of Clinton County had a grudge, and to get to me, he took you. I got you away from him, but not before he fucked you up. And I hope,” I added fiercely, “that you never remember.”

“I’ve seen things,” he said slowly. “I’ve fought at your side. I watched a demon

possess a human. But we grow up knowing there are demons and possessions and spirits. Ghosts.”

“But not vampires and shifters,” I murmured. “Not wolves. I know.”

He ran his hand over his face, and suddenly, he looked just a little more tired. “Wolves,” he muttered. “Shifters.”

I’m a wolf shifter. I wanted to say that to him, but I couldn’t. Fear lingered. He would reject my wolf. He would reject me. I didn’t want to see his regard turn to revulsion, and I couldn’t say the words. Not yet.

Eventually, he’d find out all on his own.

He’d need time to process what I’d told him, so I changed the subject to the reason I’d come. “Lucy’s dreams,” I said. “She keeps seeing your serial killer. She believes he’s going to take her.”

“Because of me,” he said. “I’ve gotten you and your friends on this guy’s radar.” And finally, his expression softened a little when he looked at me. “Maybe that makes us even.”

I got up to pace, unable to sit still with the nervous energy inside me. “I have to keep Lucy out of his hands, Detective. She seems to think it doesn’t matter what I do—her dreams have shown her with him, and there’s no way of changing that.”

“So we need a plan,” he said. “When the killer takes her, we’ll be waiting.”

“We’d better be.” I slid his key into my pocket. I didn’t ask him if he wanted it back now that I’d told him about my part in his trouble. “I can’t let anything happen to her.”



“What did they do to me, Kait?” he asked abruptly. He got to his feet, his hands at his sides, his face blank. But I saw what was in his eyes.

I lifted a hand to my stomach, pressing lightly, as though I could push the dread and pain and fear away. I hurt for him. He only watched me quietly, waiting, and maybe there was a little reluctance in his stare. Maybe he didn’t want to know the answer to his question. Not really.

“They chained you,” I said, finally, “and they hurt you. They beat you, cut you, terrorized you.” I swallowed hard. “They bit you.”

“They...” He shuddered. “They drank my blood?”

And so much more. But I didn’t say that. I only nodded. He still hadn’t really grasped the truth, not completely. He didn’t quite believe that real vampires had taken him. That they even existed. He hadn’t seen one yet.

But he would.

“So...” He shook his head and laughed, a harsh bark of sound that hurt my heart. “Does that mean I’ll start growing fangs and craving blood?”

“No,” I whispered, then cleared my throat and tried again. “No. He didn’t turn you. He would have, I think, had I not found you.”

“I should thank you, then.”

“No,” I said again. “God, no. You should not thank me.” My lips trembled and I pressed them together, forbidding myself to allow so much as a single tear to spill over. “I’m sorry you were hurt. And I’m sorry you were hurt because of me.”

We stared at each other silently until finally, I turned to leave. I'd give him time to process what I'd told him, and he would call me. When he did, we'd discuss a plan for catching the killer who was going to take Lucy.

We had time. I had a feeling that bastard was going to fuck with us as much as possible before he came after her.

We just needed to be ready when he did.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

My mother called me when I was on my way back home. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I tried to stay in bed, Mom. Ash woke me up. There’s no ignoring that dog when he gets going.”

“What got him riled up?”

I hesitated. I really didn’t know how to explain to my mother that I had a “handler” who was sending me protective vests to guard against the fangs of a bloodsucker who wanted revenge. “He thought he heard someone at the door,” I said. “Last night was good.”

She let me change the subject and when she answered, her voice was soft. “I’m so happy for you, honey. There’s nothing like your first full moon shift.”

“And I’m sure the ones that follow won’t be so bad either.” I was still giddy from the experience, and already looking forward to the next time the full moon came. Funny how different things were now. It wasn’t long ago that the looming full moon scared the shit out of me and filled me with dread. But those days were over, thanks to Jared Walker.

My alpha. My wolf’s alpha.

“I met someone last night,” my mother said, interrupting my thoughts before they could venture too far into sexy alpha territory.

“Met someone,” I said. “Like a guy?”

“Definitely like a guy,” she said. “He is tall, muscular, and has long hair. And if the bulge in his—”

“Mom! For God’s sake!”

She snickered. “Fine. I’ll just say he’s all that and a—”

“Mom.”

“—bag of chips. Like one of those party packs of chips, if you know what I mean.”

“Ew.”

She laughed. “Bye, Kaity.”

I pulled into my driveway and sat there for a few minutes frowning at my house, unsettled. The demon had been handled. I’d trapped him in a spell jar. And then Remy Simon had stolen it from me, the bastard. I was disappointed that the hunter I’d been in awe of for years had turned out to be a common thief. I wasn’t afraid he’d free the demon. Remy hated the supernatural. He wasn’t going to give one of them its freedom.

So yes, the demon had been handled. But now I had to worry about Axton’s vicious human servant and a serial killer who was going to try to hurt Lucy. I had to wonder how she’d gotten on his radar. Had he seen her out somewhere and followed her home? Maybe he’d been watching Detective Moreno and had seen her with him.

Serial killer during the day and twisted vampire psycho during the night. I was going to have my hands full.

Before I could leave my car, Max pulled in behind me, Zach riding shotgun.

Relieved, I went to meet them, trying to appear casual. I didn't want Zach to think I was suspicious of him, and I wasn't, not really. I just didn't completely trust him. I didn't know him well enough to trust him. I was afraid that even though his master—his tormentor—was dead, he'd crack beneath the awful magic and dark addiction inside him.

Apparently Max trusted him, though, and that should have been good enough for me. Max could find out anything about anybody, and I knew he would have already investigated Zach. Still, I was nervous. Max was just so...tender.

And Zach had lived in hell for a very long time. It would have changed him. Warped him, even.

"Hey," I greeted. "Where were you two at the crack of dawn on a Sunday?" I was genuinely curious. Okay, yes. Nosy.

"Finding you a house," Max said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Pardon?"

"Um, you said you needed a bigger place?" He grinned. "We were house hunting."

I crossed my arms. "And did you find anything?"

"Several things. I sent them to your phone."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to live somewhere without neighbors calling the cops every time Lucy wakes up screaming," I admitted. "I'll have a look at what you sent."

"But?"

I looked at him. “How’d you know there was a but?”

“A hunch,” he said dryly.

Zach laughed. It was just a chuckle, really, but it was the first time I’d heard him make such a sound. It was good to hear. “At times you’re easy to read,” he told me.

“Fine,” I huffed. “But I need you to find me something else, Max. I can’t concentrate on houses right now.”

“You do realize,” Max said, “that it’s perfectly acceptable to think about two things at once?”

I ignored that. “I need you to find out everything you can about a woman named Avis Vine.”

Zach stopped walking. “Axton’s human servant.”

I nodded. “She’s got a grudge.”

“How much trouble can she cause?” Max asked, unconcerned. “She’s human.”

“Axton and Kaloni warped her,” Zach said, and his eyes were full of nightmares. “She’s not human. Not anymore.”

Max shivered. “You two need to associate with nicer people.” He turned back to his car. “I’ll go home and dive in. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Thanks, Max. Be careful.”

He stopped walking and squinted at me. “And why should I be careful, exactly?”

I was still trying to figure out how to delicately let Max know that the angry Avis might go after those I cared about when Zach took care of that for me. “Because Avis will come for everyone Kait loves. Her goal is to take everything from her. Possessions, money, family.” He gave Max a long look. “Friends. You won’t want to end up in Avis Vine’s hands. So be careful.”

“Damn you both,” Max muttered. “I don’t get paid enough for this.” But there was eagerness in his voice, too. Max liked to dig. He liked to find things. And he was damn good at it.

“Why didn’t she die when Axton died?” I asked as I watched Max hurry away.

“Magic was strong in that clan,” Zach said. “Bad magic. Blood magic, death magic. You need to get some wards up to keep her out of your house, at least. She won’t need permission to enter like a vampire would.”

I nodded. “My house may be small, but we can make it mighty. Maybe I can get a spell to muffle Lucy’s screams, as well.” It was good that it was a small building. The magic protecting it would be stronger if it weren’t diluted over a huge area. I got a few steps in before I noticed that Zach wasn’t beside me. I walked back to him. “Zach? You okay?”

“I wish the thought of Avis didn’t scare me,” he said. “Before the vampires took me, I wasn’t afraid of anything.”

“It’s good to be a little afraid,” I told him, anger surprising me with its intensity. I hated what they’d done to him. “Fear will keep you safe.”

I hadn’t known him long, but already I could see the changes his freedom had created. He’d put on a couple of pounds, his hollow cheeks were beginning to fill out, and he no longer walked just a little hunched over, darting his eyes at the threatening

world around him. His long hair was beginning to lose the brittle dullness, as were his eyes. The man who had mastered him was dead and the awful, debilitating magic forced inside him was fading. He could allow himself to heal and to regain some confidence.

I'd seen him fight. I'd seen him use a blade. He was crazy good—but the vampires had ways of getting around crazy good. They could shade a man. They could use magic a man couldn't stand against. They were fast, strong, and nearly unbeatable.

And if a man were human, no matter how awesome he was, he was not going to be stronger than a vampire. Unless that man was Remy Simon, maybe. The bastard. Remy could have been good for Zach, I believed, if he hadn't stolen my demon and disappeared.

"She won't get to you," I told him. "I won't let her get near you."

"You need to be careful, too. She wants to fuck with you. She wants to see your agony."

"But she won't want to kill me," I said.

He looked at me with empty eyes. "There are worse things than death."

And I averted my stare, because his darkness was unbearable. "I won't let her get near you," I said again, stubborn and determined. "You need to believe me."

"I have a kill pill hidden on my body," he told me. "I won't be taken alive."

My heart stuttered. "Zach..."

"As I said." He looked at me then and smiled grimly. "There are worse things than



death.”

“You have to fight,” I said. “You’re amazing. You can’t just swallow a pill and die. You have to fight them.”

“I plan to fight. But if they manage to take me, then I’ll go out my way.”

“Bastien is now the county master.” I took my phone from my pocket as we walked through the front door. I’d leave the vampire a message and he’d return my call when he awakened tonight. “He’ll control her. You just need time to regain your strength. You fought a wolf after I took you from the council. And you defeated him. Vampires aren’t stronger than wolves, Zach. You just need your confidence and a blade.”

But as I left him and went to my bedroom to call the new Clinton County vampire master, I wasn’t sure either one of us believed my words.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I was going to need to see my pack's seer, Lennon. She could help with wards and protection, not only for me and my house, but for the man I saw as the most at risk. Zach Keller.

It was turning out to be a very busy Sunday.

When I drove into Shadowfield, it was quiet and appeared empty. Some of the wolves would still be sleeping after last night's festivities. They'd all be resting. All except for the alpha, beta, and, I hoped, the seer.

I bypassed the community building and drove straight to Jared's house. I'd never been inside it, but I figured it was time. For a second, after I climbed from my car and stood staring up at his house, my stomach clenched. Not because I thought he'd be pissed when I told him a vampire with a grudge was possibly going to try to hurt him and his wolves, but because I was afraid I might find a woman in his house. In his bed.

My wolf growled, and her possessive anger brought me to my senses. The alpha's private life was none of my business, just as mine was none of his. He could sleep with whomever he wanted. I didn't care at all. It was simply my wolf causing trouble.

Right.

His house was big, gray, and sprawling, but not flamboyant. I stood on the sidewalk staring up at it until a woman I'd never seen before came out the front door and motioned for me. "Kait," she called. "Come in, please."

She held out her hand until I walked to her, then took my arm and pulled me in through the open doorway. “I’m Nell,” she told me. She was probably around sixty years old and had a kind smile. There was curiosity in her eyes as she looked me over, and her grip, though firm, was gentle. “I’m glad to finally meet you, Kait. I wondered when you’d pay us a visit.”

“Are you...”

“I’m the alpha’s housekeeper. I take care of everything around here, including Jared. Someone has to make sure he eats and rests. He thinks he can run on anger and fierceness alone, but no one can do that.” She gave me a long, considering look. “Can they?”

“Nope.” I didn’t ask what the alpha was so angry about. I was pretty sure he was born angry. “Is he here?”

“No, but I told him you were visiting. He’s on his way.”

“Thanks.” I looked around the foyer and then the sitting room she led me to. It was the cleanest room I’d ever seen. No clutter, nothing out of place, not so much as an awkwardly turned cushion. The wood floors gleamed, and I couldn’t see a single scratch or smudge. “It’s a beautiful house.” And there wasn’t a hint of Jared in it.

“Thank you. Jared’s mother took great pride in this house, God rest her. Jared’s father took pride in the land.”

“And Jared?” I couldn’t help but ask.

She shot me a quick smile. “Jared takes pride in his wolves. In our pack family. And someday, he will take great pride in his mate and his children.” Her sigh was deep and full of longing. “Someday. Perhaps...”

Seemed like she was wanting me to ask, but I wasn't touching that. I sat gingerly on the white couch and hoped I didn't have any of Ash's hair clinging to me. Or blood.

"Can I get you a drink?" she asked. "Coffee?"

I shuddered at the thought of risking coffee in the pristine room. "I'm fine, Nell, but thank you."

"Jared will be here soon." She sailed away, leaving me alone. I stood as soon as she left and began pacing, feeling a little claustrophobic and a lot nervous. Everything was so...white.

And then I felt Jared coming, and my breath whooshed out of me as I turned and caught him filling up the doorway. He was fierce. He stared at me, unsmiling, before he finally stepped into the room, making it feel about a hundred times smaller.

My mouth dried up and my wolf sat up with her tongue lolling, panting like a dog in heat. Last night had changed us both, and it had made my connection with my alpha even tighter. Larger. More intense.

I saw a subtle change in his eyes, and my face heated as I remember the way I'd behaved when he'd dropped me at my house. I cleared my throat and forced myself to look away from him so I could think.

"Something happened?" he asked. He walked closer to me and though I was torn between throwing myself at him and running out the door, I forced myself to stand my ground.

"Axton's human servant happened. She didn't die when I killed Axton, and now she's pissed. Apparently she's decided to mess with me. And by me I mean with everyone I care about."

“Why did you come to my house?”

I hesitated, thrown by the change of subject. “I don’t know. Just seemed like the thing to do.”

He studied me for a moment, and I had a feeling he was seeing way more than I wanted him to see. Finally, he nodded. “Avis Vine. She’s dangerous. You and Susan will move to Shadowfield until I’ve handled the threat.” Then he smiled, but just barely. “You’ll stay in my house where I can better protect you. That’s why you came here.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or punch him. “Why do you want to insult me like that?”

“I’m your alpha,” he said calmly. “Protecting my wolves is what I do.”

“I thought we’d discussed the fact that you’re not exactly—”

“I am your wolf’s alpha.” Now he was angry. “I will protect you.”

“I get it,” I said, surprising him. “You want to protect me. And you know what, Alpha? I want to protect you. That is why I’m here. To tell you that Avis Vine is coming for you, and that I’m going to make sure she doesn’t touch you.” I gave him a brisk nod and strode toward the doorway, smug as I could be.

He was so fast that he was standing in front of me before I realized he’d moved. He blocked the doorway, his hands loose at his sides, his stare dark and just a little frustrated. “You’re going to get hurt.”

I recoiled, my eyes narrow and my heart pounding. “I’ve been hurt before, Alpha. You can’t do anything to me that—”

“Not by me, Kait. Fuck. When will you trust me?” He closed his eyes for a second, clenching his fists. “I’m not Adam Thorne. I’m not my father. And I am not your fucking father.” He grasped my shoulders, squeezing gently. “Kait.”

I was full of emotions and confusion when he slid a hand to my braid and tugged gently, bringing my chin up. He stared down at me, frustrated, angry, hot. “Damn you for being so fucking broken,” he murmured.

I opened my mouth to argue, to tell him he was mistaken. I was far from broken. He had the wrong idea about me. But when I opened my mouth, he covered it with his, and I forgot how to speak. I forgot that I’d even wanted to speak.

The alpha was kissing me, and it didn’t matter that I wanted to fight to the end to make sure everyone knew how strong I was, how unafraid, how badass. I felt that kiss to my soul. And at that moment, it was the absolute only thing that mattered.

My body was suddenly boneless and heavy and though I wanted to lift my arms and wrap them around him, all I could do was hang in his grip while my wolf howled and my heart thudded and my body responded in ways it had never responded to a man before, and that was because no man was my wolf’s alpha. My alpha. God, I wanted him. In all ways.

I wouldn’t admit it, not out loud, but there was no better feeling than giving myself over to him. To letting him take control. My mind shut down and at that moment, I did trust him.

I didn’t fight it, and I didn’t want to.

He held me against him, and every touch was magnified. I felt his restrained strength, his fierceness, his passion. I felt how much he wanted me, and I was satisfied that he wanted me every bit as much as I wanted him.

Heat roared between us like a tornado of fire and he slammed me back against the wall and held me there, his mouth controlling me, his hands roaming where they would. He nipped my bottom lip and it split, swelled, and then healed, and I shook with the excitement of realizing that when two wolves had sex, it was not gentle. It was intense.

I wanted intense.

My body reacted to his roughness and I no longer hung passive and dazed in his grip. I had to touch him. My fingertips throbbed and my body buzzed and I craved him like he was a drug and I was beyond addicted. Yes, I had to touch him.

In the back of my mind, I realized this wasn't normal. Our snarling, hungry wolves wanted to devour each other and we could only go along with it and hope that when it was over, we weren't too fucked up. At least that was how I felt. I couldn't know what was in his head.

My wolf was in heaven. He swept his tongue across mine and sucked my swollen lips and slipped his fingers beneath my clothes, and I was impatient at the barriers, because I needed the feel of his bare skin against mine.

I'd forgotten where we were. Only when he gave a harsh groan and pulled away from me, holding my shoulders firmly when I tried to bring him back, did it begin to sink in that we were in the pristine room, and this was definitely not the place to finally taste the alpha.

The reason for his sudden return to sanity became clear when the sound of heels clicking on the floor wafted to my ears. We were about to be interrupted, and he'd heard her long before I had.

He straightened my clothes and smoothed my hair and finally, as I stared up at him,

he winked at me. But there was nothing lighthearted about his expression. I shivered, burning up and freezing at the same time, and I was not embarrassed. Not even when his housekeeper stuck her head into the room, took a quick look, and then hastily withdrew.

“Am I ready yet, Alpha?” My voice was raw and hoarse and even to my ears, it sounded nothing like me. “I think I’m fucking ready.”

“Shit,” he muttered, and put his hands on the wall on either side of me, his heart pounding so hard I could see his chest jerking. He dipped his head and gave me one last, lingering kiss, then stepped away. He ran his hands through his hair, then took my arm and pulled me from the room. “I wonder if either of us is,” he said.

We didn’t say another word as he led me from his house and walked me to my car. To say I was confused was an understatement. I knew the politics and hierarchy and rules of a pack were complicated and somewhat extreme, but come on.

Could we not just have sex like a couple of fully consenting adults and forget the complications?

Apparently not.

I knew it had bothered him when I’d thought he was going to hurt me, but surely that wasn’t what was holding him back. I also knew he believed I wasn’t ready for him. I didn’t know what that meant, not really. My body was ready for him. That was what mattered.

I wasn’t one to stew and wonder, either, so before I got into my car, I turned to look at him. “Why are you hesitating, Jared? We want each other. No strings. Just...” I had to swallow hard before I could get the word out. “Sex.”



Finally, he cracked a smile. “No strings,” he said. Then he huffed a laugh and ran his hand over his face. “No strings.”

I clenched my fists, then turned from him, yanked my door open, and got into my car. “Fuck you, Alpha.”

Before I could slam the door, he caught it. “Do you think I could just fuck you and leave you, Kait?”

My breath caught. “What I think,” I said, my voice calm despite the storm inside me, “is that having sex doesn’t have to change anything. There’s this heat between us, and I...” I shrugged. “I just want to get it out of my system and get on with my life.”

He actually paled. He didn’t say another word, simply stared at me with something in his eyes I couldn’t recognize, then turned and strode away.

“What the hell?” I muttered. “What’d I say?” Then, “Jared,” I yelled. “What the hell?”

“Not ready,” he snarled, and kept walking.

Mystified, I sat there for five minutes before finally, I drove away from Jared’s house. I needed to see Lennon. And it didn’t matter that the alpha was nowhere near me. I still felt him. My body was still full of heat. Damn him. And damn my wolf.

“Assholes, both of you,” I grumbled, then went to see the seer about some wards.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Jared's wolves were still restrained around me, but they were not overly rude or disrespectful. Not to my face, anyway. They didn't want to risk their alpha's ire. But I could see the resentment in their eyes when they looked at me—some more than others.

I was directed to the witchwolf, who I found in her beautiful herb garden with another woman. The sun was weak and there was a chill to the air, but the garden was full of color and peace, and for a few moments I stood quietly soaking it in. After my encounter with the alpha, I needed a little calm and quiet.

But both women turned toward me, pulling in my scent. It was difficult to sneak up on a wolf. Lennon's face was serene, but the other woman frowned slightly.

"Kait," Lennon called. "Come inside."

I pushed open the gate and walked down the path toward them, enjoying the greenery and the pots of herbs and the statues and fountains. Walking the garden was immediately calming, and I felt my tensions melting away. Probably Lennon had spelled it to bring calm and peace, but whatever the reason, I was grateful.

The seer introduced the woman with her as Jeanette Lister. She was a small blonde with sparkling green eyes and a ready—though somewhat hesitant—smile. She seemed friendly enough, especially considering most of Jared's wolves had a grudge against me, warranted or not, because I'd been forced from my own pack when my father had betrayed our alpha. It was hard to recover from that. Wolves had long memories, and I was apparently guilty by association. It didn't matter to them that I'd been a child when my father had brought shame to my pack.

Fuck 'em.

Jeanette excused herself after a couple of murmured words and left me alone with Lennon. While not unfriendly, she'd avoided my eyes and seemed...jumpy, somehow.

"What was wrong with her?" I asked Lennon.

Lennon sighed. "You smell strongly of our alpha, Kait. We have good noses, you know."

Heat spread up my neck and landed in my cheeks, and I pretended interest in a plant with long, gray leaves so I could hide my face. "I just had a conversation with him."

"A conversation," she murmured. There was a smirk in her voice. Then she sobered. "Jeanette is the young lady who was tentatively matched with Jared as his future mate."

I jerked around to face her, shock fighting with the immediate and dark possessiveness that clutched at my heart. I opened my mouth to say several things but dismissed them all. I had no right to say anything.

"You believed there weren't young ladies eager for such a position?" she asked. "The alpha needs a mate." Then she softened. "They don't love each other. It would be a match of convenience."

"An alpha's mate isn't his equal," I said finally, flinching at the disdain in my voice. "I would never want such a relationship."

Lennon shrugged. "She has a heart of steel and a fierce love for her people. She would make a good, solid mate for Jared."

“It’s no business of mine who he ends up with.” I forced my anger away.

She changed the subject, but there was a sparkle in her eyes. A sparkle that looked a little cold, if you asked me. “What do you need from me?” she asked.

“Axton’s human servant is going to cause trouble. Since I killed her master, she’s coming after me. She’s going to hurt people I care about. I need whatever protections you can give me. Wards on my house, spells...” I hesitated. “And I need you to surround Jared with protection. He won’t be careful.”

“No,” she agreed. “He will go after her before she can come after you.”

“So will I,” I said, “but it’s not me I’m worried about.”

“I’ll come to your house tonight.” She squeezed my arm. “Don’t worry about Jared, Kait. He can take care of himself—and you need to trust your alpha. We want to make sure you’re protected.”

“My friends,” I said. “They’re the ones who need protection. Axton’s former human slave is in my house. She’s going to go after him. And Lucy...” I ran my hand over my face. “And the detective. Shit. He can’t take another encounter with a vampire.”

“About you and Jared...” She took my hand and pulled me from the garden, and as soon as we were outside the gate, the stress came back.

“There’s nothing about me and Jared.” I shrugged. “He just has some strange rules.”

“Rules? What did he say?”

I shook my head and ignored the question. I didn’t want to have a conversation with Lennon—with anyone—about the fact that I wanted the alpha’s body and he was

reluctant to give it to me. Then it dawned at me that she was casually holding onto my hand. “How are you touching me without a reaction?”

Her smile was just this side of secretive. “I’ve built up protections since the last time. I’m prepared.” She squeezed my hand. “And it goes both ways.”

Meaning it wouldn’t kick my ass either, the way it had done the first time we’d inadvertently touched. “I’ll see you tonight,” I said. “I’ve got to catch this bitch before she hurts someone.”

But she wasn’t ready to let me go. “Kait, listen. You need to trust him to do what’s right. He knows what he’s doing. He knows what’s best.”

“Of course he does.” I pulled my hand away and hurried back to my car. I would rather take on three crazed human servants than have girl talk about the alpha. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but it pissed me off to think that she seemed to know more about it than I did. She was a seer though, so of course she knew things.

And maybe my wolf needed a little distance from Jared before she embarrassed us both further.

But was I strong enough for that? I was fiercely drawn to him, and that was part of the reason why I wanted to resist him. Not his body, but him. He had too much power over me, and that made me weak. It wasn’t getting any better. Just the opposite. “I’m going to back off,” I muttered, a vow my wolf didn’t like at all. But I would back off, and if Jared got himself straightened out, he knew where to find me.

I drove out of the sleepy community, forcing my thoughts from the alpha and putting them back where they belonged—on a couple of deadly enemies who wanted to take me on.

“Bring it,” I whispered, and eagerness tightened my belly. I was ready for a good fight. Always.

And I imagined my father peering over my shoulder, smiling and proud.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I put the vest on, then pulled my shirt on over it and at last, I buckled on the holster that would hold my demon blade. Something settled into my soul with a sigh when I lifted the blade from its bed and slid it into the sheath. I resisted wearing it when a fight was coming because I would need to shift, and it was a matter of time before I lost it. And for reasons that were more emotional than logical, that thought terrified me.

I was as addicted to my blade as I was to my alpha, or very nearly—and I couldn't bear the thought of losing either one of them. It wasn't just because the blade was so powerful, and it wasn't just because Jared was my alpha.

I'd contacted Sixten and asked him to send over two of the best ballistic vests he could find. Lennon could weave protection into them when she arrived later tonight, and I had silver chokers with crucifixes ready to wind around their necks. No vampire could enter my apartment, but Avis wasn't really a vampire. And even if they didn't come into my house, Avis would be patient—I couldn't keep Lucy or Zach behind spelled doors forever. I also couldn't force them to wear the vests every time they walked outside, but I'd do what I could to keep them safe.

And then there was the matter of Lucy's dreams and the serial killer who had her in his sights. A vest and crucifix wouldn't protect her from him, and when I'd suggested she get out of the city for a while—the country, even—she'd refused.

"Then I'd just end up with a killer and you wouldn't be there to rescue me," she said, and though she'd smile serenely and her voice was light, I'd seen the worry lurking in her eyes. Lucy was brave as hell, but she was scared, and rightly so.

When I called Rick, he didn't answer. I didn't want to leave a voicemail warning him about vampires potentially coming for him, so I made a mental note to call him back. They'd taken him once and they could take him again, but Rick Moreno wasn't the type to let me lock him in with Lucy and Zach and try to protect him.

Finally, when dusk came, Bastien returned my call.

Frederick Axton's half-brother had changed since he'd become the most powerful vampire in the city—I could hear it in his voice. “I am aware of Avis and her madness, Kait. I have people looking for her, including Farrow, whom I trust more than anyone else in the world. They will find her, and they will bring her to me.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But maybe she'll get to my people before she's caught. I need to kill the bitch before she hurts anyone. You have to have some information you can give me.”

“She has a weakness,” he said, his voice so smooth I thought for a second that he was trying some sort of magic on me. “All human servants who have become...twisted up with dark magic are imperfect in their composition. She will have an Achilles' Heel.”

My heart leaped. “What is it?”

“I do not know,” he told me. “And it may not help you at all, but it's all I have to give you. And we both know I owe you everything.” There was a smile in his voice. “The weakness is there. Only Frederick would have known what that weakness was. Even Avis may not be aware. But if you discover it, you will defeat her—if, of course, she comes for you before I can contain her.”

“Give me an idea,” I said, impatient and a little deflated. “What sort of weakness? Physical? Mental? Magical?”



“I am sorry, Kait. I simply do not know.”

“Not helpful,” I grumbled. “Find her, Bastien.” I ended the call.

Max and Joe were waiting in the kitchen with Lucy and Zach, and Ash padded from person to person, getting a pat and a bite of food from each one. He craved attention—and food—which wasn’t surprising considering he’d been deprived of both when I’d found him.

Lucy was feeding everyone, because that was Lucy. Not that I was complaining. I’d never eaten so well in my life, and my wolf was always hungry. I watched them all for a moment, realizing how attached I’d become to each one of them. The snarky Max, a hunter in his own right, though he hunted information instead of supernaturals. Joe, ex-military, fearless and intense, as determined to protect me as I was to protect him. Zach, full of nightmares and pain, a vampire hunter who’d lost his way, maybe, but in time, I was sure he’d regain his confidence. And Lucy, the psychic with a big heart and a gift for turning any sort of food into something amazing.

My friends.

I’d been alone for so long, alone in my hobbled pain, that I hadn’t realized how much I needed people. I was a wolf. Of course I needed people. Now that I had them, I was a little feral in my need to keep them. To keep them safe.

It was the same with the detective. And at the thought of him, my stomach once again tightened with worry. Before I could pull my phone from my pocket and call him, someone knocked at the front door.

“I’ll get it,” Joe said immediately, shoving his chair back. He glared at me as though I’d threatened to answer the door myself, then hurried past me, his fingers brushing

his holstered gun.

We were all on high alert.

Zach pulled a chair out for me as Joe escorted Lennon into the little kitchen, and Lucy placed a cup of coffee and a plate of dinner—mostly meat—in front of me. Lennon refused food but accepted a glass of water, smiling at Zach when he offered her his chair. He went to stand by the sink, just a little separate from the rest of us. I imagined I could see signs of his withdrawal taking hold, and it worried me. I couldn't trust that his addiction wouldn't get the better of him, but I had to trust that he'd do the right thing if it did.

He looked up and met my gaze, and likely my concern was written all over my face because finally, his stare softened and he gave me a nod. He wouldn't hurt my people, and if his pain began to overwhelm him, he'd let me know it was time to restrain him.

“—because guess what?”

I took my attention from Zach and put it on Lennon, catching the tail end of her question. Luckily, she wasn't expecting an answer.

“Because our world is dangerous. If you're associated with us in any way, you are vulnerable. You are at risk.” She pointed at me. “And that is why Kait sent for me. I will somewhat lower your risk.”

Joe folded his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “How?” he asked. “Are you going to teach us a supernatural's weak points?”

She pulled her wand from her dress pocket and waved it gently. “Wards and spells. The rest is up to you.”

“Um.” Max held up a finger. “You’re a witch?”

She glanced at me, then nodded. “I am.”

Joe pointed his chin at the wand. “What can you do with that thing?” He grinned, because he was just slightly mocking, and not even a little bit ready to believe her wand was for anything but show.

Lennon knew I wouldn’t have asked her here if anyone present were not to be trusted with her secret, so she went ahead and gave Joe a preview of what she could do with her wand.

“Please don’t destroy my kitchen,” I said, right before she traced a delicate, intricate design in the air and the lower cabinet doors slammed open and half a dozen pots and pans flew out and right at Joe’s head.

He pulled his gun.

“Joe,” I yelled, then fell into helpless laughter with the rest of them.

“Did you know she could do that?” he yelled.

“No,” I said, to Lennon’s surprise. I shrugged. “I didn’t know I had pots and pans.”

Lucy shook her head. “What do you think I use to cook for you?”

“I didn’t think about the preparing,” I answered, lifting a forkful of steak to my lips. “Just the devouring.” Then I looked at Lennon. “I really would like to have that wand.”

She stood, preening only a little. “I will get to work. As you were, everyone. There’s

no need to pay me the slightest attention.”

“You shouldn’t have come alone,” I told her. “You need to be careful too, Lennon.”

“Eli is waiting outside,” she murmured. “He’s lurking in the shadows. Now hush so I can concentrate on warding the place.”

I should have known Jared’s beta wouldn’t have let Lennon venture into the city without him. I’d seen Eli’s love for Lennon the first time I’d met him.

Max grabbed the small computer he’d been working on, slid his phone into his pocket, and stood. “I need to leave. Does she want to...” He bulged his eyes and swirled his hand through the air. “Hit me with some sparkles before I go?”

“Already done,” Lennon called from somewhere out in the hallway.

“Damn,” Joe muttered. “That’s some good hearing.”

“Hang on, Max,” I said. “I asked you and Joe to bring your vests so Lennon could spell them.”

“Can’t get him to put one on,” Joe said. “I’m wearing mine.”

“If a vampire comes for me,” Max said, “a vest isn’t going to stop him or her from taking me. Besides, it’s uncomfortable.”

“It’s another layer of protection,” I told him, knowing there was no way in hell I could force him to wear a vest if he didn’t want to. “Lennon can weave a spell into the fabric, and it could save your life. Being uncomfortable is better than being dead.”

Joe strode toward him, his hand out. “Give me your keys. I’ll get it from your car.”

“Oh my God.” Max held his computer case up as though that would stop Joe. “I am not going to—”

“Hey.” Zach’s voice wasn’t loud, but it got the attention of everyone in the kitchen. Joe turned to face the hunter, subtly putting himself between Zach and Max. Joe didn’t trust Zach, not yet. Max shut his mouth and peered around Joe’s shoulder, and Lucy stopped loading the dishwasher and turned to watch. Even Lennon came in from the hallway and stood in the kitchen doorway, gazing at Zach.

For a few seconds, Zach hesitated, his stare flitting from one of us to the other. Then he put his attention back on Max. “I once saw a vampire shove his claws through a man’s back and rip out his heart. That’s uncomfortable. Wear the vest, man.”

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Max reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. Joe held out his hand without taking his stare from Zach, and Max dropped the keys into his palm.

“I’ll be right back,” Joe said, and went to get Max’s vest.

Zach didn’t talk a lot, but when he did, he was pretty damn convincing.

“And then we need to work on protecting everyone from the human threat,” Lucy said, and I saw her shudder. She was more afraid of what she’d seen in her dreams than any vampire, but that was because the vampires were only a slight risk to her. Jakeston’s serial killer was a sure thing.

“Um, only you are at risk from the killer?” Max sauntered to her and put his arm around her. “And if he wants you, he’ll have to take the rest of us as well, because we aren’t leaving your side.”

When Joe came back inside, Ray Christian was with him. Lucy squealed and threw

herself at him, ignoring Max when he called her a traitor. As far as I knew, Lucy and Ray hadn't developed into anything serious, but she was genuinely glad to see him. Perhaps he'd convinced her that commitment wasn't so bad.

Joe brought me the box he'd carried in—the vests I'd ordered from Sixten. “This was on your porch,” he said. “Someone opened it.”

“Eli,” Lennon said. “Never mind. Everybody put their vests on. I'll do everything I can to make them repel any vampire who gets close to you.” She sat down beside me. “All this activity and you right in the center of it. You love it, don't you?”

“Yeah.” I leaned back in my chair and stretched out my legs. “I kinda do.”

We were quiet for a few seconds as we watched the others, then she shivered. “”Something bad is coming, Kait. I guess you know that.”

“Let it come,” I murmured. “Worse things will be waiting when it gets here.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I wasn't lacking for work. If anything, the city had abruptly become a hub of supernatural activity, and the office phones hadn't stopped ringing all day. People walked in, as well, and after I finished up with my sixth client and left my office to take a break, I was shocked to see a full waiting room.

"Fucking November," I realized.

With everything that had happened, I'd forgotten that November was an extremely active time for spirits. It was said that the veil between the worlds was at its thinnest during the entire month of November, and I believed the hell out of that theory. Things that happened in November changed our world forever in subtle and not so subtle ways, and it wasn't just with the dead. I'd hunted and killed more vampires in November than at any other time of the year, as darkness came early and the bloodsuckers were more active, hungrier, and uncharacteristically restless. November affected all nonhumans—dead or alive.

There would be a sudden uptick in house-hauntings from spirits who'd either been stuck here but couldn't make themselves seen or spirits who'd been unable to come back, for whatever reason, but were suddenly successful in their endless attempts.

Joe was standing by the door, his arms folded and his customary scowl in place, screening anyone who walked in and watching—somewhat hopefully, I believed—for trouble.

I gestured at Max and went back into my office. "No more walk-ins," I told him. "November is going to be too busy for that."

“I’ve already put a notice on the door.” He sat on the edge of my desk. “And on the website. After today, it’ll calm down.”

I raised an eyebrow. “We have a website?”

“Um, have you met me?” He slid from the desk and sauntered to the door, muttering. “Do we have a website.” He shook his head. “Pitiful.”

I snorted. “Check on my mother. I’m going to make sure Lucy and Zach are settled in with the pack.” The wolves would keep my friends safe. With November just arriving, a serial killer on the hunt, and a raging human servant bent on revenge, I couldn’t be too careful. We’d be lucky to make it through the month with no casualties.

“Lucy is fine,” the alpha told me when I got him on the phone. “But expect to see Zach. He will not hide to escape danger. Not for long.”

My chest tightened. “You have to keep him there, Jared. He’s not strong enough to fight the vampires. Especially not one full of Axton’s blood magic.”

“I won’t force him to stay here, Kait. He’s a man, not a child. He believes he is part of your group, and he will fight at your side. Lennon is attempting to bolster his strength.”

I thought over his words, and even though I was reluctant to let Zach walk into danger, I knew Jared was right. Zach was a man. A hunter. And he wasn’t going to hide. Not for long.

I sighed. “When he’s ready...”

“I’ll bring him to you personally.”



“Thanks, Jared.”

He hesitated. “Be safe. There’s something in the air.”

“Fucking November,” I said.

“Fucking November,” he agreed, then, “You will kick November’s ass, Wolf.”

He ended the call before I was quite ready to let him go. I rubbed the chill bumps from my arms, then hit the intercom button to tell Max to send in my next client. I made appointments for a dozen cleanings, my mind on the ticking clock. Night would soon come, and with it, the vampires.

I was more afraid of the once human servant and her followers than I was of the human serial killer. Both would do damage, but the serial killer was more relatable, somehow. And, as I’d told the detective once, serial killers were just a little fascinating, the bastards.

I’d no sooner thought of the detective than he appeared, striding through the still-packed waiting room as I stood at my office door speaking with Max. Joe intercepted him but I gestured and shook my head, and he let Rick walk on undisturbed. Good thing, because Rick did not look like he was in the mood to be slowed down by anyone.

His face wore a familiar look of grim determination crossed with angry worry. His brows were low, his eyes dark, hands curled into fists. I sighed when he reached me. “What happened now?” I murmured.

“In your office,” he said, and waited until I turned to lead him into the room before he closed the door. He crossed his arms and stared me down, silently accusing me of something I was probably guilty of. “We need to talk,” he said.

“Okay.” I sat down behind my desk and sent him a frown. “Have a seat, Rick. You’re looking a little pale and pissed.” I wasn’t worried that he’d remembered more about his captivity and torture or being dragged through the tunnels. He wouldn’t look angry when he remembered that. There’d be something else in his eyes. Horror, maybe. Pain, definitely.

He ignored my suggestion. “Jakeston’s serial killer has been in touch with me.”

I sat up straight, my eyes wide. “You talked to him?”

“Oh yes,” he said silkily, and that angry accusatory look never faded. “I talked to him. Do you want to know what we talked about?”

“I...think so.”

He smiled, but it wasn’t a smile of amusement. “You, Kait. We talked about you.”

I wrinkled my nose, confused. “Me? Why?”

“He spoke about how you find him and his kind interesting. Apparently you understand him.”

I stood, somewhat slowly, my heart beginning to pound. “Rick...that night on your porch. As I was leaving, I felt something. He was there. He heard us talking, didn’t he?” And that meant all sorts of things.

“He’s fixating on you,” he said. He didn’t pace, but he was jumpy as hell. “I need to get you somewhere safe until I catch him.”

“I’m not worried about me. I hope he does show himself to me. But if he gets his hands on you—”

“Just because I was ambushed by...monsters,” he interrupted, “does not mean I don’t know how to handle myself. Do not treat me like I’m weak.” His voice was cold and just a little hard, as were his eyes. “This serial killer has decided to align himself with both of us. We’ll take advantage of that, but not with you out in the open, offering yourself up like an unhinged martyr.”

I studied him, noting the flush high on his cheeks, the glittering heat of his stare, the paleness around his lips. He was not well—not yet. Lennon had helped him greatly, as had Jared’s doctor, but he was not back to normal. He was barely halfway back to normal. He had to know that. And he was angry. So angry. Angry at the vampires, at himself, at the world. At me.

He was hurting.

I walked around my desk and went to him, noting the way he flinched when I wrapped my arms around him. He didn’t try to remove himself from my embrace, but he didn’t hug me back. We stood there quietly for at least five minutes before some of the tension melted from his body.

His scent was at once familiar and strange, as the vampire attack had added something to him. He smelled of warm human, of life, of sun and man and strength, as he always had, but now he also smelled of something dark and cold. He was the same, with extras.

Bad extras.

I closed my eyes, realizing how very much I did not want the detective to change. I wanted him to be as he’d always been—human cop, good guy, secure in his world.

“Fucking vampires,” I whispered. “Fucking Axton.”

If he heard me, he showed no sign of it. Finally, he grasped my arms and pushed me away from him, but he was calmer. “He will use Lucy to get to you,” he told me. “Where is she?”

“She’s with Jared.”

He nodded. “I’ll pick her up.”

“No. There is no safer place for her than Shadowfield. I sent her there myself, Rick, and you know I wouldn’t put her there if it wasn’t secure.”

“Someday,” he said quietly, “I’m going to need to know everything about Jared Walker and Shadowfield.”

But this was not that day. I nodded. When he was ready, I’d tell him about the wolves. He wasn’t ready for that conversation. Neither was I, honestly.

At that moment, there was a quick knock at my office door, then Joe pushed it open and stuck his head inside. “Zach’s here.”

I stood beside the detective and watched as Zach, three of Jared’s warriors at his back, walked into the room. He didn’t slink, didn’t avoid eye contact, didn’t hunch his shoulders even a little bit.

“I’m going to fight with you,” he said, and there was no doubt in his voice.

I didn’t know what had happened in the time he’d been at Shadowfield, but he was at peace with his decision. His stare was calm and unwavering, his spine straight, and his fingertips brushed the sheathed short sword at his hip.

I eyed the wolves behind him. They were three of Jared’s best guards, and I

appreciated that he'd sent them to escort Zach to me. But they were more than an escort.

"We'll guard your back as you track Avis Vine," one of them told me. He stepped away from Zach and offered his hand. "I'm Wyatt Killen." He pointed at the female wolf with him, and then the male. "This is Avery James and Brian Faulks."

A pack's warriors were unmistakable. They carried themselves a certain way, they were watchful, quietly suspicious, and extremely muscular. They bore scars from their trials, scars that never healed. When a wolf was in trials or in training to be an alpha's warrior, there were times he wasn't allowed to shift to heal. Those scars never faded.

They were unflinching in their duties and would die without hesitation to protect their alpha and their pack. A warrior would obey his alpha no matter what was commanded of him. And apparently, Jared had commanded these three to babysit me.

Avery was a redhead with bright green eyes, a couple of inches shorter than me, bulky with muscle, her upper lip bisected by a deep scar that somewhat matched the one that lay over her right cheekbone. Brian was my height, sported a buzzcut and narrow brown eyes, and one side of his face was marred by what could only be the long, vicious scars from another wolf's claws.

Wyatt, the one who'd spoken and the commander of his little group, was around six feet tall with dark blond hair and brown eyes. He was pretty, but his eyes were cold and his scars were somehow more sinister than the others. Across his forehead and over his cheekbone were two long scars, dotted on both sides with what looked like puncture wounds, as though his wounds had been stitched up with a huge needle.

"Kait," Rick said, his voice polite even as he stared at the new arrivals with careful suspicion, "may I have a word?"

I noticed that he put himself just slightly between me and the wolves, his fingers twitching as they probably itched to reach for his gun. I could understand, really. He'd been through a lot, was jumpy and angry, and the wolves...they couldn't have looked more dangerous if they'd tried.

I didn't want to send them back into the waiting room to scare my clients, so I sent them a smile and an invitation to sit while I walked the detective out. Zach went to stare out the window, a man apart as usual, but there was just something different about him. Something had happened while he was with the alpha, and it went beyond Lennon's spells and charms.

Max, completely unafraid and very nosy, stood when Rick and I walked from my office. "I'll see if anyone wants a coffee," he said, and hurried by me.

"Ms. Silver," one of my potential clients called, standing. "I need your help!" She was a small woman with dark hair and a bleak expression, and a dark bruise spread across her cheekbone. I could see that she'd slathered on makeup to try to hide it. As she darted a quick look at the man who'd sat beside her, I saw another bruise on the side of her neck.

"Sit down, Georgia," the man said. "She'll get to us when it's our turn." He shot me a grin, darting his tongue out to wet his thick lips. I believed immediately that he was abusing the woman. I just wasn't sure how his abuse tied in with whatever spirit was giving her trouble.

She twisted her clasped hands, and her lips trembled before she pressed them into a thin line. "Ms. Silver," she said. "Please."

"Give me a second," I told the detective, and left him standing near the door while I went to calm the woman. I held out a hand, and she took it immediately. Her fingers were cold, and despair came off her in waves. I could smell her fear. My wolf stirred,

interested in that fear.

Down, girl. “I’m not leaving,” I assured her. “I’m going to walk this gentleman out and I’ll be right back.”

But when I started to pull away, she held onto my hand with a desperate grip. “There’s a ghost,” she whispered. “Andrew let me come to see you, but he won’t wait much longer. I don’t want to go back.”

“Maybe,” I said, not taking my stare from hers, “Andrew can go on home. I’ll see that you get a ride afterward.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Andrew said, no longer smiling. “You have ten more minutes, then we’re out of here. Ghost or not.” He reached up, grabbed her arm, and yanked her back to her seat.

I looked at him, then, and pulled in his scent, and I realized that Georgia wasn’t the only one filled with fear. Andrew was terrified, as well. And I smelled blood, fresh blood. Andrew was bleeding—I couldn’t see it, but I could smell it.

“Tell me,” I said.

“We live in Heritage Towers apartment building,” she said immediately. “Our neighbors have a...a ghost.” She gave a watery snort. “Ghosts are real. They have two of them. Mean ones. Cindy is my best friend. I knew something was wrong so this morning, I took Andrew with me and refused to go away until Cindy opened the door.”

Everyone in the waiting room was staring at her, fear in their eyes. Two people got up and hurried from the room. I nodded at her encouragingly. “Go on.”

“They’re evil,” she murmured. “They...” she swallowed hard and her fingers drifted to her bruised face. “They hurt us. They hurt Andrew more than me. He—”

“Shut up, Georgia,” Andrew muttered. “Tell her what she needs to know or we’re leaving now.” He stood and grabbed her arm. “Tell her about the baby.”

Shit. “Baby?” I asked, my voice calm. I didn’t have to look to know Rick was now standing behind me, listening intently.

Georgia nodded. “Cindy’s newborn. They want him. One of the ghosts followed us, but he couldn’t come in when we entered this office.”

I’d had the office warded—no spirit could enter the space. At least not easily. “How did you get out of the apartment?” I asked, keeping my voice mild. I understood the threat. The spirits would harm the baby if they felt threatened. They were going to harm him anyway, and I needed to hurry.

“We escaped after they threw us into a couple of walls,” Andrew said. “They didn’t really want to keep us there. They want that kid, and that’s all they care about. They can’t decide whether to kill him and take his spirit back with them or stay there with him.”

“They’re afraid they’ll lose him if they kill him,” Georgia said, her voice stronger. “They’re not...sane. Especially her.”

“She sent her man after us,” Andrew said. “Like Georgia said, he couldn’t come in. I don’t know if he’s outside or if he went back to the apartment.”

They were talking about two ghosts like they were flesh and blood people. They’d heard them talking, had been abused by them, and one had followed them to my office.



“Are you sure they’re ghosts?” Rick asked, apparently having the same thought.

“Most people can’t see or hear them,” I explained.

“We’re sure,” they said at the same time. “They’re ghosts.”

Fucking November.

“I’ll go with you,” Rick told me.

I was glad to have him. I went to Joe as Rick spoke with the couple to get the apartment number and whatever else info he needed. “Tell the wolves I had an emergency,” I said. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I didn’t care if they be pissed that I’d ditched them.

There was a baby to rescue.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I looked for the spirit who'd trailed Georgia and Andrew as I left the building, but I saw no sign of him. "He might have gone back to the apartment," I told Rick. "This is not usual ghost behavior." I grabbed my supplies from my car, buckling on my belt and checking briefly to make sure it was loaded with everything I might need to deal with a couple of spirits. I wore my vest and my demon blade even inside my office, so I was about as protected as I could get.

Heritage Towers was only half a block away, so we didn't drive. I kept an eye out for the spirit as we walked, focusing on the job at hand, but in the back of my mind was the nagging realization that it would soon be dark, though it was only four o'clock. November brought the darkness in more than one way, the bitch.

And darkness would bring Avis Vine.

"How will you send the ghosts back?" Rick asked. "Don't you usually have to find what's tethering them here and burn it?"

"There are all sorts of ways to 'kill' a spirit," I told him, attempting to slow my walk a little. The detective was just slightly breathless, which reminded me once again that he wasn't completely healed. I patted my belt. "Traps are one. It doesn't sound like they're lost or stuck. It sounds like they came through deliberately and fixated on the baby."

"They can just come through? Visit whenever they want?"

"Not normally," I answered, noting the sheen of sweat on his face, "but this is fucking November." I hesitated. "Rick..."

“I’m fine,” he growled.

Awesome.

“Here’s the office. Can you get maintenance to open the apartment door?” I didn’t want to go up and bang on the door, hoping the spirits would let us in. That’d attract too much attention.

Cindy lived on the fourth floor. Luckily, the elevators were in working order, because no way in hell could the detective have climbed the stairs. I watched him as we crowded into the small elevator with maintenance, and though he kept his face carefully blank as he spoke with the other man, I could see the tiny lines of pain around his eyes. He should have been resting and recovering from the horror of the vampires, not dealing with ghosts and serial killers.

“It’s too much,” I said suddenly, then felt my face warm when both men stopped their conversation to stare at me.

“What’s that, honey?” the maintenance man asked.

I glared at him, but then the elevator bumped to a stop, the doors slid open, and I hurried out into a too-warm hallway that smelled of onions and bleach. I was eager to deal with the spirits and get back to the office before darkness covered the city.

The detective gave a perfunctory knock on the door, and when no one answered, he nodded at the maintenance man. “Open it.”

The baby was crying. His wails sounded weak, as though he’d been crying for a while, but no one else made a sound. Rick and I slipped into the apartment, gently closing the door before the curious maintenance man could join us.

“Let me know what you need,” Rick said.

“I will.” The door opened into the empty living room. The TV was on, but muted, and the mess lent credence to Georgia’s claims that they’d been knocked around by the spirits. The coffee table was turned on its side, a playpen was smashed, and the wall clock hung askew. A few framed photos lay on the floor, their glass shattered. And the only sound was the unceasing cries of a distressed baby boy.

“They’re in one of the bedrooms,” Rick said. We peered into the tiny kitchen, and without asking me if we might need it, he grabbed a box of salt from an open shelf on the wall.

He’d brightened, despite the awfulness of the situation. Rick, whether he knew it or not, was really beginning to love ghost hunting with me.

There were three closed doors in the short hallway, and the baby’s cries, suddenly muffled, were coming from the room at the end. I didn’t hesitate, but strode to the door, Rick at my heels, and shoved it open.

The scene that greeted me wasn’t unexpected, really, but for one thing. A female sat on a rocking chair, holding a blanket-wrapped baby. A man stood at her side, his hand on her shoulder. Two humans—Cindy and her husband—sat on the floor on the other side of the bed, their backs against the wall, pale, terrified, and bloody.

I smiled as anger rose inside me. Feral anger. “We’re here to help, Cindy. I’m Kait Silver, and this is Detective Moreno. We’re going to get you your baby and send these two assholes back to hell.”

“Hell?” Rick asked. “Not ghosts?”

“Oh no,” I said, almost gently. “They’re not ghosts at all. They’re demons.” And that

filled my demon-hating heart with a dark killing joy. It was a mixture of emotions and desires from me, my wolf, and my psycho, different and separate from the strange power the vampire council had either activated or created inside me. I hated demons even more than vampires.

I pulled my blade and both demons gasped, realizing immediately what it was I held. The female clutched the delicate bundle more tightly to her chest, and the male threw himself in front of her, his arms wide, knees bent, hissing like a crazed snake.

“One question before I kill you both,” I said, genuinely curious. “Why haven’t you left already?”

“Because of me,” someone said, and I whirled, crouching, my demon blade at the ready, to face a person I hadn’t even been aware of.

Another female, though she was not human, and she was definitely not a demon. Wings, tattered and drooping, swept the floor behind her.

“Angel?” I whispered, disbelieving. “Seriously?”

She looked as feral as I felt. Her glass green eyes were wide and light in the darkness of her face, scars littered her bare body, and long, tangled black hair fell to her prominent ribs. “Fallen, I’m afraid,” she said, “but not too weak to keep these two from taking an innocent soul back to hell with them.”

“Kait,” Rick said, frowning. “What is it?”

I couldn’t take my stare off her. “Can’t you see her?”

“I don’t...” He moved a little closer to me, his shoulder brushing mine. “I don’t see anyone but the two demons and the parents. Who is it?”

She was a spirit—an angel spirit. A guardian. “Do you need me to help you?” I asked her, because her sorrow was breaking my heart. “Are you trapped here?”

“I am where I need to be at this moment,” she murmured. She pointed at the demons. “My hold is slipping because the evil of this time is strong. Dispose of the demons before they suck the life from the human infant. Quickly, now.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“Kait?” Rick asked.

“When you can,” I told him, “get the baby.” Then I whirled, brought up the gleaming demon blade, and went after the hissing male demon. As we fought, I heard screams. A lot of screams. The two humans screamed, the female demon screamed, the baby screamed.

But I was in the zone, and their terror did not distract me at all.

I may have dragged it out longer than I should have, because the fighting gave me all sorts of pleasure. It wasn’t new, exactly, but it was certainly magnified. I’d changed since the fight in Scarlett’s basement. No, that was wrong. I’d changed—or been changed—since the vampire elder had impaled my heart with his magic. His power.

And a tiny part of me was horrified.

I was a protector, not a cold-blooded killer.

Right?

Finally, I grabbed the male demon to me, held him like a lover, and slid my demon blade into his awful heart. When the stolen body crumbled to the floor and the demon

fled with a hiss and a sizzling spark that smelled strongly of sulfur, I put my attention on the female.

She'd fled to a corner and Rick stood in front of her, but he didn't have the child. She faded softly, in and out, one hand around the child's throat. "One step closer," she told Rick, "and I will end this child."

"Kait," the angel said. "Quickly. She will take him."

Even as she said it, the demon's fades lasted longer. Soon, she would fade, and she would not return. And she would take the spirit of the baby with her.

I didn't have to tell Rick to move. We made a good team, the two of us, and he slid to the side, his hands out, as I rushed the female. I didn't attempt to move the baby out of the way so I could get my blade into the demon's heart. I yanked her to me, trapping the baby between our bodies, and I went in through her back.

When she fell, the baby fell, as well, but Rick was there to catch him.

I wiped my blade on my clothes and examined it for any nicks or changes as Rick rushed the baby to its mother and checked on the two humans. When I realized I was more concerned with my blade than the humans, I shoved the knife into its sheath and mentally kicked my own ass.

I refused to become the vampires' monster.

The battered angel stood with the parents and Rick, but her stare was on me. It was intrusive, that stare, and I was nearly certain she could read my thoughts. I didn't like it. I also didn't like the torment in her eyes. It was difficult to look at. "Thank you for helping the humans," I murmured.

Rick was busy checking the baby and the parents for injuries and barely glanced up when I spoke. When he found me looking at the wall, he ignored me and went back to work.

“What will we tell the police?” the mother asked, her voice calm. Too calm, really. They’d need to be seen for their trauma, but there weren’t too many doctors in the city who understood trauma caused by supernaturals. If the parents wanted to stay out of a psych hospital and wished to keep custody of their son, they absolutely couldn’t go to an emergency department. Or their family doctor.

“I am the police,” Rick assured her. “No one else will come by.”

“Doctor?” the husband asked, his voice raspy. He cradled his arm to his chest, and when he spoke, blood leaked from the corner of his mouth.

Rick looked up at me. “Dr. Hayes?”

I hesitated, then nodded. “I’ll ask Jared to send a car.” One thing was for sure—we needed a supernat hospital for humans. Ben Hayes couldn’t take care of the pack and the humans I kept bringing to him.

“You’re free to go now,” I told the spirit.

She smiled at me. “I will hang out with you for a while.”

Shit. “I don’t need a guardian angel,” I told her.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “But we won’t argue about that. I’m here. I’ll leave when it’s time for me to leave. My name is Nicole. Forget about me for a while. More pressing things are coming.” Then, though she’d said she was hanging out with me, she abruptly disappeared.



I wasn't disappointed. I absolutely did not want a spirit dogging my steps—especially not an angel, and especially not one who looked like she'd lived a thousand lifetimes in hell. I felt her despair too deeply, for some reason, and I didn't like it. It was depressing.

“Good luck, Nicole,” I whispered, then pulled my cell from my pocket to call the alpha.

And I forgot about the angel.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Jared was pissed. I seemed to have that effect on him.

“Where are my wolves?” He pulled me into the little kitchen as his people went to retrieve the three humans, and though he kept his voice low, there was no mistaking his tone.

“They’re only half a block away,” I said, pulling my arm from his grip. “In my office. I slipped out to deal with this emergency.” Then I realized I was explaining myself to him, and that just made me mad. “I don’t need a boss, Jared.”

“I’m not trying to boss you. I’m trying to protect you.” He shoved his hand through his hair and blew out an exasperated breath. “Damn you, Kait. Why do you have to be so fucking stubborn?”

“I’m not stubborn. I’m a powerful adult woman.” I narrowed my eyes, understanding a little better why the detective had been so angry with me. I was treating him the way Jared was treating me—and neither one of us liked it. “I’m fully capable of taking care of myself and those around me.”

“It’s dark,” he said.

I stiffened immediately. “Lucy?”

“She will be fine if she stays with the pack.”

I turned around to head for the door. “Time to hunt.” But I came up hard against Rick’s chest, and caught between the alpha and the detective, I could only stand there

as tension thickened and a wave of testosterone flooded the room.

“Who are you hunting?” Rick asked, his voice deceptively mild. He never took his stare off Jared.

He’d dealt with the surprisingly uninjured humans the demons had possessed—the magic of my demon blade, maybe combined with my own magic, was getting stronger. It extracted the demons without killing the human hosts. It barely even injured them. They “woke up” and remembered nothing, and though they felt their aches and pains and were dazed and a bit braindead, they were alive. They would be okay.

“A very bad woman,” I said tersely, fed up with everyone. The kitchen was so tiny I couldn’t squeeze by him, and I really, really didn’t want to shove him out of my way. “Let me by, Rick.”

He nodded, then shocked me by moving. “Be careful. If you need me, send me your location and I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

For a second I didn’t move. As I stared at him, he gave me a wink. “I know you’re a badass motherfucker, Kait Silver.”

I grinned, then shot a look at the alpha, who watched us both with a darkness that made me shiver.

“Go,” he growled. “I’ll be right behind you.” Then he gave a smile of triumph as the detective frowned.

I could only shake my head and sigh.

Before leaving, I slid my blade from its sheath. I handed it to Rick. “Take care of it

for me?”

He hesitated before accepting the knife, and I couldn't blame him. It had been forged in an evil fire and had tasted the blood of many. Its power would be felt by anyone who touched it, and not even the detective was immune to its influence. But he did take it, and I was secure in the belief that he would protect it. I trusted him.

And then there was only the hunt. I left the humans to Jared's wolves and practically flew down the stairwell and from the building, and the alpha was at my back until we were outside—and then he was at my side.

The three wolves I'd left at my office were waiting, as was Zach, and every person in my little hunting party—including the alpha—waited for me to catch the scent I needed so they could follow where I led.

Zach had been born into a family of hunters, and I had no doubt he'd been a great one, but he was not a wolf. There was no way in hell he could keep up with us, but there was also no way in hell I was going to leave him behind. Tonight, we'd track like humans.

So as much as I wanted to free my wolf and run through the shadows to find and devour Avis Vine, I forced myself calm. “Who has the biggest car?”

“That'd be me,” Wyatt said, then, “We're riding?”

I glanced at Zach. “Yes.”

He caught my stare and held it. “I'm not slowing you down,” he said, his shoulders square and his spine straight. “Run, Kait. I'll drive. If I find her first, I'll take her out and bring you her head.”

“I’m not leaving you right now,” I said. “And I’m not arguing about that. Come on, everybody. Let’s go find that bitch.”

But before I could get into Wyatt’s SUV and let down my window so I could catch any scent I wanted to catch, my cell rang. “Rick,” I answered. “I’ve been gone for ten minutes.”

“That was just long enough for someone to rush a restaurant full of diners and kill eighteen of them,” he said, his voice jerking as he ran. “They got them on camera, Kait, and they’re saying it was vampires. Vampires are showing themselves to the city. To the humans.”

I could barely breathe. “Which restaurant?” I whispered. Avis didn’t intend to hurt only me. She was slaughtering humans. She was imploding, and she was determined to cause as much damage as possible. She was bringing the vampires out of the shadows, and the world was not ready.

“The Golden Spice on Fifth. I’ll see you there.”

I lowered my phone slowly, staring at nothing.

“Kait,” Jared said gently. “What happened?”

I told him. No one spoke for several long seconds. We stared at each other, all of us shocked, horrified beyond words. Finally, “Eighteen people,” I whispered. “They killed eighteen humans.”

“On camera,” one of the others said. “The vampires won’t survive this.”

“We won’t survive this,” Wyatt said.

I could feel the world changing in that moment.

We sped to the restaurant, because now more than ever, I had to find Avis Vine. I couldn't undo the massacre, but I could stop her from butchering more humans. The police wouldn't let me near the restaurant, and I didn't wait for Rick to get me in. I didn't need to see the bodies.

I caught her scent there, and that was all I needed. I shoved away the grief and horror and fear, sank into my wolf brain, and I began to hunt. I even forgot Zach in my quest, because nothing mattered but catching Avis Vine.

She was now my purpose, and I would not rest until I ripped her heart from her chest and sliced her head from her body.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

The city was in shock, but soon, there would be only chaos. Terror and disbelief were on every face I saw, and already people gathered in small groups on the streets to listen while grim speakers shouted about the end of the world, government interference, and conspiracy theories.

I wanted to shift, but I needed to stay in contact with the detective. He'd keep me informed as I tracked the killer vampires. But Avis was fast—vampire fast—and she had yet to leave the city. That terrified me, because there were only two reasons why she'd stay.

One, to kill more humans, and two, because she wasn't afraid of being caught.

And as I followed her scent through well-lit streets crowded with cars as people attempted to flee, Rick called again. "People are dying in the streets," he told me. "The vampires have started picking people off as they gather in groups and pile into their cars."

"While the humans are disorganized and confused," I told him, "the vampires will strike the hardest. They need a voice, Detective. Talk to them. Tell them that most of what they've heard about vampires is true. Tell them to go inside and lock their doors—vampires cannot get into their houses without an invitation." Then I hesitated, because Avis was not exactly a vampire, and she could go wherever she pleased. Still, it might cut down on some of the deaths.

"Vampire headed this way," Wyatt said.

And not just any vampire. I ended the call with the detective and looked up to see

Bastien, the county master, walking toward me. He didn't look like a vampire. He'd cut his long, shiny hair and donned an expensive suit, attempting to blend in with the humans. But his eyes were terrible, and I knew that he would blame himself for Avis Vine's murder spree. As county master, that was on his shoulders.

Farrow, the girl who'd approached me when I'd first visited Frederick Axton, was at his side, and though they didn't make themselves obvious, I saw other vampires near him, also attempting to blend in. Their lives were about to change forever, and I couldn't imagine what they were thinking.

"Do you have her scent?" Bastien asked me.

"I do."

"My people are all over the city. We'll find her." He stared at me with a stillness only vampires were capable of. "If you find her before I do—"

"I know what to do," I interrupted, patting the stakes I'd hidden beneath my long jacket. "She won't be the first vampire I've staked."

He flinched, just a little. He got control of his emotions quickly, but I saw what he tried to hide. His eyes were brimming with desolation. "I would like to get her alive," he said. "I would use her as an example to others who might betray their own. I can punish her in ways you cannot imagine, Kait. Bring her to me."

He wasn't wrong. Even though there would have been nothing as satisfying to me as staking Avis and taking her head, he could keep her alive for years with his creative torture. And he could use her to keep others in line. "I'll think about it," was all I'd promise.

He gave me a quick nod. "Thank you." Then he and his people hurried on, as



determined as I was to stop the carnage and capture Avis Vine.

I wondered if her insanity would affect other vampires in other cities, other countries. Avis was far from the only crazy in the world, and other vampires might only have been waiting for someone to lead them into the fray—and out of the shadows.

By dawn, she still had not been found, many humans were dead—most of them killed by other humans, terrified humans with guns—and Bastien told me that some of his vampires had joined Avis, rising up with their dark desires and, perhaps, a belief that once they were out they would become...equals, somehow. Mainstream.

Accepted.

Only that would never happen, because they had too much power, there were too few of them, and the majority of humans would only ever fear and hate them. Wolves would be next, of course. I was doubtful we could stay hidden now. That any of the nonhumans could.

Maybe my nerves screwed with my hunting, but for whatever reason, I lost Avis's scent around four in the morning. I was exhausted, as were the wolves with me, because we'd barely taken a moment to rest. We hadn't eaten, and now we were running on pure hatred and desperation alone.

We weren't the only ones. Groups of humans and the occasional loner carried shotguns and blades through the city streets, searching for vampires. Maybe they thought there was safety in numbers or that if they spotted a vampire they'd simply shoot him or her and someone would burn or bury the monster, and all would be well.

It wouldn't take them long to realize the futility and danger of their plan.

"Lucy and Ash are at Shadowfield," Jared said. "Come home with me to sleep. We

will begin the search again as soon as it's dark."

I surprised him by agreeing. The last thing I wanted was to be alone. I called Zach and asked him to return to Shadowfield as well, and then called my mother.

"I'm already at Shadowfield, Kaity. You're coming?"

"Yeah. Go back to sleep, Mom." In one's pack was safety, comfort, and strength, and I was in no condition to deny myself.

I forgot all about the serial killer. What was one crazy fucking human in the midst of such a massive nightmare?

When we got to Shadowfield and I stumbled walking toward Jared's house, he gave a soft growl and took my arm to steady me. "You'll get cleaned up," he told me. "Food will be waiting. After you eat, Nell will show you to a bed."

His fingers were warm on my arm, even through the thin fabric of my jacket. Warm, and possessive. And yet...

"Jared."

He didn't stop walking but his body immediately tensed. "Yes?"

I knew he wanted me. Wolves had strong senses—his desire was not going to be a secret. At least not his physical desire. Mentally, though, I only knew that he didn't want to want me. And I would have given much to know why. Maybe it was because of his arranged match with Jeanette Lister, but I didn't think so. He'd said it was because of me. That I was not ready.

What the hell did that even mean? And who put that shit into his head? I wanted to

ask him, but honestly, I was so sick of throwing myself at a man who recoiled like I was some sort of innocent...human that I kept my mouth shut and my hands to myself, and I went to take a much-needed shower.

Jared's family home wasn't over the top. It was too clean, if you asked me, and everything was just too...white, and it definitely didn't scream "The alpha lives here!" which is exactly how a wolf wanted to live. Simply and under the radar, just like the vampires.

"Shit," I whispered, and dropped my fork back into my plate. Nell had prepared rare steaks with potatoes and an apple pie for dessert. The food was good and I was starving, but after only half the huge steak, my worried brain got in the way of my appetite.

Jared ate with me, but the only one who talked was Nell. She talked a lot as she bustled back and forth, but I didn't mind. It helped fill the uncomfortable silence. She went silent when I stopped eating. "Is something wrong with the meat?" she asked, frowning. "Would you prefer something else?"

I rubbed my eyes. "It's delicious, Nell. My worry is getting in the way of my appetite, I'm afraid."

"Oh, dear," she said. "Try not to worry so much. Jared will worry enough for all of us, and he will always protect this pack. Certainly he'll protect you. Honestly, he shouldn't be allowing you to—"

"Nell," Jared interrupted.

He didn't say anything else but she immediately wiped her hands and left the dining room after a quick, somewhat apologetic glance at him.

Jared left his chair and walked around the table toward me, and my body stiffened immediately. Just a little, but enough to make me realize I didn't trust the alpha the way a wolf should trust her alpha. I didn't submit to him, I didn't obey him, and I didn't believe his word was law, the way a normal wolf would. And just like that, I realized by saying I wasn't ready, he simply meant I wasn't ready to let him be the boss of me. Apparently, he believed that in order to have sex, we needed to know our places—and accept them.

My wolf loved the hell out of that. But me? No. Not so much.

“Stop thinking,” he said, sitting down beside me, “and eat your dinner. You can't hunt if you don't eat.”

“I can't be a submissive wolf, Jared.”

He studied me, then cut off a piece of meat, speared it with the fork, and handed it to me. “You don't need to be submissive,” he said. “Not the way you think. But you have to trust me. You have to believe I won't hurt you, that I will take care of you, that no matter what, I will always do what is best for my pack. And you.”

I wasn't like other wolves, simply because I'd been “warped” by being forced out of my pack at such a young age. Then my wolf had been hobbled, so really, I was closer to human than shifter. Even growing up, my parents had kept me more isolated than a normal pup would have been. My father had seen to my training, my mother to my education. I'd had few friends. Then I'd been sent away.

I understood that a wolf would look to her alpha for protection. I understood that the weight of the pack rested on his shoulders and that regular wolves accepted and were grateful for that. His word was law.

But I didn't know why it was so important to him that I be that person.

I was completely torn, of course, because a big part of me—the wolf part—wanted everything to be the way it was supposed to be. Wanted to lie down and give him my belly and relax, secure in the knowledge that as alpha, he was responsible for us all. He would take care of everything, including me.

The woman part though, she wanted to shove him up against the wall and have her way with him, then go out hunting and protecting and defending and taking care of her own damn self.

I sighed, then lifted the fork to my lips. As he watched, I ate the damn steak, and then I ate another one—not because he'd said I should, but because I knew that if I wanted to catch Avis and protect not only my people but the humans, I had to make sure I was physically strong enough to do so.

But afterward, as I got up to head to bed, I blurted it out, because...oh, who the fuck knew why. I just did. "Why the hell," I asked, standing so close to him that I could have taken a deep breath and brushed my body against his, "can we not just have casual sex without all the complications?" I reacted almost violently to the thought and to the nearness of him. My body woke up. My skin erupted in gooseflesh, chills raced down my spine, my mouth dried up, my hands shook. Worse, my heart pounded so hard I was sure he'd hear it, and a wave of extreme heat gathered between my legs and wiped all sane thought from my mind.

There was only lust. Deep, unexpected, and extreme. There was something huge and special connecting us. I couldn't believe I'd feel this way otherwise. Fate? I wouldn't rule it out. I was that shaken.

But anger lit his stare, and my immediate instinct was to step back and get away from that anger. "There is no casual sex, Kait," he bit out. "Not with us."

I had to restrain myself from touching him. "What do you want from me, Jared?"

“I want nothing you cannot freely give,” he growled, at last, and then he turned and strode away from me. I had to admit—if he felt the way about me that I felt about him—physically—then he was stronger than me.

I wished I could talk to Lennon, who might, if pushed, shed some light on Jared’s thinking. I honestly didn’t know what he wanted. Not a casual one-night stand, obviously, but did that mean he wanted something serious? With me?

I snorted. Right.

Whatever he wanted, it wasn’t me for a mate. He would just come to claim me, if he wanted me. And if I’d resisted, he’d have done what any hotblooded alpha would have done. He’d have pursued the fuck out of me. Female alphas did the same. If they wanted a wolf, they knew it, and they went after him. And if the alpha didn’t get his or her mate? I didn’t know. I’d never heard of such a thing happening. Alphas always got what they wanted.

Nell hurried back into the room. “Come with me, Kait. I have your bedroom ready for you. I put your cell phone and your weapons on the dresser.”

“Don’t you ever sleep, Nell?” I asked her, eyeing her dress and her perfectly applied makeup.

“Oh, I sleep when I need to.” She grinned and linked her arm through mine. “You look like you’re ready to fall over, though, so let’s get you tucked in.” She sobered as we walked down a long hallway to the back stairs. “You and the alpha...you will get her, won’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said, grimly. “We will.”

The bedroom she showed me to was at the top of the stairs on the right, and just

before she led me in, she paused to point at another door at the end of the hallway. “Jared’s bedroom.” Her voice was soft and when she looked at me, there was something in her eyes. Craftiness? Amusement? I didn’t know.

I said nothing, but once again, my body roared to life when I thought of Jared in his bed, lying sprawled and defenseless and naked beneath crisp white sheets.

Damn.

“If you need anything, there’s a call light right here,” she said, pointing out a discreet white button, “and this is an emergency button. Push it, and you will have half the warriors in the pack in your bedroom before you can take a breath.” Again, she grinned, and now her eyes held only mischievousness. “Not a bad thing, if you ask me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m too tired for emergency buttons.”

“Get some sleep, honey. I’ll wake you in a few hours, if you’d like.”

“Five hours. Thanks, Nell.” I fell into bed. The bed was nice. The room was nice. Not too big, not too small, with a bathroom and a walk-in closet. But I missed my bed, and I missed my dog. If it wouldn’t have disturbed him and Lucy, I’d have sent for him.

I was asleep before the thought was completely formed, and I dreamed the entire time. I dreamed of the alpha and his gleaming skin, his muscles, and his fierceness. I dreamed that he came for me, and kissed me, and it was so real that when something woke me and I opened my eyes to find him there above me, I thought for a minute that it hadn’t been a dream at all.

He stared down at me, as silent as I was, then, “It’s dark in a couple of hours.” His

voice was quiet and smooth, and his words didn't really penetrate my groggy mind. Just the sound of his voice, the glittering of his eyes, the sensual curve of his lips.

"The more I'm around you," I said, but then I stopped, because I couldn't say what I wanted to say. I wasn't that groggy.

But he knew.

Then I glanced at the bedside clock. "Three o'clock," I practically yelled, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. "I told Nell to wake me in five hours. I have to..." I climbed out of bed and stood there, trying to get everything straight in my head. "The world is imploding and I'm lying here sleeping. What's the news?"

I didn't even have clean clothes. I started to panic when I realized my blade wasn't with me, but then remembered I'd handed it to Rick for safekeeping. I could only imagine what the detective was dealing with since the city had fallen into chaos, but I was pretty sure he wasn't sleeping through it.

Jared gripped my upper arms. "Lucy brought some clothes for you. Your bag is in the bathroom. I had Eli go get your car, it's parked out front. Moreno called me when he couldn't reach you, and I told him you were safe. Things have changed in the city, but it will be no different whether you sleep for five hours or for eight. Take a shower. Breakfast and coffee will be waiting when you're finished. Okay?"

Slightly calmed, I nodded. He was right, and my head was fuzzy. I needed to let myself fully awaken, drink some coffee, and clear my mind. "Everyone is okay?" I asked, and he knew who I was talking about. My mother, Lucy, Zach, Rick, Joe, Max...everyone.

"Everyone is fine." He continued holding my arms, squeezing just slightly. "I'm worried about you, Kait. You have to take care of yourself."



“I do?” I lifted my eyebrows. “I thought that’s what you were for.”

He smiled. “Deal.”

Uncomfortable, I pulled out of his grip. “I have to get ready.”

“Yes,” he said. “You do.” And he meant something totally different than I did.

I left him standing there while I went to get a quick shower, and when I came out, he was gone. There was a tray on the table, though, holding coffee and enough breakfast to feed half a dozen wolves. I ate it all, grimly refueling, gearing up for the coming night.

A night of hunting, hoping, and death.

Preferably not mine.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I felt naked without my demon blade. As I left Jared's house, planning to see my mother, Lucy, and Ash before I went hunting, I called the detective.

"I was getting ready to call you," he said, when he answered. He sounded rushed, exhausted, and angry. Overwhelmed. And it wasn't even dark yet. "I had an ID badge made for you in case you get stopped."

"Good. It'll be easier to hunt the bitch if there aren't so many humans in the way. I'll be in the city within the hour. Can you bring my blade?"

How quickly things could change.

"I'll meet you at my house in forty-five minutes," he told me. "I've secured your weapon there."

"Thanks." I hesitated. "How bad is it, Rick?"

"It's daylight," he said, somewhat dryly, "and people are still killing each other. We're doing what we can." He blew out a hard breath. "It's like the fucking end of the world out there, Kait. How the hell did this happen?"

I squeezed my phone, my heart aching. "I'm sorry, Rick."

"Not your fault," he murmured.

But wasn't it? I was one of "them." One of the nonhumans. My kind was killing his kind. And I absolutely felt responsible. Jared would feel the same. The supernaturals

were going to be as traumatized by the changing world and the horror as the humans were.

As just as the other nonhumans would be, I was terrified and heartbroken. Not just for the humans, but for my people. Even the vampires—at least some of them. Not all—or even most—of them wanted to be yanked out of their shadows so violently and abruptly. Those who were eating humans or killing them were not all evil butchers like Avis, but the madness, confusion, freedom, and fear had overtaken them. They would rush from their dark prisons, drunk and giddy after centuries of repression, of existing for so very long in a world that would never really belong to them, and they would do the wrong thing.

For a few seconds, I lost my breath, and I shoved my fist against my mouth to keep from sobbing. Better I should rail and curse and embrace my anger.

“Suck it up, Princess. It’s time to fight.”

I nodded, straightened my spine, and let my rage smother my fear. “I’ll see you in a little while,” I said. “Be careful, Detective.”

I was eager to have my blade in my hand. It would take out Avis and her crew as easily as my wolf would, and I wouldn’t need to shift. Right now, shifting was a bad idea. People were searching for killer monsters—vampires, yes, but wolves were next. It was just a matter of time, and I didn’t want to rush it by getting seen. I had to protect my people.

My mother and Lucy had been given rooms in the Rose Inn, and as though they had known I was coming, both of them were waiting inside the little common room when I walked inside. My stress immediately lessened when Ash, wooing and snuffling, rushed to greet me.

I fell to my knees and caught him to me, hugging his wiggly body, laughing as I turned my face from side to side, attempting to keep his tongue out of my nose, mouth, and ears. When Ash was loving on me, all the bad stuff melted away.

Finally he tore himself away and got a case of the zoomies, sliding on the shiny hardwood floors and crashing into furniture as he raced around the room, grinning at the attention he was getting. The more we laughed, the harder he ran.

But time was running by as fast as Ash, and I needed to get to work. I hugged my mother and then Lucy. “Thanks for bringing me clothes, Lucy. I hope you didn’t leave Shadowfield without half a dozen guards.”

She laughed, but she had new dark circles under her eyes and her face was paler than usual. “I wish we could go home.”

I wished that, too. “Are you okay, Luce?”

“She isn’t sleeping,” my mother said. “She can’t sleep for the bad dreams.”

Lucy tried to grin but failed rather miserably. “Every time I close my eyes,” she said, then shrugged. “I’ve had them my entire life, but somehow, this is different.”

“Because your dreams are about you,” I said. “But you’re safe here, and you have to get some rest.”

She avoided my stare. “I know.”

“Kait,” someone called, and I looked up to watch as Lennon walked into the room. “Welcome to my inn.”

I lifted an eyebrow, surprised. “Your inn?”

She grinned and held out her hand, then retracted it before I could actually take it. It was painful for a seer to touch people, sometimes for both seer and the other person. Mostly just for the seer, though. “It’s a special place. You’d be surprised at the things that happen here. Someday, you’ll have to stay for a few nights.”

“The alpha likes her right where she is,” my mother said serenely. “In his house.” And there was a mother’s pride in her voice.

I hastily changed the subject, even as my face heated. A woman didn’t want others to know when she pursued a man and he rejected her. “Why Rose Inn?” I asked Lennon. “Your favorite flower?”

She laughed and the sound was like the tinkling of glass. The seer was just otherworldly. Still, there was the tiniest of lines between her brows and her laugh didn’t quite ring true. I didn’t think I’d done anything to upset her. Probably, she was simply upset over the bad shit that had happened, just like the rest of us. “It’s my last name.”

“Oh,” I said. I was a bit new to the pack, but I really should have known Lennon’s last name. Then chills chased each other down my spine, and my heart stuttered hard for a few breathless seconds. “Jared’s coming,” I said.

Moments later, he pushed open the inn door and strode into the room. The guards Wyatt, Avery, and Brian were at his back, and Zach was beside him. It appeared as though the alpha and the hunter had become fast friends, and I was glad to see it. Zach needed someone like Jared.

And maybe he wasn’t the only one. But I frowned at the thought. I didn’t need him—I wanted him. There was a big difference.

“I need to speak with you before you go,” Jared said.

Which meant he wasn't hunting with me tonight. Only something big would have kept him from accompanying me on the hunt for Avis Vine and honestly, I dreaded hearing what it was.

"Good afternoon, Alpha," Lennon said, her voice serene. But it looked to me like there was a sort of...warning in her eyes when she looked at him, and I felt a tension between them. Maybe it had nothing to me, and I was being a little paranoid.

I hugged my mother, Lucy, and Ash goodbye and turned to follow him outside.

"What has happened now?" I asked, once we were striding away from the inn. I didn't mean to sound hostile, and I gave him an apologetic glance. We were all on edge.

"My scouts have just returned with the heads of three vampires—a small group attempting to infiltrate the compound." He looked at me, giving me a second to think about what he had said.

It took me about five to really grasp his meaning. And then I could only squint and shake my head, because no way could he have said what I thought he'd said. "No," I said, finally. And when he only nodded, grim and silent, I whispered, "Show me."

Ten minutes later I stood in a basement room in the pack's small warehouse, staring at the three vampires, bloody and gory exclamation points with their severed heads placed at the tops of their shriveling bodies.

Their unburnt bodies.

Sure, there were blackened scorch marks across their gruesome faces, and some holes had burned through their clothes, but the sun hadn't killed them—and it hadn't been dark when they'd tried to slip into Shadowfield.

Jared and the others stood back and gave me some time to absorb the awfulness of what I was seeing. I crouched down to examine them, noting the empty eyes, milky with death that had, in reality, claimed them long, long ago. Their hair had been burned to the skull, but the sun had not sunk beneath the skin. The female had blisters on her scalp and her nose, and the two males had black holes in their lips, their eyelids, and their ears.

The sun had hurt them, but she had not killed them.

“Magic,” I said, finally standing. “Frederick Axton and his seer had lots of secrets, didn’t they?” I kept my face blank, and my voice didn’t show the horror in my heart. It didn’t matter, though. There wasn’t a person there who didn’t feel the exact same way I did.

Somehow, these vampires had survived the sun.

“It was nearing dusk and overcast,” the alpha told me, stepping closer as though he thought I might faint and he’d need to catch me. “And what sun there was weakened them severely. My wolves were able to take them easily.”

“But it didn’t kill them,” I said. “And maybe they’ll get stronger eventually. Maybe they’ll be able to walk in the daylight without consequence.” We stared at each other, and I couldn’t help but shudder.

Vampires were powerful and hungry. If the sun wasn’t there to control them, they’d destroy the world—even if some of them might not want to. And vampires walking under the sun? No. That was just wrong.

“And if they could do this,” Zach said, walking to stand beside me, “then how many other vampires or supernaturals are also learning such secrets?” He tilted his head when he looked at me, and his long hair slid down the side of his face. “Who else did

Axton and Kaloni give this knowledge to? And where did they get it from?"

I reached out automatically to push his hair out of his face, and I felt the alpha's immediate tension. I didn't look at him. "Maybe Kaloni created it," I said. "When we kill Avis and her rogues, the magic will die with them." I could hope.

"I want to be part of her death." Zach caught and held my stare, his own steady and full of a sort of eager, greedy desire to kill that I hadn't noticed before. "When Avis is captured, I would like to be the one to take her heart."

"If possible," I murmured, "I'll give it to you." I didn't tell him that Bastien wanted the woman as well. Sometimes I wondered what Axton and his human servant had done to Zach, but the dark curiosity was fleeting. I didn't want to know details.

"Right now," Jared said, "you need to hunt for Avis. Stay in contact. I will join you later if I can." He looked up when Eli strode into the room. "Eli is going with you, as are these three." He indicated Wyatt, Avery, and Brian, who remained by the doors, guarding their alpha from a threat none of us could really allow to sink in.

I didn't want Eli to go with me. Honestly, I didn't want any of the wolves with me. I hunted better alone. God knew I'd done it all my life. But it would have been pointless to argue. They would simply follow me anyway, because the alpha demanded it.

I could see from the anger in Eli's dark eyes that he was as reluctant to go as I was to have him, but he wouldn't argue, either.

"Sorry," I told him, and maybe he softened a little. I gave my overprotective alpha a small smile. "Be careful out there, Jared. Especially since you're giving me your best people."



The little knot of warriors straightened their spines and lifted their chins, pleased, but Jared only grunted. “Eli,” he said.

“With my life, boss,” Eli said.

“Come on, Zach,” I said, when Zach lingered.

“He’ll work with me tonight,” Jared said.

I knew Jared was taking Zach under his wing, but it irked me that he thought the recently tortured hunter wouldn’t be safe with me. I frowned at him. “I’d feel better if he hunted with me, Jared. He’s a hunter, after all.” And it wasn’t that I didn’t trust Jared to take care of him, but I believed Zach needed me. Jared didn’t really understand Zach’s vulnerability—or the fact that his withdrawals could soon take over his existence.

And part of me, a big part, was afraid that the alpha only wanted to keep Zach with him to separate him from me.

“He’s a human hunter,” Jared pointed out. “He cannot keep up in a wolf’s hunt. He will guard with me.” He didn’t wait for me to argue further. Secure in his belief that I would be well defended with his beta and guard surrounding me, he walked away.

“Zach?” I asked, reaching out to snag his sleeve. “Will you be okay?”

There was anger in his voice when he spoke. “Don’t do that, Kait.” He strode away without giving me another glance.

“You understand why he’s angry,” Eli said, watching my face.

“Because I care about what happens to him?” I snapped.

“Because you treat everyone around you like they’re weak and in need of your mighty protection. Even the alpha, Kait.” He didn’t sneer, but he came damn close. “You are not stronger than everyone around you.”

Jared stopped at the doorway, Zach beside him. “She doesn’t think she’s stronger than we are,” he said, catching and holding my gaze. “She just doesn’t show weakness. She was never allowed to.”

Suck it up, Princess.

I didn’t say anything, and finally, he walked out the door with Zach at his side. I waited a few moments before I followed, smothering my worries and fears beneath the excitement of the coming hunt.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I climbed into the driver's seat of my car, raising an eyebrow when Eli got into the passenger seat without a word. "I thought you'd insist on driving," I told him. "I expected an argument."

"Not at all," he said, smiling smugly. "You drive, we watch for danger. If we see something suspicious, we'll jump out and take care of business while you tend to the steering and braking and such."

He laughed when I glared at him.

The city was in disarray, but it would get worse before it got better. Cops were stopping people, strongly encouraging them to go home and stay off the streets after the sun set. Some people listened, and some didn't. Some couldn't, for various reasons. More people died.

Eli read news articles to me as I drove through the city, taking backroads and side streets whenever possible to avoid police.

Apparently the homeless were safe. The vampires ravaging the city left them alone—probably their blood wasn't quite rich and tasty enough and with the bounty of the city at their disposal, the vampires were going for healthier choices.

There were fights. Shootings. Killings. People began to take advantage of the chaos by looting and burning.

And because it was November, spirits and demons joined the fun. I saw them. I would need to control as many of them as I could, because the vampires weren't the

only threats to human safety.

How long before the military was brought in? How long before they formed a perimeter around the city and refused to let anyone leave? Maybe they'd drop a bomb on us, hoping to contain the problem. Who the hell knew? I certainly didn't.

All I knew was that we needed to neutralize Avis and her people before it came to that.

I was late getting to Rick's house, but he didn't complain when he opened the door to let me in. He glanced at the four people behind me. "You have a key, Kait."

I shrugged. "I'm not using that key if you're home to open the door for me." I looked at Eli. "I'll be right back."

He nodded and he and the others spread out on the porch, watchful and patient.

I followed the detective into the living room, and he gestured at my blade and the laminated ID badge on the coffee table. He'd put the badge on a black lanyard, and I checked it out before dropping it over my head. "Where'd you get the picture?"

He grinned, and for a second, his amusement lit his face and chased away the shadows. "Internet."

My stare lingered on his face, memorizing that expression. I knew I wouldn't see it often. "There are pictures of me online?" I gripped the handle of my blade, enjoying its familiar warmth before sliding it into its sheath at my hip.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Quite a few pictures of you, Kait."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you being so sly and amused about, Detective?"

“It’s not me,” he said, not quite grinning. “It’s the teenager inside me.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, but he wouldn’t tell me. Fine. When I got a chance, I’d search my name and see what came up. Better yet, I’d ask Max. I was sure he’d already Googled the hell out of me.

“I have my old ID in my glovebox,” I told him. “You didn’t have to get me a new one.”

“The red line at the edge of the card,” he said, “is not a quality error. It’ll tell any cop who stops you that you’re working with us and for the mayor. It was Louis’s idea. He has people watching out for you, you know.”

I nodded. Ever since I’d led the police to their son, the mayor and his wife made sure I was taken care of. “Thank him for me, will you?”

“I will. You’ll be hearing from him soon. He wants to speak with you.”

For some reason, that made my stomach tighten. Mayor Hedrick was going to need something I wasn’t sure I was ready to give. “How’s Beth?” I asked, changing the subject. The house had an empty feel to it, as though Rick weren’t enough by himself to bring life to it.

“Better,” he answered. “She has good people around her. She...”

“What?” I prompted, when he stopped.

“She’s not coming home. She’s going back to Colorado. Her parents are there.” He shrugged, trying for casual, but he didn’t look at me. “She told me half an hour ago.”

I reached out to squeeze his arm. “I’m sorry, Rick.” I hesitated, then, “Not because

of...?”

“No. It had nothing to do with you or what she heard. She knew it wasn’t true. This has been a long time coming. People like her shouldn’t be with people like me.” Finally, he met my stare, and I wasn’t surprised to see that his was blank. “I have to get to work.”

“Me too.” I started to tell him to be careful as he walked me to the door, but that seemed to upset people. “Thanks for taking care of my blade,” I said instead.

“You can trust me, Kait.”

The words were abrupt and unexpected, heavy with seriousness and a feeling of urgency, and I stopped walking to face him. “I know.”

He studied me for a few seconds. “Do you? Do you really trust anybody?”

I swallowed. “When I can.”

He nodded. “Call me if you need me. Be careful out there.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You too, Detective.”

He didn’t mention the serial killer and I knew he would have if there’d been any new developments, so I didn’t waste time questioning him. He stood on the porch watching me and the four wolves walk back to my car. I was sure he’d like to have questioned me about them, as well, but it was not a night to ask questions.

I stopped when I reached my car, goosebumps rising suddenly on my skin. I lifted my face to the cold, fresh air, closing my eyes as I inhaled. None of the wolves said a word, just stood quiet and ready.

“She’s close,” I told them, finally. I was suddenly glad for the protective vest my contact had sent me. I hadn’t forgotten the troll in the tunnels. The dog-turned-vampire had been right up there with some of the most horrible things I’d ever seen. I hadn’t told another soul about that dog. And now that I’d learned that some of the vampires were able to withstand a waning sun, I had a new item to add to the junk drawer of horror in my mind.

And though I had yet to see her, Avis Vine was in that drawer. Avis Vine, who was standing in the shadows of the night, watching me. I felt her there, the bitch, her and her evil intent. She was on a mission to destroy not only me and those I loved, but the city and the vampires. She was going to die, but in her misery, perhaps she didn’t care. Most vampires feared their waiting afterlife more than anything else in existence.

She had to know I was going to send her to that afterlife.

“Where is she?” Eli murmured. He didn’t search the shadows, didn’t make it obvious that we knew she was there, but it didn’t matter. She was taunting us as surely as if she’d been standing in the middle of the street with a dead human in her arms.

The detective’s street, a quiet residential street to begin with, was completely silent. His neighbors were mostly older professionals, and they took the law seriously—as well as the danger lurking outside their doors. They’d blockaded themselves in their homes, pulled their blinds, and wouldn’t have answered a knock on their door no matter what.

Smart people.

Rick left the porch and headed for his car, surprised that I lingered. “Kait?”

For a few seconds, I was frozen with terror, imagining Avis watching him, licking her

lips with eager, greedy hunger, dreaming of making me watch as she tore him to pieces.

“Rick,” I said, my voice hoarse. “Get in your car.”

He pulled his gun immediately and crouched slightly, turning in a half circle to check the area. “Where, Kait?”

Shit. Everyone wanted to know where she was. I didn’t know. She was every-fucking-where. Her scent wafted to me from behind me and down the street, from the hedge at the front of the house across the way, from the roof of the detective’s house.

She’d rushed around, leaving her scent to confuse me, and I could not pinpoint exactly where she now stood.

“Eli, get Rick,” I said, my voice calm even as my heart thumped like an out-of-control drum. And only when the wolves surrounded the detective and brought him into the safety of our circle could I force myself to relax enough to think. “Give me a second,” I said, before anyone could speak.

And there in the eerie quiet of the cold street, I went to get my wolf.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Then suddenly, she was there on the street, her vampires fanning out behind her.

Avis wasn't a weak woman. She wasn't even a woman. She was a creature that Frederick Axton and his seer had created from something that had once been human. She was muscular, with bone-white fangs that protruded from her mouth. They looked almost fake, like plastic teeth a kid might buy for Halloween. Her skin was scaly and yellow—probably her liver was shot—and her brown irises floated in the dull yellow of her sclera.

I'd expected her to be skeletal and ill and rotting from the inside out, but other than the jaundice and the abnormal teeth, she looked...grotesquely fit with her bulging muscles and her thick, shiny hair. She wore a fitted, sleeveless white dress that bared her biceps and ended mid-thigh, and a pair of black ankle boots. Maybe she was around thirty years old, maybe sixty. It was nearly impossible to tell.

She was a monster.

I had pulled my wolf to the surface so I could get a better idea of her exact location—I'd never planned on shifting. There were many reasons for me wanting to hide my shift, most of them good reasons. I didn't want to show my wolf to Rick or the humans who were likely peering from their windows with their phones recording the encounter. I didn't want to lose my demon blade. I didn't want to out myself or the wolves to the public.

So I didn't shift, but that was okay. I would still kick her ass.

"Rick," I said quietly, "get into the car and lock the doors."

He didn't answer or move to obey me, and from the corner of my eye I saw him holster his gun and hold his hand out. After only a slight hesitation, Eli pulled a stake and slapped it into his waiting palm.

"No, Detective," I murmured. But I understood. The vampires had made him afraid, and he did not like being afraid. They'd taken him once, and he hadn't been prepared. He hadn't even known they existed. Now, he was going to fight back, even if it meant his death.

I could relate.

But Rick was a cop. He dealt with guns and humans, not stakes and vampires, and I was terrified that he was going to get hurt. It wasn't that I thought he was weak. It was only that he was human, and I cared about him, dammit.

Part of my mind was on protecting him when the vampires struck, and I knew the break in my concentration was dangerous. Avis knew it, too, so Rick was the first one she and her followers went for.

"Kill the human," she screamed, and in a blur of movement, the vampires were on us. And they were damn fast. Unfortunately for them, so were wolves. Normally, I'd have gone into the battle with joy and enthusiasm, but I was too filled with worry over the detective. How could I fight and keep him safe at the same time?

Especially when he wouldn't let me.

If it hadn't been for Joe, I honestly think the detective would have died there that night. Apparently Joe had been watching, though, keeping an eye on me for the mayor. Joe took that job very seriously, and maybe he'd stuck a tracker onto my car, courtesy of, I was sure, Mayor Hedrick.

Avis had extended her claws—claws that were at least five or six inches long—and swiped a trench down my face and neck before she went for Rick. I would have shrugged it off, but the burning pain became something I hadn't felt before from the teeth or claws of a regular vampire. It was like her claws were tipped with icy poison, and as soon as she sliced me, that poison began drifting through my bloodstream, its coldness freezing and slowing my muscles, my heart, my brain.

With my hesitation, she sliced her claws down my chest—and the council's man, Saul—didn't let me down. She couldn't get through the fabric of the protective vest. And whatever the cloth had been spelled with hurt her as much as her poison hurt me.

She screamed and attempted to retract her claws, but they were stuck in the layer of magic protecting me. Before she could strike desperately at me with her free hand, I blinked through the blood obscuring my vision and did what I'd only done once before—I partially shifted.

I couldn't stop the snarling growl of my wolf as I released my claws, but there was so much noise that my growl was lost in the sound of a battle that had gone quickly vicious, bloody, and painful.

And Eli wasn't trying to protect the one human among us—he was trying to protect me, a wolf more powerful than he was, simply because his alpha had commanded him to do so.

The other wolves were trying to stay in their human forms to avoid showing themselves to the world, and because they were wolves—wolves with stakes—they didn't have to shift. Yes, it would have been a more level fight, quicker, certainly, but they forced sharpened stakes through the chest walls of the enemy, and no matter that Avis and her crew outnumbered us, the vampires began to fall. They were trampled under heavy shifter foot, and as Avis ripped herself free of me and we began to fight in earnest, I saw Joe swinging a wicked, serrated machete, taking the heads of

whatever unlucky vampires got in his way. “I’ve got Rick,” he roared.

And finally, I could concentrate on Avis Vine. Joe was fighting his way to the detective, and he would protect him because Joe was part of my crew. He knew what I needed him to do.

Eli was a different story. Avis and I tumbled through the night, locked together as we both attempted to get the upper hand—she once again clawed my face and in a desperate frenzy attempted to sink her fangs into whatever part of my flesh she could reach, I was quietly amazed by her strength. The fight was taking everything I had. I tried to go on the offensive, but too often I found myself having to defend. She was a force.

And most of it was magic.

I balled my fist and hit her in the face as hard as I could, which was pretty damn hard, and as she flew backward, I took the opportunity to yank my demon blade from its sheath. There was no time to think, really. I was fighting on instinct alone. But the second I drew my blade, it was like time slowed down.

The blade glowed, lighting up my hand, its warmth rushing through me to counteract the icy magic from her lethal claws. Now I was a hundred percent.

We were no longer in the detective’s driveway with the others. We’d ended up in someone’s backyard across the street, and it was dark. Not too dark for vampires and wolf shifters, though, and I saw her eyes widen as she leaped to her feet, her short dress billowing around her muscular thighs.

I viewed everything with a clarity I hadn’t had even a few seconds earlier. The line of red-tinged sweat running down her face, the frosty breath escaping her pale, parted lips, the gray aura of magic surrounding her like a wispy ghost...and her sudden

terror.

I smiled, and there was my psycho, not quite taking over, but making herself known. “Run,” I murmured. At that moment, there was no worry over the detective or the humans or even the city as it crumbled. I spared them not a single thought. There was only my joy in chasing this vampire. In catching her, and in killing her.

A switch had flipped inside me, and I embraced the change with everything I was. My body tensed, as hers did, as we both prepared to run. She would have more speed than me, which would make the chase just a little more thrilling.

Thrilling because I could lose her. She could escape. She was strong, insanely quick, and running on a dark magic that I wanted to taste. My heart was beating impossibly fast and hard as a storm of overwhelming energy gathered inside me, and we stared across the dark yard at each other, frozen, for that breathless millisecond.

In that moment, she was preparing herself to die. Like the line of sweat running down her face, an equally bloody tear slid from her eye.

And then, she whirled, and in a blur of movement she raced away. I sprang, as well, my head full of her scent, a scent that would quickly fade if I hesitated. And I would have had her. I would have killed her—we both knew it.

But a huge, warm body torpedoed from the darkness, ramming me so hard I lost my balance, my blade, and for an instant, my senses. Eli’s wolf. He thought he was rescuing me. Protecting me.

He’d lost me for a little while, and I could imagine his worry that he had let his alpha down and I was lying in the darkness, dead.

The bastard lost me my kill. I would have had her. Now, she would redouble her

efforts, but she would not meet me again. She wasn't stupid.

"You bastard son of a bitch," I said, and shoved his heavy, bloody body off me. Not only had I lost my blade when he'd rammed me, but the pain of every wound I'd suffered that night, including what felt like a half a dozen broken bones from Eli's "protection," roared suddenly through me. My enormous boost of adrenaline was gone.

I would have to shift if I wanted to heal quickly. But first, I would have to find my blade, as it had been knocked from my grip. Two others rushed into the yard—Wyatt and Avery. I guessed Brian had stayed behind to guard the detective and, to a lesser degree, the machete-wielding Joe Patrick. Honestly, right then, Joe was the only one of them I felt I could depend on. He understood what was important and didn't treat me like a delicate flower in need of protection.

I didn't look at Eli as I began to walk a grid through the yard, exhausted and hurting. I was afraid if I looked at him, I might stab him in the eye when I did find my blade. But I decided right then and there that from now on, I was hunting alone. I wasn't accepting them and then giving them the slip, either. I would stand my ground with Jared and tell him to keep his damn wolves.

If he couldn't see me as the power I was, that was his problem.

Finally, Eli loped away, and I was glad to see him go.

"Are Rick and Joe okay?" I asked Wyatt.

He didn't answer for a few seconds, and when he did, there was definite hostility in his voice. "The two humans are just fine," he said, "but Brian is dead. I put him in the back of the car so we can transport him back to Shadowfield. I do hope you won't mind having to ride with a dead wolf."

I stopped searching the ground and stared at him, horrified. “God, Wyatt. I’m so sorry.”

He said nothing, but the female, Avery, clenched her fists. “He wouldn’t have died had the beta aided us instead of being so wrapped up in protecting you.” She sneered, but tears stood in her eyes. One of their own had died there tonight, and they were hurting.

One of our own.

It seemed that I kept taking one step forward and two steps backward with my pack. They were never going to accept me at this rate. And maybe that was because we both knew I didn’t really belong with them.

I finally spotted my blade and slid it into its sheath, then began walking back to the detective’s driveway, subdued and quietly upset. The wolves were right to be angry. And I had to wonder why it was that my first instinct was to worry more about the humans than my own kind.

Especially when, as soon as they found out about us, the humans would make it their one purpose in life to wipe us all the hell out.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Rick and Joe were standing in the street, waiting for me. In Rick's eyes I saw relief follow swiftly by a half-irritated sort of acceptance, but in Joe's eyes there was only satisfaction.

I couldn't help but grin to see them both. No, they weren't wolves, but they were my people. My tribe. And in a few seconds, they both returned my grin, and neither of them shrank from me when I wrapped my arms around them and pulled them into a hug.

"Careful there, boss," Joe said. "I've got a machete."

I laughed. "Yeah you do."

Rick pulled back to search my face. "You're cut up, Kait."

"I'm okay." I felt the healing wound pull tightly when I smiled. "I'll heal."

He only nodded.

Behind me, Wyatt cleared his throat. "We need to get Brian's body back to Shadowfield."

Rick looked at him. "What are you?"

I turned sharply to Wyatt and held my hand out. "Wait—"

"Wolves," he said. "We are wolves." And he lifted his chin, straightened his back,



and stared the detective down. God, the pride in his fierce wolf stare.

And at that moment, I felt it, too. Rick and Joe were my people, but so were these wolves. Pride shivered through me, and without thinking, without hesitation, I gripped Wyatt's arm with the hand I'd held out, only seconds before, to stop him.

"Wolves," I whispered, and finally, I turned to look at the two human men—Joe with his sharp, bloody machete, which he'd lifted to lay across his broad shoulder, and Rick with his suit and his gun and his cold cop eyes.

There wasn't any surprise in either of their stares.

"Damn, Kaity Bug," Joe said. "I knew it."

I laughed, and even I heard the relief, pride, and the tiny, tiny droplet of fear and shame that yet lingered. "You didn't."

"Well, no," he admitted, then shrugged. "I just knew you were special."

Honestly, that brought tears to my eyes.

Rick said nothing, but he pulled an honest to God handkerchief from his pocket and began swiping at the blood on my face. "Come back inside. I'll patch you up."

"Can't," Wyatt said, speaking for me. "Neighbors are watching. Someone called the cops. We need to get out of here."

We all heard the sirens, though who was to say they were coming for us? The city was loud with the sound of sirens and full of constant emergencies. We weren't going to be high on their priority list. Still, Wyatt was right. We needed to go.

There was a dead wolf who needed returned to his family. And there was a mutant vampire I needed to catch.

Eli strode toward us, dressed in a pair of borrow pants two sizes too small for him. He came straight for me. “Turn your nose up if you must, Kait Silver, but when my alpha gives me an order, I will follow that order to my death.”

I nodded. “I know, Beta.” But I wouldn’t apologize, because his actions meant Avis was still out there, killing people. I didn’t say that, either, because he knew—and he was as angry at his alpha as he was at himself. “You won’t be hunting with me again, though,” I said, instead.

“I’m good with that.”

“The alpha won’t let her hunt alone,” Avery muttered. “He thinks she’s the—”

“Shut your mouth, wolf,” Eli growled.

She shut her mouth.

“Avis fucked you up,” he told me. “Do you want to take time to sh—”

“No,” I interrupted quickly. I just wasn’t ready for him to say the S word in front of Rick and Joe. Not yet. Just...not yet.

“I’ll meet you there,” Joe said. “You know I’m hunting with you, right?”

I sighed, somewhat regretful that he was human. “I’ll leave you in the dust, Joe.”

He grinned and hefted his massive machete. “I know. But I’ll follow you, Kait. And if you’re lying half-dead in a dark trench somewhere, I’ll find you. Eventually.” He

lost his grin. “I swear it.”

“Dammit, Joe,” I whispered, as weepy as an old lady. I clasped Rick’s hand for a few seconds, then climbed into the car. I needed to get to the woods of Shadowfield, shift, and get my emotions under control. I didn’t tell anyone to be careful. Avis would take some time to regroup, I was nearly certain. She’d clawed me up, it was true, and badly, but I’d damaged her, as well.

Vampire—sort of—or not, she was going to need some time.

No one said a word all the way back to Shadowfield. I stared out the window as Eli drove, my stomach hurting as I witnessed my beloved city being battered by evil. I clenched my fists, suddenly raging. I was tempted to tell Eli to stop and let me out, but he’d have argued, and besides, I wanted to be with the alpha when he saw his dead wolf.

In my old pack, it wouldn’t have hurt my alpha to have lost a wolf. It would tear Jared up. And I would be there with him, though he might not want me to be.

He was waiting when we pulled into Shadowfield, standing with a long line of wolves behind him, waiting. Eli parked my car, and when I didn’t move, he surprised me by patting my knee. “It’ll be okay, Kait.”

“One of our wolves is dead,” I murmured. “That’s not okay.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Jared won’t blame you.”

I pointed my chin at the wolves behind him. “They will.” I met Jared’s stare through the window, and though his expression didn’t change, his lips tightened and his eyes went so carefully blank that I knew he was hiding an enormous amount of emotion.

Zach stood beside him, frowning, and then he broke from the little crowd and walked toward the car. Jared didn't try to stop him.

Eli opened his door. "Come on. You can help me carry Brian to them."

I jerked my head around to look at him, my breath whooshing out. "I can?"

Wyatt and Avery had already left the car and stood at the back, waiting by the hatch. I wanted to help Eli carry Brian's body to their alpha, but that wouldn't have been right. I didn't know him, not really. I wasn't his friend. Wyatt and Avery were.

"Let them take him," I said.

He nodded. "Jared is right. You're a good person."

Eli and I bracketed the two warriors as they carried their brother to the alpha, and Zach halted before he reached us to watch us come. There was a question in his eyes, and I gave him a nod to let him know I was okay, despite the way I looked. And even before we reached the knot of wolves, I could hear the soft cries of a woman.

"Bring him inside," another woman said.

Jared stared down at the body for a few seconds before nodding. "Take him home," he told Wyatt and Avery. "Eli, Kait. With me."

Zach didn't ask if he might accompany us—he simply walked beside me, his shoulder brushing mine, offering his support, should I need it. Jared didn't take us to his house but to his office in the admin building.

The room was bright and warm, but the pall of death and rogue vampires hung heavy in the room. Finally, Jared looked at me. "How did he die?"

“I wasn’t there,” I said. “I was battling Avis Vine in another location.”

He scraped his cold stare over my wounded face. “Eli,” he said.

Eli tensed. “I wasn’t there either,” he said. “I was chasing after Kait. I attempted to protect her and failed to protect the ones who needed it a whole fuck of a lot more than she did.”

Jared narrowed his eyes and took a step toward Eli, his rage flaring to life. Both men were hurting, and both of them would express their pain as anger.

Damn wolves.

I did something then that I shouldn’t have done. Knowing didn’t stop me from doing it, though. I got in the middle of a couple of angry, powerful wolves. “Listen to me,” I said. “Brian’s death was the fault of the bloodsucker who killed him. Not yours, and not Eli’s. And from now on I’m hunting alone.”

Jared’s pupils contracted and for a second, there was such blackness in his eyes that I believed he might start killing people—starting with me—and not stop. “Do not,” he bit out, “get between me and my wolves.”

I moved hastily out of his way. Let them kill each other, if that’s what they needed to do. I’d had enough. I needed to shift, heal, and get back out there. I frowned, suddenly remembering that Joe was supposed to meet me. The second I thought it, though, my cell vibrated.

I turned my back on Jared and Eli and read the text from my mother.

I just heard. Are you okay? I’m outside keeping Joe company until you get here.

Relieved, I tapped out a quick reply. I'm okay but having a delay. Be there soon. Tell Joe?

I didn't want her to know I was going to shift before I went hunting, because she'd only worry. Zach was so quiet I'd almost forgotten he was in the room, but when I looked at him, he gestured toward the door. Without hesitating, I dropped my phone back into my pocket and gave him a nod. I was more than ready to exit the testosterone-laden room.

"Kait," Jared said, as I put my hand on the doorknob. "I want to talk to you."

I yanked open the door and strode out, Zach at my back. I didn't answer him, so Zach answered for me. "Come find her when you're done being an asshole."

But it didn't bother me that the alpha was an asshole. Most alphas were assholes. It bothered me that he obviously didn't think of me as one of them. He didn't want me sticking my nose in pack business. And he for damn sure didn't think of me as his equal. To him, I was just another of his wolves, and he'd proven that.

That was why we hadn't had sex, despite the fact that I'd thrown myself at him. He'd told me I wasn't ready. Ready to...what? Accept him as my lord and master?

Fuck that.

It royally pissed me off that I cared so very much, when he cared not at all.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

The vampires had screwed up my happy home. I wanted to be back there with Lucy and Ash, walking into my office with the snarky Max, and fighting over pastries with Joe. After I left Shadowfield, I'd stop by my place to change clothes, pack an extra bag to stash in my car, and just...be home for a minute.

I didn't give my wolf a lot of time to run through the woods—there was too much to do. I healed the wounds Avis had given me, and then I washed away the blood in an icy stream that ran through the woods. The worst of my injuries had been the magic she'd sent into my bloodstream with her claws, and my demon blade had neutralized that. I would need to tell Jered and Lennon about the discovery. It was one more important piece in the puzzle that was Avis Vine. If Lennon could create an antidote to counteract the poison, it could save a life.

I'd left my clothes and blade with Zach, but when I returned from the woods, Zach was gone and Jared had taken his place. I was clothed only in pale moonlight and shadows, but unlike Zach, Jared didn't turn his back when I stepped from the trees, naked and wet from my quick wash in the stream.

"I promised him," he said, quietly, "that I was 'done being an asshole.' I'm sorry, Kait." He held out his hand, offering me my blade.

I hesitated, then pulled my unbound hair over my shoulders to at least hide a little of my body from his stare, then walked to him, took my knife from his hand, and turned away to dress. "What happened, Jared?"

He was silent for a few seconds, but I didn't turn to look at him as I quickly dressed in my tattered clothes. Finally, he spoke, and though his voice was calm, they were

laced with pain. “Brian wasn’t the only wolf to die tonight. I found three others after you left. Three of my scouts. It shouldn’t be so easy for the vampires to kill us.”

“Shit,” I whispered, yanking on my boots. “Jared, when Avis cut up my face, her claws released a poison into my bloodstream.” I put my hand over my holstered blade, ashamed that part of me was reluctant to tell him how I’d beaten it for fear he’d want to take my knife. “My demon blade counteracted it. They’re killing us with magic. That’s why it’s so easy for them.”

He wasn’t convinced. “Avery and Wyatt were hurt. Avery was not only clawed but bitten. They’re alive.”

“I doubt all the vampires have the power. If they did, we’d all be dead.”

“I’ll talk to Lennon.” He blew out a breath and ran his hand over his face, then reached out, grabbed my upper arms, and dragged me to him. “Fuck,” he whispered. “You could have died, Kait.”

I stiffened in his arms immediately, but God, I wanted to melt against him, into him, around him. He felt like heaven. He smelled like heaven. And I knew from experience that he tasted like heaven. “I thought you didn’t care.” I tried to sound dry and snarky. I didn’t succeed.

He squeezed me so tightly I couldn’t breathe. “It isn’t that I don’t care about you. It’s that I care too much. I don’t know what to do with that.”

“Why is it so hard?” I asked.

He sighed. “You do not want to be an alpha’s woman, Kait. You want to be...”

“What?” I asked, breathless.



“Alpha,” he said. “You want to be alpha.”

“And you can’t be with me because you don’t want to fuck an alpha?” I was going to make him say it.

“There can’t be two rulers of my pack, Kait. When we fuck, it will be because you are ready for what comes after.”

“I’m hot for you, Jared. I don’t want to marry you and I don’t want to steal your pack. I don’t even like most of those assholes.” Still, I didn’t step away from him. I didn’t back out of his arms. I knew he couldn’t take the responsibility of his pack lightly. He’d been born into his position, and alphas were a whole different animal than regular men—or women. I understood that part, honestly, I did. I would have been the same way if I’d ruled a pack.

But I didn’t understand one thing. “Why can’t you just have some fun, Alpha?”

He didn’t laugh. “I can’t lose myself in you for a night and not want you forever.” He slid his fingers to my hair and tugged until I looked up to meet his stare. “And neither can you.”

“What do you want?” I whispered, my heart aching. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to accept me as your alpha. Not just your wolf’s alpha.” He lowered his face until his lips were so close they brushed mine when he spoke. “Yours.”

An alpha’s mate took vows to submit to her—or his—alpha’s rule. His word, in the end, was the only word that mattered. The pack was his pack. She helped him, took care of him and his household so he could better rule his pack—and yes, the pack was deferential to the alpha’s mate. They were respectful. And, if she were anything like my ex-alpha’s mate, they feared her. But only because she belonged to the alpha.

If his mate saw something she didn't like happening in the pack, she could bring it up, but she couldn't change it. She could not get between an alpha and his pack, which I had already infuriated Jared by doing earlier.

Could I bow to my alpha, my husband, my mate?

Hellno.

Because I was alpha, as well. I was alpha.

And I understood what Jared was feeling, because I felt it, as well. If I'd ruled a pack, I would have made sure the man I married understood that I was the ruler. If he tried to take that from me...

I clenched my fists and a growl rose within me. Yes. I understood. But I wanted this alpha. I wanted Jared. Not just in bed, I had to admit, though I'd told him that was all I wanted. He knew better. He knew I wanted him the way he wanted me. As more than just a fuck.

I was extraordinarily drawn to him, which made me think that there was more at work here than mere physical attraction. My wolf wanted to submit to him. She wanted to live for him. And that scared the absolute crap out of me.

I realized at that moment that my mother was only ever free, only ever herself, after my father's death. His death had nearly killed her, because he had been the only thing in the world that mattered to her. He'd dominated my childhood and wasn't it the truth that I barely remembered her there?

I loved my mother. So much. But I absolutely did not want to be like her—at least not the way she was with my father.

I moved my face slightly, sliding my lips against his. I opened my mouth, touching him, tasting him. And there was nothing better to me or to my wolf. He pressed his heat against me and deepened the kiss, and I was so taken by him, by his dominance, his heart, and his sex, that I almost said yes. I almost said yes, I will be your mate, I will let you rule me and my heart, and I will belong to you.

The alpha of the Gray Shadow Pack hadn't gotten down on bended knee and offered me a ring, but he'd just asked me to be his mate. And no matter how I felt about anything else, that was...that was huge. And I would never forget it.

But I could not accept.

Because he would not accept an alpha as his mate, and I wasn't changing who I was for him, or for anyone.

Not even for my insanely upset wolf.

There was a lot we didn't say. I love you, for instance, or I could love you. Or I feel like we were meant to be, and my heart is breaking. But he took his lips from mine and for a few seconds, we simply stared into each other's eyes. I pulled his scent deep inside me, because that was the only part of him I could get, and I slid my hands over his arms to intertwine my fingers with his. He, though, was the one to speak. Apparently there were some things he could say.

"It's not the end for us, wolf. I'm not walking away."

I squeezed his fingers and finally, I pushed myself out of his arms. "I am." Then I turned back to look at him over my shoulder. "For now."

He grinned, and we left it there, in the woods.

For now.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Saul called me as I was driving home, Joe planted firmly in the passenger seat. He wouldn't stay behind, and I wasn't wasting time arguing about it. I needed to change, grab some extras to stash in my car, and figure out a way to keep my blade on me when I shifted. It worried me senseless. If I was hunting alone, I needed a way to keep my blade safe. And right now, it was the only thing protecting me from the lethal magic shed by some of the vampires' claws.

"Report," Saul said.

"I'm fine," I snapped. "Thanks for asking."

After a few seconds of only crickets, I gave up and told him everything that had happened, where I was headed, and that I was hunting alone. I told him that Avis Vine was using some sort of lethal magic, that a couple of the vampires had withstood the sun—barely—and that some of the wolves were dead.

"Thank you for the information," he said, politely. "I'm pleased the protection I sent has kept you alive. Can I do anything else for you?"

"You can figure out a way for me not to lose my blade when I shift," I growled. "I mean, if you're really wanting to do something for me, you can attempt that. I'd greatly appreciate it." I hung up, grumpy as anything. He had that effect on me.

As soon as I got home, I called Max to check on him. "Hey," I said, when he answered.

"I'm not leaving my place, Kait," he said. "If you could see it, you'd understand."

Come over. Bring Lucy.”

“I just came home for some clothes. I’m going after Avis.” I frowned. “Huh.”

Joe pulled his gun immediately at the change in my voice. “What?” he asked.

“Kait?” Max said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I told him. “I smell something. I have to go Max. Call me if you need anything.” I traded my cell for my blade and with Joe at my back, I edged toward my bedroom.

“Someone in there?” Joe murmured.

“Is,” I said, “or was.”

No one was in my bedroom, but there was something on my nightstand that hadn’t been there before.

My demon, safe in the trap jar.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered, pushing my blade back into its sheath. “Put your gun away, Joe.”

“What is it?”

“Remy Simon was here. Apparently he thinks it’s okay to break into people’s houses and return things he stole from them.” I patted his arm. “Go raid the fridge. Have some coffee. I’m just going to pack a few things and I’ll join you.”

As soon as he left the room, I texted Remy. Why the second thoughts? I’d finished

changing clothes and was toting my bag to the kitchen when he replied.

I'm going to hunt with you. Figured you'd be pissed unless I gave the jar back.

"Made some sandwiches and coffee," Joe said, gesturing at the table. "Have a seat and eat before we go."

"Thanks, Joe." I sat down and tapped a quick reply to Remy. Don't you have your own city to see to?

Jakeston is ground zero. I'm not going anywhere. Hurry up, Silver. We have vampires to kill.

If any human had a chance of keeping up with me, it was Remy Simon. And if I were being honest, I was happy to have him along. He wanted exactly what I wanted—to hunt and kill vampires. There wouldn't be any complications. He wouldn't think he needed to protect me and despite the fact that he would do what was best for himself, he would have my back, because he knew I'd have his.

"Remy Simon is coming along," I told Joe, then I took three huge bites of my sandwich, gulped down my coffee, and stood. "We need to go."

"I have my gun, my stakes, and my machete," Joe said, standing as well. "I'm ready to kick vampire ass."

I didn't argue.

When we got to my car, Remy was already inside, sitting in the front passenger seat. He had his long legs stretched out, his head back, and his eyes closed.

"My car was locked," I told him, "as was my house."

He snorted. “There’s not a lock in existence that can keep me out, Silver.” He peered at the neckline of my t-shirt, then reached over to pluck at the fabric of the vest beneath it. “What’s that?”

“Let me set some boundaries,” I said, backing out of my driveway. “Stay out of my house and keep your hands off my body.”

He winked. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I can shoot him through the seat if you want me to, Kait,” Joe said from the back.

“Not right now,” I told him. “I just had the car cleaned.”

“Let me know,” he said, mocking Remy, “if you change your mind.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Absolutely.”

“Where are we going?” Remy asked, apparently not finding us amusing. “Did you get a sighting?”

“Yeah,” I lied, as I sped toward the city, pretty sure the vampires would be where there were the most people. “Someone I trust got her scent and that’s where we’re headed.” I couldn’t very well tell him I was the one who’d gotten her scent.

“Tell me what we’re up against.” He was wearing a soft-looking black leather jacket, white t-shirt, blue jeans, and dark brown boots, and there was a brown leather bag at his feet. The faded but recent scent of blood wafted from him—he’d washed, but the scent lingered. He couldn’t hide that from a wolf’s nose. “I talked to a few sources, but they couldn’t tell me much.”

“We’re up against some bold fucking magic,” I said grimly. “And vampires who are



done hiding.” I told him about the magic that had killed Brian.

“Some of them came out in the sun,” Joe told him.

Remy straightened slowly. “You lie.”

“No,” I said. “He doesn’t. Jared’s men killed them. There were three of them. Blistered and bloody, but the sun didn’t burn them to death. It weakens them, and I’m sure if they were out long enough it’d kill them, but who’s to say they won’t get stronger? That eventually—”

“Don’t even say it.” He pulled a stake from his belt, a gleaming, worn piece of wood, and sat back, caressing it gently. “My lucky stake,” he said, at my look. “I never leave this one behind. I expect when I do, I’ll be dead. Her name’s Dolly.”

I didn’t laugh. I had my demon blade, after all. “Why Dolly?”

He ran his thumb over the sharp tip. “Means gift of God.”

I shuddered, then put my stare back on the road.

“Hunters are crazy sons of bitches,” Joe muttered.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Says the human as he caresses his gun.” As soon as I said human, I realized I would need to tell Joe not to mention to Remy that I was a shifter. Remy would try to kill me with his “gift of God,” and the sneaky bastard might just succeed.

I hadn’t had time to really think about the fact that Joe, a human, knew I was a wolf. Before Joe, Lucy, and the detective, no humans had known my secret. I needed to be more careful. Things had a way of snowballing. I couldn’t help but wonder how the

two men would feel about me once they'd had time to really process the information. Most likely they wouldn't really comprehend it unless they saw me shift. The human brain had a way of filtering out uncomfortable shit.

"You want to borrow a stake, Joe?" Remy asked, finally putting Dolly back in her loop on his belt.

"Kait hooked me up," Joe told him, "and I have my machete in the back."

Remy nodded. "I like a good machete. A couple of strong hits will lop the head right off, if you do it right."

My cell rang, interrupting the conversation. I didn't recognize the number. I tapped the dashboard touchscreen. "This is Kait Silver."

"There are vampires," a man whisper screamed, his voice loud and eerie through the speakers. "Come quick."

"Where are you?" I kept my voice calm as beside me, Remy fastened his seatbelt.

"Harmony's on Seventh," he said. "It's across from—"

"I know where it is. I'll be there in a few minutes." In the background I could hear crashes, screams, and loud country music. Sounded like a typical Saturday night at a human bar. I was surprised that a bar was open what with the vampires running around killing humans. People were stupid.

Then the caller screamed. His scream was so loud it was distorted, and I slammed my foot down on the gas pedal, speeding through city streets that were, thank God, a hell of a lot less congested than they usually were.

People were gathering in buildings, bars and clubs and restaurants, perhaps hoping there was safety in numbers. All they were really doing was making it easier for the vampires to kill a bunch of them at once.

There was still too much traffic, though, and I darted around vehicles, wishing I had a cop's lightbar atop my car. A siren wouldn't have hurt, either.

Harmony's was a club for humans—a rival club of Scarlett's, the club into which I'd gone to rescue the detective. I couldn't imagine Bastien would allow any of his clubs to remain open with the current state of the city, but if Harmony's was still open for business, who the hell knew.

I expected the governor to declare a state of emergency and put a curfew in place soon. People were still going to die, but maybe fewer of them would if they were forced to stay inside their homes. The entire city was in a state of shock and confused chaos right now, but things would calm down once the hunters wrangled the rogues. The regular vampires weren't ever going to cause so much trouble. They never had, after all. And they knew the tide would turn. They understood what was coming for them, and they hated the rogues as much as everyone else for screwing up the status quo.

The county masters would help the humans, even when those masters and their clans became hated, hunted, and tortured. And as I sped to Harmony's, I called Bastien, leaving a message when he didn't answer. "The rogues are at Harmony's. I'm on my way there but it'll be a few minutes. Send help."

Still, I got there first. I slammed the car into park, shut off the engine, and raced into the club, Remy behind me and Joe trailing a little behind him. Joe had taken time to grab his machete.

I had my demon blade in one hand and a stake in the other, and as usual, joy in my

black, killing little heart. That eagerness helped tamp down the worry and horror I felt for the humans, and even the rage and hatred I felt for the vampires. It was strange, that joy, but it was good. I'd accepted it long ago. It was part of me, and I didn't see a need to change who I was.

There were two vampire "guards" waiting just inside the entrance, placed there, I figured, to handle law enforcement if they showed up. There was a male and a female, both around sixty when they'd died, both wearing yellow dresses, strangely enough, and their faces lit up when they saw me and my little crew stride in.

"Dinnertime for us," the female said, but before the sentence was completed, I'd rammed the stake through her heart.

"Dessert for us," I said, then "Joe."

"Got it, Boss." He proceeded to deprive her of her head.

Remy had staked the male, and together, we hurried on into the club, leaving Joe to make sure the two vampires never rose again.

Inside the club, Avis waited. I wasn't surprised. There were dead human bodies everywhere, but still a few alive for the vampires to play with. I caught a glimpse of Avis sitting at a table against the wall, a drained, naked body stretched across the top. She smiled at me, lifted a bloody finger, and slid it into her big-toothed mouth. There were vampires between us, and I would have to get through them before I got to her. I could do that.

A line of terrified humans sat cringing against the wall, their knees drawn up, crying, screaming, begging.

And then there were the ones being passed from vampire to vampire in the middle of

the room. Those vampires weren't hungry—they were simply enjoying their cruelty. When they saw us they flung their victims away and came at Remy and me, their eyes full of blood.

That was different. Generally, when a vampire's eyes changed, they went to black, not red. I filed the info away for later. There were only fifteen or twenty vampires in the room, but with their speed and strength, it seemed more like a hundred of the bloodsucking bastards.

Now that she knew I was unaffected by her magic—though she didn't know it was because of my demon blade—Avis was a little less eager to tangle with me. She wanted me to suffer, true, but she didn't necessarily want to take me on in a physical fight. I was sure she planned to be long gone by the time I managed to fight my way to her.

I wanted to leap through them and get to her, but I couldn't leave two human men—even if one of them was the boogeyman, the best of all hunters, Remy Simon. He was still human, and when faced with a roomful of vampires, he would either run, die, or he would fight with me.

Together, we could do some damage.

I heard Joe roaring as he swung his machete, and there was not only a time when I intercepted a vampire going for him, but Remy did, as well. I should have shifted. If I'd shifted, I could have killed the vampires a lot faster, but I couldn't shift in public, and I couldn't shift in front of Remy.

Still, I was nearly certain he'd look at me differently when he had time to settle down and think about that night. I was simply too fast, too feral, too strong. I threw my whole self into fighting those vampires. Blood pelted me like raindrops and I danced in puddles of it, and part of me stood back and watched with a sort of anxious

wonder, afraid that one of these times I'd trip in the darkness and drown in all the blood.

Bastien and his enforcers came, blowing into the room like lethal, raging hurricanes, and though I wanted to continue fighting, my prize was still across the room, quietly watching the carnage.

And finally, I went after her. To my shock, she didn't run. She watched me come with shining eyes, and just before I reached her, she stood, rushed me in a blur of movement, and wrapped me up in her arms.

"I want to tell you something," she murmured into my ear. "Something about your detective." Her voice sounded like she'd swallowed broken glass and some of it was still caught in her flesh.

And despite my desire to end her, I hesitated. I turned my head slightly and met her stare. "Tell me, then, you monstrous bitch."

She laughed. "He did some very, very bad things while under my master's control. You should be prepared, Kait. Soon, he will start to remember. He's going to change, you know."

I was abruptly cold as chills shook my body.

I wanted to ask her what he'd done—what Axton had forced him to do with his awful mind control—but there was no time. I knew she didn't want to kill me, not yet, but I certainly wanted to kill her. She was the reason my city was hurting.

I tightened my grip on the demon blade. It was trapped between our bodies, burning hot, throbbing like a thing alive. There was no time to be precise or worry about hitting her heart just right. I forced the knife into her abdomen, dug it in as deeply as I

could, and then began to shove it up toward her foul vampire heart.

But before I could reach it, she tore herself away from me, laughing softly, and was gone faster than my eye could track her.

And she took my precious blade with her.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I was inconsolable.

Not only had I lost Avis Vine, but I'd lost my demon blade as well. My heart literally hurt, and I felt somehow diminished. I leaned against the wall, my hand to my chest, forcing myself to keep my cries of sorrow inside. I was livid because Avis had escaped me but filled with sorrow because she'd taken my blade. And the sorrow was much larger than the rage.

Bastien, Remy, and Joe surrounded me, and Bastien's vampires began cleaning up the mess and, because Bastien thought it was a good idea, helping the distressed humans who'd survived the night.

They were gentle, as human-looking as possible, and I heard them murmuring about how most vampires were just like them, that they'd only ever be their guardians, that they'd been there all along. Planting seeds of hope.

"There is something you should know," Bastien told me. "Whatever magic Frederick and Kaloni embedded inside Avis is spreading like a virus to other vampires. Soon, Jakeston won't be the only city attacked. This "disease" is infecting certain vampires and altering their brains and their bodies. We have to kill the infected, I believe, to snuff it out."

"Maybe," Remy said, "it's automatically fading. None of the vampires we fought tonight seemed to have it, and they were with Avis."

Bastien nodded. "We will hope so."



I could barely bring myself to care. I saw and heard everything through a haze of sorrow, and I swear, it was as though Avis had taken a vital part of me that I could not survive without. It was as though the blade were my drug, my child, my life.

“The night isn’t over,” Joe told me grimly, holding his hand to his ribs. He swayed as I watched him, close to passing out. He was covered with blood, and I couldn’t tell how much was his and how much was the vampires’ he’d killed. He was using his gore-covered machete as a cane. He was hurt, but he was alive. And that was pretty damn amazing.

“We can still track her,” Bastien agreed.

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Silver?” Remy asked. His shirt was glued to his body with blood, a deep cut seeped over his cheekbone, and his left eye was swollen nearly shut. He ignored all that, though, and carefully cleaned the blood and gore off Dolly.

“She took my blade,” I whispered, and of everyone there, only Remy really understood what that meant. “She has my Dolly.”

He slowly and carefully slid his lucky stake back into its loop and held his hand over it, as though one of the vampires might sneak up behind him and snatch it from him. Yeah, he understood. “It’s not going to fly back into your hand while you’re standing there whining about it.” He gave me a cocky grin, somewhat maniacal looking with his bloody, swollen face. “Let’s go get your blade and stake a bitch. Come on. Where’s that crazy killer we all know and love?”

My breath whooshed out of me as Remy’s words triggered a memory. In the tunnels, I’d called my blade to me, and it had flown into my hand. I’d done that once, and I could do it again. I had to get in the right frame of mind and probably a little closer to it, but I could fucking do that. I was going to get my demon blade back, and I was

going to stake a bitch. Excitement and hope exploded through me and I shoved myself away from the wall, energy renewed.

“There it is,” Remy said. “There it is.”

I turned to Joe. “Take my car and drive to Shadowfield.” When he opened his mouth, I held up a hand to stop him. “See Dr. Hayes and get some rest. There will be other nights, and other fights.” I was honestly shocked that he was still standing. And maybe he was, too, because he shut his mouth and nodded.

“Bastien,” I said, “get your vampires away from the humans. I’m calling the paramedics and the cops, and your people should be gone before they arrive. If you or your vampires find Avis before I do, get my fucking blade.” Maybe it wasn’t smart to let everyone know how much my knife meant to me, but I was beyond caring. They all knew I’d kill anyone I had to kill to get it back and I doubted any one of them believed a blade was worth that risk.

Five minutes later, Remy and I were jogging through the dark city alleys and side streets. I stopped for a few seconds when I smelled a particularly strong splat of blood on the street, but that was for Remy’s benefit. I followed her by scent, not by sight, but I wasn’t ready to let him know that.

Soon, when Avis was dead, the city was calmer, and I had my demon blade, I’d tell him what I was. And if I thought he was going to sneak up behind me and kill me for it someday, we’d fight then and there, and I’d end him. I didn’t like things hanging over my head.

She was so fast, even for a vampire—especially fast for someone who wasn’t really a vampire at all. I would stay on her trail if it took me all night, because that trail, if not allowed to grow cold, would lead me straight to her sleeping place. She could feed and kill and cause havoc all night but I doubted that even Avis Vine could stay in the

sun for long, if at all. If I had to follow her into the ground and kill her while she slept, I would.

Strangely enough, I had the scent of my blade as well—and I hadn't even realized, at least not consciously, that it had a scent. It smelled of fire, ash, and something close to burnt sugar. It smelled as good as the alpha.

When we came upon a group of four vampires fighting over a human man, I was tempted to leave them to Remy and continue on lest I lose Avis Vine's scent. In the end, though, I went at them with a vicious hatred, a frantic impatience, and two stakes. I killed the four of them and was growling at the human male to "get the fuck home, asshole," when I glanced up and saw Remy's face.

His face had lost its color and his eyes were wide, slightly wild, and full of crazy. "Fuck you," he murmured. "You're not fucking human."

"Protect the humans," I told him. "We'll talk about me later."

"Yeah we will," he said, and I don't know if he meant to or not, but he pointed Dolly at me. "What are you?"

"Later," I repeated, but I saw what was in his eyes. Maybe he'd accept me, maybe we'd fight. Maybe months from now he'd catch me unaware and slip a blade into my heart or a bullet into my brain. But right now was not the time to care. I couldn't trust him at my back, though, so I left him there. I followed the scent of my blade and Avis, leaving Remy to track her the old-fashioned way.

He would understand.

After that, I became laser focused. I ignored the world around me—the looting, the fighting, the sirens, the screams. The only way to regain control of the city was to rip

out the root of it. Kill the infected and most of all, kill the spreader. Avis fucking Vine.

I lost track of the time, but it felt like hours before I finally stood outside a huge furniture store, every window of its three stories dark and watchful. There was a notice on the front doors stating that the store would be closed until further notice.

She was in there waiting for me, oozing blood and stink and infection, probably feeding from the humans she'd ordered her vampires to bring her. I reached for my blade, my stomach tightening when I touched an empty sheath.

It was almost...peaceful there. My breath left white plumes in the cold, still air, and I shivered despite the fact that I wasn't really cold. I longed for soft lights, bright laughter, warmth, and food. I craved people. Friends. My pack.

I was sick of death and cold darkness, and I did not want to fight alone. Not anymore. But I had my wolf, now, thanks to Jared, and I could shift. There was no one here to hide my wolf from.

I burst into my shift, all my emotions exploding with my wolf, and for a few trembling moments I had to fight to control her as she wanted nothing more in the world than to throw off all the responsibility and just run into the night.

Finally, with a growl, I gathered my legs beneath me and shot through the air, crashing through one of the windows. I didn't try to be quiet or sneak up on them. They knew I was there, and I was sure they were waiting with breathless—haha—anticipation for my arrival.

I entered Avis Vine's den, intent upon two things—killing everyone inside and getting my beloved demon blade back.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Bloodlust was strong in my wolf, but no stronger than it was in the rogue vampires. I'd known what I would be getting into when I went through that window, and I knew I was up to the task. I remembered what I'd done in Scarlett's, how my inner psycho had risen up and how I'd needed a whole lot of desperation to get to that point.

Apparently I had to believe I was dying before the power inside me, either planted or activated by the council, would roar to life—and I was pretty sure that fighting alone in a roomful of vampires would give me that belief.

They converged upon me immediately. They attacked from all sides but my wolf, huge and vicious, wasn't taken by surprise. She whirled and rammed and bit and clawed, stomping the ones who fell beneath her feet, but the super adrenaline or whatever it was that I was hoping for didn't come—because I was kicking vampire ass.

But then one of them raked a claw from my temple to my chin, and I felt hot blood spew forth, along with a deep, burning pain which turned quickly agonizing. Right then might have been enough to explode the building power except for one thing.

That one vampire possessed the same awful magic that Avis had forced into me—the magic that the demon power in my blade had protected me from. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have my blade.

Worse, Avis wasn't in the room. I could not call a blade that wasn't there. Without the blade to combat the magic, I weakened stunningly fast. Now I believed I might die...but my power didn't come.

I dropped to the floor as agony ripped through me, burning me from the inside out, and I understood suddenly that the pain was probably how a vampire felt when he was burning in the sun. And it was bad.

Then Avis was there, standing over me, but I was too weak and too sick to do more than moan and writhe and try not to return to my human form. As my wolf, I would have a better chance of surviving the magic coursing through me.

She knelt beside me and scratched my head like I was her pet. “It hurts, doesn’t it? I’ve been keeping Simona isolated, lest her power be diluted. I’ve saved her for you.” She stood abruptly and stepped back. “Let’s see what you can do, little wolf. Let’s see how powerful you really are. I don’t want you to die.” She hesitated, and even through my agony, I could feel her pain. “I just want you to feel a tiny bit of what I am forced to endure every second of every day. I’m not insane, really, or any more twisted than you are. I’m just very hurt and exceedingly angry.”

Her words were slurry and somewhat hard to understand with her oversized fangs in the way. Apparently she didn’t have the ability to retract them. She’d said she wasn’t insane or any more screwed up than I was. She lied. Maybe she didn’t realize it, but she lied.

And then, I lost my shift. I curled up at her feet, drowning in the rush of magical agony, and I had no fear. I hurt too badly to be afraid. It was the kind of pain that made a person hope for death just to get some relief. I was lost for a while in that pain, and when it finally began to dissipate, I floated in the blackness of...nothing, really, and it was such a relief I could happily have stayed there. But my vampire captors were impatient, and they prodded me out of those sweet, dark arms.

When I came fully to myself, I was restrained with thick, heavy chains. They twisted around my ankles and my wrists and my throat, tight and cold, digging into my flesh, bruising my bones. Someone had shoved me against the wall and I was sitting up,

listing slightly to the side. I also couldn't feel my shift—likely the fault of the awful vampire magic that had been forced into me. I could only hope it was temporary. Neither I nor my wolf could survive another hobbling.

Avis leaned against a display desk, watching me somberly, but she didn't have my blade. She wore only a thin dress, stained and dirty, and ankle boots. I would have seen my knife—hell, I would have felt it—if she'd kept it. I couldn't ask her what she'd done with it. She would only have lied, and I absolutely didn't want her knowing what that demon blade meant to me.

I shoved away my despair and tried to get my bearings. Wisps and tendrils of pain still floated through me, but they were insignificant and easily disregarded.

The huge room was a mess. Furniture was broken and upended, stained with blood and other...things, and there was a smell that was nearly too much for my wolf's nose. It was a mixture of things, none of them good, and I didn't want to think too hard about what might have caused such a stench. But then from the recesses of the building, I heard a human scream. Everything that had gone into making that fetid smell was from a human body. Several of them.

“I want to show you something,” Avis said abruptly. “And I need you good and awake. I admit to being upset that you have absorbed the worst of the magic already. You should be screaming, not looking around planning all manner of bad things.” She gave one of the vampires a nod. “Her throat,” she told him.

A vampire hurried toward me, eager to please Avis, and I began to struggle in my chains, sure he was going to sink his fangs into my neck. He didn't, though. He simply scraped a sharp fingernail along the side of my throat and when the skin separated and began to bleed, he eased the edge of the silver chain into the cut.

Then he stood back and all the vampires stared at me with focused anticipation, all of

them sadistic sons of bitches who apparently thrived on other people's pain.

I lifted an eyebrow.

"Why?" Avis asked, when my skin didn't begin to smoke from the silver.

I shrugged. "Silver doesn't affect me." I didn't tell her that I'd been warped, my wolf hobbled before I could shift. Likely that had made me, in some ways, more human than shifter. Wolves weren't hurt by touching silver but were weakened and severely injured—usually—if they were cut or shot by it.

Vampires were more affected by silver than we were, but someone had wrapped me in these chains, and the vampire who'd cut me had handled them like they were nothing more than paper. It made no sense.

She said nothing for a moment, then, "Of course it doesn't." She curled her lip and clenched her fists, and hatred lit her eyes. "Of course it doesn't." Then she visibly relaxed and stretched her lips over her protruding teeth. "I am creative, though. I will figure out something else to make you cry, Wolf."

I yawned.

She stared at me for a few seconds, frustration in her eyes. Then she snapped her fingers. "I know! What hurts you the most isn't physical pain, is it? It's the physical pain of others."

Shit. I could feel the blood draining from my face, and I couldn't hide my reaction from her. She paced in front of me, pleased, watching me closely. Still, I said nothing. Threats wouldn't do a thing except give her satisfaction.

She crouched down before me. "I have your mother. Susan, isn't it?"



The pain from her magic hadn't totally left me, but it wasn't enough for her. She knew what would get to me the most. I leaned forward slightly, gratified when she flinched. If I could have gotten free at that moment, I would have ended her life.

"I don't believe you," I said.

"I don't care what you believe. She's here, in this building—but that doesn't matter right now. It's enough that you know. Now, about what I wanted to show you. Dawn. Fetch it."

And though I quivered in dread, terrified I would see my mother, the vampire lackey shoved a different human into the room. From the looks of him, he'd been there a while. He was naked, though his lack of clothing wasn't from shifting, the way mine was. He was injured. Bloody. Terrified.

All to be expected when you were a human captured by creatures you hadn't known existed only a few days earlier.

He gave a hoarse yell and shrank away when Avis approached him. "Now, now," she said. "Let's not get all dramatic. Remember what I promised you earlier? That as soon as I got this animal here, I was going to take all your fear away?" She gestured at me. "I have the animal, and I will keep my promise."

Almost before she was finished speaking, she took the human's head between her palms and forced him to his knees. Then she leaned forward, opened her mouth, and bit him.

She was not gentle. I heard the stretch and snap of flesh even over the man's moans. She drank, and drank, and drank.

"I will kill you," I said finally, unable to keep silent. "You mutant bitch."

“Shhh,” one of her vampires said, putting a finger to his mouth. And when his black stare dropped from my face to my throat, I swallowed hard and went quiet, wishing my hands were free so I could drag my long hair over my shoulders and hide behind it.

Avis continued to drink from the human, who had long since slumped into her arms. He was dead. She yanked her mouth away from his flesh finally and stood, then dragged the body to me.

He was waxy and still, but his eyes were half-open. There was no spark there, though, just flat, dull...death.

“You won’t believe this,” she told me. “Watch what I can do. Watch what I am going to do everywhere.”

One of her vampires dropped to his knees at the human’s head, then pried open the man’s jaws. He forced his mouth open wide, and then, before I was quite ready for it, Avis leaned over and began vomiting the blood back into the dead human’s mouth.

The blood gushed, and along with it, I got a whiff of the same putrid scent I’d caught earlier. My mind was overwhelmed, and my stomach rebelled. I turned my face away and took shallow breaths, trying my best not to throw up and add to the awfulness.

Dawn, the vampire who had dragged the human into the room, leaped to me and grabbed my face, forcing me to watch.

And then, the unthinkable happened.

The impossible happened.

Avis staggered drunkenly to her feet, giggling, and the human she’d killed began to

twitch. In seconds, he sat up, his eyes snapped open, and he parted his lips. Fangs, long and sharp, shot from his gums, and he screamed, confused, horrified, and most of all, starving.

Avis patted him on the head. “Come with mommy, darling. There’s a lovely shifter waiting for you. You may feast until you are quite satisfied, and then I will teach you how to be a vampire.”

She led him from the room, and I really couldn’t decide which horrified me the most—the fact that she was about to take him to my mother, or the fact that she’d just made a vampire.

In mere minutes.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

When Avis had gone crazy and dragged the vampires into the public eye, I'd believed everything was about as bad as it could get. I'd been wrong. Now it was as bad as it could get. Surely.

Turning humans was a complicated process that didn't often work—which is why there were so many more humans than vampires. If the bloodsuckers figured out how to turn humans as easily as just...biting them, the world was doomed. Vampires needed humans to survive, so they would die, as well.

Avis didn't care.

"Avis," I screamed, struggling in the chains that held me. "No! God, no!" I fought the heavy, cold metal, and the more I struggled, the tighter they became. They bit into my flesh, twisting and pinching, and I realized something that hadn't even occurred to me before. The chains were not metal. They were magic.

No wonder they hadn't bothered the vampire when he'd touched them. The same magic that hurt me seemed to protect him.

Avis was not powerful enough to do any of this. She'd been Frederick's whore, his servant, and his rat in a cage to torture and experiment on. Every thought she had in her head had been planted there by him. Everything she did now was because of him. Spreading diseased magic, killing the world...that wasn't her. It was him. While she lived, he lived.

I fought the chains, and despite trying to push the thoughts of my mother away, they rose suddenly to overwhelm me. Logically, I knew that if Avis really had my mother,

she'd have paraded her in front of me. She would have made me watch as her newly created "child" savaged her. Logically, I knew that.

But what if? What if she really did have her? And that tiny what if grew and grew until finally, I was overwhelmed by it. In the end, I was sure of it. Avis had my mother, and they were killing her. Maybe they were even turning her, like the troll in the tunnels.

I screamed, fighting the magic like a maddened beast, as everything bad that had happened came to kick my ass. My mind, weakened by the fear over my mother, quickly exploded into a traumatized mess of panic, doubt, and horror.

My blade would have helped me. And I would scream for it. I would call it. Maybe it couldn't come, but...

What if?

So I opened my mouth and my mind to summon it. I didn't scream a word, but a feeling. I sent whatever power was inside me to my blade, and then, I felt it. But something else happened as I gathered that power and forced it outward. Two things, really.

I became stronger than the magic of the chains. They shattered like glass as I leaped to my feet, terrifying the vampires who'd remained behind to watch me. Shards of frozen metal flew through the air, embedding themselves in vampires, walls, furniture.

At the exact moment I freed myself, the alpha burst into the room like a terrible storm, growling and raging, blood clinging to his beautiful fur. His wolves were right behind him. Zach slipped into the room like a quiet shadow, deadly and intense. And then, like a furious, bald avenging angel, Joe stomped into the room, machete

flashing.

There was only a millisecond of hesitation as they caught sight of me breaking my chains, and then there was only chaos. They flung themselves through the room, tearing through vampires I hadn't even seen, vampires who'd watched from the shadows, as well as the ones who'd stood with Avis. In seconds, almost before I could take a single breath or a step forward, the vampires were dead, hearts flung across the room and heads, courtesy of Zach and Joe, thrown onto a rather nice couch and lit on fire.

Jared shifted as he strode to me, the change so seamless that for a second, I forgot everything but my awe. "Kill every vampire in the place and bring me Avis Vine," he growled, and his warriors wheeled and rushed through the building, their howls raising the hair on the nape of my neck.

I ran to the alpha and jumped into his arms, and he wrapped me up in his warmth.

"Kait," he murmured. He didn't ask me if I was okay. He could see that I was, and that I wasn't.

I shoved my nose against his warm alpha throat, but only for a few seconds. "They have my mother, Jared," I cried.

He frowned. "They do not. I just left her, honey. She's safe with my pack and no harm will come to her." He searched my eyes, finding things there that made him begin to rage all over again.

I pushed and he let me slide down his body. "We have to find Avis," I told him. "She's turning humans, and not in the usual way. I watched her turn one right in front of me—in minutes."

Shock lit his stare. “That’s impossible.”

“Kait.”

I turned at the sound of Zach’s voice, gratified to see him holding his long, thin coat out to me. “Thank you,” I whispered, shrugging into the warm jacket. Joe stood beside him, but he kept his eyes averted until I was covered.

“Joe,” I said. “You were injured. You should be home resting.”

He snorted. “I’ll rest when I’m dead.”

Something that I was afraid would happen sooner rather than later.

“I found your phone and a couple weapons outside,” Zach told me. “I put them in the coat pockets. Your clothes were ruined, though.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Zach.”

“Kait,” Joe said. “Don’t forget your knife.”

My heart jumped as I turned to where he pointed, and there, embedded in the wall where I’d just been restrained, was my demon blade. It had come when I’d called—I’d just been a little too busy breaking my magical chains to notice.

“You should shift,” Jared told me.

I shook my head. I didn’t tell him the magic was delaying my shift, because he could have pulled my wolf out of me. I didn’t want to shift because I had my blade back, and it felt good in my hand. It felt necessary in my hand. For right now, I wanted to hunt with my blade.

Jared shifted and streaked through the room, following his nose to the enemy. Zach, Joe, and I followed, and though I felt residual pain, it was nothing I couldn't handle. Squeezing the handle of my blade, my two friends by my side, my heart swelled once again with a hunter's joy.

And maybe I'd known deep down that Avis had been lying, but the fact that my mother was safe gave me indescribable relief. It also filled me with rage that the mutant vampire had managed to fuck with my mind.

The entire time I'd had the pain of that magic flowing through me, I'd been quietly terrified it would somehow change me. That it had been sliding through me, that magic, doing untold damage. And maybe it was affecting me in ways I didn't yet realize, but as far as mentally, I was back to normal.

I was a hunter, and I was not afraid of anything.

I needed to enjoy that feeling while I could.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Avis was surrounded by magic, and it spread its wings and carried her away. It was the only way to explain how the warped vampire woman kept getting out of sticky situations. She should have been holed up with the human she'd turned, watching him with his gory dinner and teaching him, as she'd promised, to be a vampire.

But when we reached where her scent was strongest, she was gone. When Wyatt Killen shifted and held a borrowed stake to a vampire's chest, the vampire died without giving up any of her secrets. And when I tracked her scent through the building, it led me to the streets, and after an hour of hunting, it disappeared. I lost her.

I stood in the middle of a barn in the rural village of Teichmann, a few miles outside Jakeston, my nose twitching as I attempted to sort through the strong scents of farm animals to find Avis's. I couldn't. She was gone.

"For now," I whispered, bone tired. While I'd been hunting, my mind had been too occupied to think about everything that had happened that night. But now, the hunt was over, and it all rose up to choke the breath from me.

"Check the house," Wyatt said, and two of his men hurried through the darkness to make sure Avis wasn't inside, and that the humans who lived there were still alive. I could have told him Avis wasn't in the house, but I said nothing. The men had no clothes on, but it wasn't like they were going to knock politely on the door to ask questions. They'd peer through windows if they could, listen for sounds of distress, and use their superior noses to smell for blood.

Dogs were barking, but they were contained inside a fenced area and couldn't do

much to challenge the men. They'd been barking before we arrived, though, and I was sure it was because Avis had been through the area.

Wyatt jogged from the barn at a nod from Jared, leaving me and his alpha alone.

"We will get her, Kait."

"Yeah." My fingers were shaking when I lifted them to shove loose tendrils of hair from my sweaty face. "I just wonder what else she's going to do before we catch her. She's turning humans like nothing I've ever seen before. She's shoving deadly magic inside people—inside wolves—and killing them."

"She did that to you?"

I hesitated, but I wasn't sure why. "Yes. It was burning me from the inside out. I think they've managed to duplicate what it feels like when a vampire is hurt by the sun. I know how that sounds, but I felt it, Jared."

"It didn't kill you," he said. "So that means there is a chance of surviving it."

"She said she'd been saving that particular vampire for me. I don't think they possess the power any longer, like it wears off after a while or they use it up after they use it once. That doesn't mean that they might not be able to get shot up with more of it. I just don't know." I rubbed my temples, then my eyes. "Nothing they do is possible. It's like I'm caught in a nightmare and can't wake up."

"Eli is sending a car. You'll feel better after food and rest."

Dawn had come, and Avis and the vampires would be forced to sleep for the day. At least, I thought they would, but who the hell knew anymore? I certainly didn't. I could hope, though, because I needed some sleep myself. And I really needed to hug

my mother.

There were a lot of things I needed, but the car arrived and Jared popped the trunk and got dressed while I climbed into the warm back seat. After he got in with me, I slid into his arms and let him hold me while I began to relax. I drifted off with his scent in my brain, and I wished the car ride would last for a few hours. I didn't have to be strong or prepared to fight or worried someone was going to die. I didn't think about Avis Vine's awful magic or if Jakeston would ever get back to normal or what the future held for nonhumans. I could just lie there and let the alpha take care of me.

And that didn't bother me at all. Not right then.

I fell into a sort of blank unconsciousness that both rested and reset me, brief though it was. When the driver pulled into Shadowfield and shut the car off, I awakened immediately, and instead of being groggy and exhausted, I was strangely energized.

I sat up but didn't pull away from Jared. I lifted my fingers to his lips, and he watched me calmly, but his stare sharpened and his body tensed. I barely noticed when the driver climbed from the car, barely heard the soft thunk of the door closing. Distant voices of returning warriors and the awakening community drifted through the cold, foggy morning, but I was isolated inside the warm car with the alpha and the outside world simply didn't matter.

I slipped my hand around to the back of his neck and pressed my lips to his. I didn't move, then, just closed my eyes and reveled in the feel of his lips against mine, his scent, his warmth, his presence.

There was something undeniable between us. It flared to life every time we were near each other. Definitely every time we touched. It was irresistible, and it was inevitable. And maybe my encounter with Avis Vine's magic and the fragility of life had affected my thinking—definitely watching her kill a human and then bring him back

immediately as a vampire had altered me—but something settled inside me.

Jared didn't want to love me and leave me. And he didn't want to take part of me if he couldn't have all of me. He had to weigh each decision he made, had to think about the future, his wolves, the consequences of his actions. That was his job as alpha of a pack.

I understood that. I was also tired of all the back and forth, all the thinking, worrying, wondering.

I pulled away from him, finally, darting my tongue out to grab the taste of him from my lips, and smiled. He didn't return my smile, though. He saw something in my eyes. Something he wasn't sure he liked.

“Kait?”

I shivered at the way his deep, quiet voice wrapped around me and slid into my soul. It was good to be free of doubt.

“I'm going to check on everyone,” I told him. “You're going to get some sleep?”

He watched me, frowning. “You, as well.”

I only nodded. I was practically jumping with an urgent energy, and I couldn't sit still a moment longer. I rushed from the car to check on my people and my mother, content with the weight of my blade in my pocket. Already I was eager to change clothes and strap on a belt so I could slide it into a sheath at my hip where it belonged.

But first things first.

My mother stood in front of the Rose Inn with a man I didn't recognize, and I was pretty sure he was leaving her after having spent the night in her bed. This, then, was the "all that and a bag of chips" man she'd recently met. He was slender, around forty years old, and had a kind smile and twinkling green eyes. His long hair was tied back in a long tail, and he wore a rather rumpled suit. He didn't look like an asshole, but...

"If you hurt my mother," I told him, smiling as I took the hand he held out to me, "I will kill you."

"Kait," my mom said, aghast. "It's too early in the morning for jokes." She laughed as she pushed me into the building, attempting to make light of the situation. "I'll see you tonight, Nigel."

"You didn't introduce us," I said, as she shoved me deeper into the inn and safely away from the love interest.

"You need to take a chill pill, little girl," she said, sterner than I'd seen her in...ever. "Maybe a whole bottle."

I pulled her into my arms. "I love you, Mom."

She softened. "Are you okay, Kaity?"

"I had a bad night, but I'm good now."

She pulled back and looked up into my face. "Food and sleep is what you need. When you wake up, we'll talk."

I frowned. "About what?"

But she wouldn't say. She patted my hand and led me back toward the door, now that

Nigel was gone. “It’s nothing that won’t hold. I would encourage you to go see Ash and Lucy, but they’re both still asleep.”

“How’s she doing?”

She hesitated. “She’s doing okay, but when things settle down and you can get her back home and spend time with her, she’ll do a lot better.”

I leaned over to kiss her forehead. “I know. Soon, I hope.”

“Get some sleep, Kaity.”

“I will.” I left her there, a little uneasy in my stomach because of Lucy. My mom was right. I needed to spend some time with Lucy. And I would, as soon as I woke up for the day. Right now, though, I had things other than sleep on my mind. Sleep would come, but first, I would.

I strode to Jared’s house, ignoring the stares from the few people awake and outside—I knew I looked a little crazy with blood on my skin and Zach’s coat, but these people were wolves. They’d seen worse.

As though she knew I was coming, the alpha’s housekeeper was standing on the porch, the door behind her wide open. Her frowning face cleared when she spotted me.

“Kait,” she called, gesturing for me, as though afraid I might pass her by and go sleep in the grass. “Come. Your bed is made up and I’ve laid out clean clothes for you. Jared told me you’d be along, and he would fire me if I neglected you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “No he wouldn’t.”

“Well, no,” she agreed, “but he would be very unhappy, and we both know that an unhappy alpha is...”

“A mean son of a bitch?” I followed her up the stairs, but my nose twitched at the smell of bacon coming from deep in the house, and what I wanted to do was follow it.

She didn’t laugh. “Sad,” she said. “I don’t like to see our alpha sad. Jared isn’t an asshole, Kait.”

I’d hurt her feelings with my bad manners. “I’m sorry, Nell. I know he’s not.”

She pushed open the door to the guest room. “Have a shower and get some clean clothes on. I’ll have a tray waiting when you come out.”

“Nell.” I caught her arm before she could leave the room. “Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“Thank Jared.” But she softened. “You’re welcome, dear.”

I combed my tangled hair, brushed my teeth, and showered in record time, and then, I dried off and put on a white t-shirt that hit me mid-thigh. I didn’t stop to eat. I’d devour every morsel Nell had left for me. Later.

There was something I had to do first.

I had no hesitation or doubt as I strode to the alpha’s bedroom. I silently opened his door, slipped inside, then shut it behind me. No light came through the covered windows, but I didn’t need much light. There were a couple of soft, warm nightlights placed around the room, and I was glad. I didn’t want total darkness, because I wanted to see him.

I took a deep, quiet breath, breathing in a scent that would always be better than anything or anyone I would ever smell again, and I padded across the room to the bed. Right or wrong, complicated or troublesome or fraught with pain...I didn't care. I needed him, I wanted him, and I was going to have him.

But when I stood staring down at the bed, I found it empty. Before I could turn, he pressed his bare body against me from behind and snaked his arms around my waist.

"Fuck, Kait," he said, his voice hoarse.

He didn't say anything else, and neither did I. It wasn't a time for talking. I was finally going to do what I'd been wanting to do since he'd walked into my house and asked me to work for him. No matter what it meant, or whether or not I was ready for what came after, I was going to fuck the Gray Shadow Pack alpha.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Wolf alphas generally weren't attracted to each other—they were in competition with each other. They fought, or at best, had an uneasy alliance. There were far fewer female alphas than male alphas, and we'd evolved that way because a sad but true fact was that male alphas tended to be more physically powerful than females, and they killed us, forced us into submission, or disabled us so that we couldn't fight. This was the history of wolves.

Times had changed, however, and most male alphas no longer matter-of-factly destroyed their weaker competition. They were no longer more animal than human, driven by instinct and a feral need to survive, protect their pack, and snuff out the enemy. They thought more like humans.

Still, deep down, there was that innate and primal instinct in alphas to fight other alphas. To dominate them. That instinct was strong in Jared, and it was strong in me. I had my wolf to temper my instincts, though, as she was fundamentally submissive to the alpha's domination. Still, I was not in wolf form, and I was alpha.

So sex with Jared was not gentle, kind, or sweet. Maybe over time we would settle and that sweetness would come, but our first encounter was fierce, hot, and dangerous as we both fought our instincts and embraced them.

It was absolutely everything I'd hoped it would be. More, really, because some things a person simply couldn't imagine. It was the sort of sex that really should have been done deep in the woods where no one could hear, where we did not need to be quieter or worry about breaking furniture or be confined by walls.

He ripped the t-shirt from my body like a barbarian and I loved it, even as I slammed

him back against the wall—dislodging a clock and beautiful painting of the Shadowfield woods in the process—and sank my teeth into his shoulder.

I marked him, because he was mine. God, he tasted good.

Then I yelped when he buried one hand in my hair and yanked my head back, baring my throat, then lifted me and turned so that my back was against the wall. I thought he would mark the side of my neck, then, but he ran his lips over my chest and to my breast, and he bit me there. Hard.

He marked me as I'd marked him, claiming me as I'd claimed him, and the fire from that mark rivaled the pain from Avis's dark magic—but only for a second. It turned fast to pleasure as it raced through my body and straight to my wolf, and she screamed with a savage joy as her alpha gave her what she needed. She belonged to him now. She had everything she'd ever wanted. Her freedom, and her alpha.

For a second her joy overwhelmed me and when I pulled myself out of the drunken pool of ecstasy in which she floated, I was on my back on the bed, and Jared was on top of me.

We didn't talk, but there were sounds. Grunts, yips, sighs, moans, and groans, yes. Sometimes he murmured my name in a way that made me clench my thighs, and once, he gave a husky laugh when I squealed and pulled his hair when he held me down and plied his tongue with such enthusiasm that I thought I might die.

In the end, he won the “who's more alpha” argument, because truthfully, he was physically stronger than me. But by then, I didn't really care. He made me feel too good to care. I had a feeling he didn't really care either. Not then.

“Tell me,” he murmured, thrusting inside me, slowly, deeply, smoothly. His arms trapped mine and his hands held my wrists, his big body heavy and hot atop me.

I wanted him fast and hard, but he held me down and wouldn't let me move, and I had to take what he gave me. "Fuck you," I said, panting. I arched my back and tried to slam my pelvis against his, but I was as ineffectual against him as a pup against her alpha.

He dipped his tongue into my mouth, then nipped my lips before lifting his face. "Kait," he whispered. "Kait."

His voice was dark and held things that made my heart full. I stared up into his eyes, at his need, his alpha need, and I wanted to give in to him. I wanted to submit to him. I wanted to be everything he wanted me to be.

But I clenched around him as tightly as I could and when he groaned and lowered his forehead against mine, breathing into my mouth, almost kissing me, I whispered, "Tell me, Alpha."

I could feel him smiling against my lips. "I belong to you," he said. "I am yours, Wolf."

My breath whooshed out of me, and for a second, I couldn't do anything but freeze beneath him. I couldn't say a word.

"Someday," he told me, "you will understand that giving yourself to me doesn't mean losing who you are. You don't need to be afraid, Kait. Not of me."

Then he released my wrists, pushed his hands beneath me, and took me with him as he flipped to his back. He didn't slide out of me, though, and when I sat on top of him, he stared up at me, his eyes glittering in the semidarkness. "Fuck me how you want to fuck me," he said.

I did.

He filled up every part of me, and though I still held some of myself back, I didn't take my stare away from his the entire time he was inside me. Not once. I couldn't say what he wanted to hear, though. Not yet.

Not yet.

But maybe I showed him.

And afterward, I curled up in his arms, facing him, and pressed my tired, spent, aching body against his. I wrapped my arms around him, as he did me, and I slept. A woman couldn't do that if she didn't trust a man.

A few hours later I woke up to find that neither one of us had changed position. He was awake, as well. His arm was surely asleep because I'd been lying on it for so long, but he made no move to pull it out from under me.

"Hey," I said.

"Yeah?"

"We'll be all right." It was the best I could do.

"Yeah." And there was a smile in his voice.

I got off his arm and lay across his chest, resting my chin on my folded arms as I gazed at his face. Somehow, he seemed different to me. Just a little, but different.

"Why are you frowning?" he asked.

"You seem different to me." I hesitated. "Something's different."

He pushed a strand of my hair behind me year. “Maybe it’s you.”

Suddenly and for no good reason fear blasted me so hard that I gasped, jerking away from him and sitting up, a hand to my chest. “God,” I whispered.

He sat up, his stare sharp. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I told him, and my voice was full of tears. “Something’s wrong, Jared.”

He was already out of bed, yanking on his pants, then stepping into his boots, not even bothering with a shirt as he ran for the door. “Get dressed,” he said, but at the door, he stopped, strode back to where I stood trembling at the foot of the bed, and grabbed my shoulders. He kissed me hard, his fingers bruising my flesh, and then he turned and was gone.

For a few seconds, I was too tired, too hurt, too everything to actually move.

“Something bad is coming, Kait. I guess you know that.”

“Let it come. Worse things will be waiting when it gets here.”

I ran to my room, cleaned up as fast as I could, and dressed. I put on my badass along with my clothes. I couldn’t let fear rule me. I wouldn’t.

Something bad had arrived. I would be waiting.

And I would be something worse.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

It wasn't the vampires that came to Shadowfield—of course it wasn't. It was still daylight, though the cold skies were overcast and the day was dim, the vampires would be sleeping. Maybe a few odd test vampires had attempted to brave the sun, but we never saw them, not that day.

It was the humans who came to Shadowfield, but it was the vampires who sent them.

They snuck in and stood in a line with their guns, and they shot everything that moved—man, woman, or child.

They shot the wolves.

It didn't matter that they shot us. They didn't shoot us with silver and though they would hurt us, they wouldn't kill us, the bastards. Not most of us, anyway. But there were humans among us.

Zach. Joe. Lucy.

“They found us,” I whispered. It was every wolf's nightmare. I allowed myself to grieve for five seconds before I put my sorrow away, and then, there was only rage.

I strode toward the humans, navigating the people who'd fallen in the startlingly abrupt carnage. Though all wolves were born with an innate sense of self preservation and would never, ever shift in front of humans, some of them were so badly damaged that if they didn't soon shift, they might never completely heal.

There must have been around thirty humans, mostly men, dressed in leather and

draped with belts and guns, and I understood their fear and their anger, truly I did, but I could have happily killed them all, and would have, had my mother not intercepted me. She saw the blank killing rage on my face, and she knew me. She knew what I would do.

Jared, Eli, and all his warriors stood before the crowd of humans, their hands empty, attempting to talk with them, despite the danger of the guns. Zach stood with them, which froze my heart, because he would die from a gunshot.

Then Joe and Lucy ran across a yard and straight for the humans, like they could stop them. Like the humans wouldn't kill them simply because they were alike. "No," I screamed. "Get the fuck away. Lucy, inside!"

I should have spent more time with her. That's what I kept thinking.

"Kait," my mother yelled, ramming me from the side. "No, baby. Do not let them see you." She put her arms around my waist and held on for dear life, even as I attempted to free myself from her grip. My mother was strong, and I was her kid. She wasn't letting me go, not easily.

I spotted her guy as he hurried toward his alpha. He saw my mother, hesitated, undecided, so I helped him make up his mind. "Nigel," I called, and he would not mistake the command in my voice. "Get her."

She was not stronger than he was, and though she might not forgive him and he had to know that, he took her away from me. Dr. Hayes and his nurse hurried across the grounds, both of them carrying medical bags.

It was so surreal that I could almost believe I was dreaming, had not the blood been so red and the gunshots so loud.

Jared turned and saw me coming, and he held up a hand to stop me. To tell me to stay where I was, where it was safer, because even though I was a wolf, I was his wolf, and he would not see me hurt.

The humans were calming down—maybe because their violence had not been met with violence, and even though he was a wolf's alpha, he was still an alpha, and they subconsciously responded to his quiet command. A powerful enough alpha could make it so a human wanted to obey him.

Also, the wolves didn't scream or shift or do anything else the mob of humans expected werewolves to do.

I was ten yards away from the alpha when one of the humans lifted his gun and shot him. Shot him in the back of the head, the son of a bitch. I didn't scream, either, because wolves did not scream in front of humans. We went about our suffering quietly, and we killed them just as quietly.

Lucy screamed, though, and her voice was the catalyst to restart the hysteria in the terrified humans. One of them turned his gun on her, and it was like time slowed down. Just as it had in the club.

And just as it had in the club, my power exploded inside me, stronger than ever. Out of control. Huge, red, and dirty. Kait the woman didn't really want to kill a human. Kait the psycho wanted to kill them all—and she was in charge now. My demon blade was suddenly in my hand, and I went after the humans.

I killed the man who pointed his gun at Lucy, just as his finger was tightening on the trigger. I killed the man who shot my alpha, as well. I ripped the rifle from the man who aimed it at me even as he scrambled away, and I killed the man who attempted to empty his handgun into my body.



The rest of them scattered, a screaming mass of terrified assholes, and they ran. Some of them dropped their guns in their rush. I let them go, but I felt the pounding of doom in my chest. More humans would come. The police would come. Men were dead.

And I had killed them.

Shadowfield was done.

Joe strode to me and took my blood-spattered face between his palms. “Kait,” he said. “Kait. Come back.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant until I lifted my hand to push him away and saw only fur. Silver, white, and blue fur, and lethal black claws. Low growls floated from my mouth, and I realized I was a wolf. But I was a woman, as well. And God only knew what else. I was power, and magic, and beast, and woman.

“Come back,” he murmured. “Jared needs you, honey.”

“They shot us,” I whispered, and I was back. I was horrified, devastated, and terrified. What the fuck had I done?

I shoved my bloody blade into its sheath and dropped to my knees beside the alpha. The doctor was already working over him, and warriors surrounded him. Eli cradled Jared’s destroyed head in his lap, and when he looked up at me, his eyes were too wide, too horrified.

Whoever had shot Jared had shot him with silver.

They’d targeted him specifically.

“Ben,” I said to the doctor. “Fix him.”

“He needs to shift, Kait,” he said, as all the pack who were able gathered around us. He leaned close to me and hissed, “He will die if he does not shift. Hell, he may die if he does shift, but if he’s to have a chance, he has to shift now.”

“Wyatt,” Eli yelled, and in the next second, Wyatt stood at his side.

“Tell me what you need.”

“Get Adam Thorne. Force him to come with you. He can save Jared.”

I was horrified. “What? No! You can’t bring the Stone Moon alpha to Shadowfield. He won’t save any of us. He will kill the alpha and take you all as his wolves. Don’t be fucking stupid, Eli.”

But the doctor agreed with Eli. “He’s Jared’s only chance. The alpha can pull Jared’s wolf and force his shift. He will die, Kait.”

“And Adam Thorne will make him die faster.” I took Jared from his beta, cradling his head on my legs. “I will call his wolf.”

For a second, there was only silence.

Then, “The fuck you will,” Eli growled. “Only an alpha can bring another alpha’s wolf, and you are...” He hesitated, leaned closer, then pushed his nose against my throat.

I didn’t try to stop him. He smelled his alpha on me. Jared’s mark would be clear to any wolf who tried to catch my scent. But there was something else, as well. I didn’t keep up the walls that might have hidden me—walls that came as naturally as

breathing. I didn't hide from him, and he caught my alpha scent.

"Alpha," he breathed. "No wonder Jared has been so fucked up lately." He stood. "Move them back," he told his men. He glanced at me. "Do you mind if they know?"

I thought about it for a few seconds. "No," I said, then raised my voice. "But somebody get my mother."

"I'm here," she said, and two wolves parted to let her pass. There was something in her eyes. She'd seen me talking to invisible people before, and she thought I was a little crazy. She wouldn't believe I was an alpha until she saw it.

Jared had freed my wolf. He'd yanked her out and let her run, and heal, and be. And I was about to return the favor, even if I wasn't quite sure how to do it. And maybe I couldn't have done it, alpha or not, before I'd joined with him. Now, though...

I leaned forward and touched my lips to his cheek, his forehead, and finally, his lips. He was still as death, and I was grateful he was unconscious. Had he been awake, he would have been in agony as the silver rushed through him. If he'd been anyone but an alpha, he would have likely already been dead.

"Save our alpha," someone begged, her voice high and thin. They'd all been traumatized this day, and it was unlikely things would get better for them.

"Shhh," someone admonished.

She fell into silence and no one else made a sound. I could feel their bated breath, their disbelief, their hopeful doubt. I also felt their resentment, though it was fading. They were slowly forgetting that I had been sired by the most hated of all wolves—a traitor. They were forgetting that I was an outsider, a person who'd belonged to an enemy pack. If I saved their alpha, they would surely forgive me anything.

“Jared,” I whispered, and I closed my eyes and plunged inside him, deeper and deeper until finally, I touched his wolf. And just that suddenly, I knew what to do. I felt what to do.

I grabbed his captive wolf, and I brought it snarling and snapping into the world. I felt his power, while I was there. I was overwhelmed by it, scorched by it, and scarred by it. But I was also...proud. He was mine. My alpha.

And when I came back, I saw something incredible. Something unbelievable.

I hadn't just brought Jared's wolf. I'd brought all their wolves.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

The alpha nosed me gently, then licked a tear from my face. Or maybe he was only after the blood. I brushed my fingers over the wound at the back of his head. “Run, Alpha,” I murmured. “Heal.”

He wheeled around and staggered away, his wolves, howling and yipping and full of joy, at his side. They would forget, for a little while, the horror of the humans.

“Lucy,” I said, my voice raw but calm. “Call the detective.” I stood and dusted off my pants, trying not to look at the men I’d killed. There was work to do.

“First,” she said, more rattled than I’d ever seen her, “I’d like a hug.”

I pulled her small body into my arms. “Get packed, Luce. We’re going home.” At least she was. I was probably going to prison. But the promise made her happy, and she hurried off to call Rick, pack up whatever items she’d brought to Shadowfield, and get Ash. I was thankful beyond words that she’d left him at the inn instead of bringing him outside with her.

“Joe, call the mayor and then get Max over here.”

“Why Max?” Joe asked, his hand on my shoulder.

I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I told him. “I just need to see him.”

“I’m on it, boss. But the mayor is going to kick my ass.” He went to stand by the bodies of the humans while he made his calls.

I looked at Zach. “Are you okay?”

“Fucking vampires,” he said. “And fucking November.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Avis and her crew sent the humans. They planted shit in those humans’ minds. It had nothing to do with November.”

He lifted an eyebrow but there was something careful in his eyes. I was different to him now. I understood. I was also different to myself.

“Didn’t you see their eyes?” he asked. “Every human here today had demons in their eyes. The humans were in there, somewhere, but they were sharing space with demons, Kait.”

I sucked in a breath, both shocked and hopeful. And suddenly, I did remember, vaguely, seeing the shine of red in dull human stares. I’d been too locked in crazy mode to consider it at the time. “Are you saying the demons are somehow...working with the vampires?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m saying.”

“Uh, Kait?” Joe called. “Could you come here for a minute?”

His voice was so deliberately casual that both Zach and I hurried to him. “What now?” I asked, but when I reached his side, I saw what had caused him such shock.

The humans I’d cut with my blade were not dead. They were stirring, and their deep, lethal cuts from where I’d slashed them with my blade were knitting. One of the men opened his eyes and groaned, but there was no red shine to his confused gaze.

“How?” I murmured. “How did I do this?” But the longer I thought about it, the surer

I was. If I had completely shifted and let my wolf attack the humans, they'd be dead. But I had used my demon blade, and it had gone after the demons inside them. They'd expired. I knew they'd ceased to exist, because if I'd sent them back to hell, I'd have seen their spirits leaving the bodies, the way they'd left the couple whose baby had been held by demons.

No. They'd died, and their spirits had been absorbed by their hosts.

I clutched Joe's hand, caught somewhere between extreme relief and enormous disbelief. "I killed the demons," I said. "I didn't kill the humans."

"The wolves are safe," Joe said, patting my hand.

"For now," Zach agreed. "But this thing that happened here today is a preview of what's to come."

I pulled away from Joe and knelt beside the groaning human. "Jared will be ready now," I said. "He will make sure it doesn't happen again." I stared down at the man on the ground. "Why did you come here?"

He tried to sit up but failed. Finally, with Joe's help, he managed to climb to his knees. He stared around him with a dazed expression, but one that was fast turning angry. "What is this?" he demanded. "What the fuck is this?"

I stood, then pointed at the discarded weapons littering the ground, then at the three other men who had yet to awaken. "You and your friends came here with guns and attacked this community," I told him, grimly accusing. "You got your asses kicked."

But he shook his head and finally managed to get to his feet. He stumbled to one of the men and gave him a solid kick. "Kev," he said. "Get the fuck up, man." He ignored the other man, as though he didn't know who he was.

When Joe and Zach took a step toward him, he backed up, pointing his finger, his eyes wild. “Stay away from me.”

“Sir,” I said, calmly. “Joe can drive you home. You need to get out of here. The cops are on the way.”

He didn’t look like the type who’d want to talk to the police. I felt sorry for him, really. He and the other humans would have no idea what they’d done or why they’d done it. The others who’d fled would hopefully lose their demons quickly. They might try again, but I doubted it. They’d tried and failed, and they’d seen a demon slayer with a killing blade take out some of their own. Whatever deal they’d had with the vampires wasn’t worth dying for.

“Kev,” he shouted, delivering another quick kick. And finally, Kev woke up. He was as disoriented as the first guy, but we stood back a comfortable distance and watched as they both managed to stumble down the street toward the stone exit gates.

Rick Moreno slowed as he passed them, but then he drove on to where I stood with Joe and Zach. He took his time climbing out of his car, then stood with his fists on his hips as he surveyed the area. I didn’t rush him. Finally, he made his way to me.

“There’s a dead guard at the gates,” he said. “And a dozen abandoned pickup trucks at the side of the highway.” He looked around at the weapons on the ground, the pools of blood wetting the pavement, and the human lying a few yards away who had yet to awakened. “Is he dead?”

“No,” I said, though honestly I wasn’t entirely sure. He was sprawled face down with one of his arms at an awkward angle, and I vaguely remembered peeling half his face off with my blade. “Wake him up, Joe, and send him on his way.”

Zach went to retrieve the scattered guns. When the detective and I were alone, he



said, “The mayor wants you to come see him. I’ll take you.”

“Good,” I said. “I need to speak with him, as well.”

He eyed my bloody clothes but didn’t comment upon them. He was used to seeing me dressed in rags and blood. “What happened, Kait?”

“The humans came.” I couldn’t help but shudder at the remembered image of those armed humans and the damage they’d caused. “They were full of demons. I killed some of the demons. The rest ran.”

“And the humans?”

“They’ll be okay once the demons take off. They won’t remember what happened. The ones you saw had no idea why they were here.”

“That’s lucky,” he said, his voice grim. “How did they get into Shadowfield, Kait?”

“They had help.”

“Just the demons, or from the inside?”

I hadn’t wanted to consider there was a traitor in Jared’s pack. They wouldn’t have appreciated hearing that—not from me. And I’d probably be the first one they’d accuse. Or my mother. “The demons,” I said. “And the vampires, and the magic Avis Vine is using.”

We watched quietly as Joe succeeded in getting the last human up off the ground. He dusted him off and helped him down the street. After a few steps, the man pulled a cell phone from his pocket—probably to call someone to pick him up.

“Joe,” I called. “Get him outside the gates.” I didn’t want whoever he called to come into Shadowfield to fetch him.

Zach walked in the opposite direction with an armload of guns, probably to drop them in one of the small storage buildings for the wolves to deal with later.

“Where is everybody?” the detective asked.

“They came in shooting, Rick,” I said, and I know he heard the sorrow in my voice. “One of them shot Jared.” I swallowed hard, then forced myself to continue. “They shot him in the back of the head with silver.”

“Son of a...” He blew out a hard breath. “He’s dead?”

“No. He’s with his people in the woods, and he’ll heal. This time.” I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly cold. “But even though they were filled with demons and didn’t know what they were doing, the humans will be back. One of these times, they’re going to find the wolves, and the next time, Jared won’t tell his people to stand down while he tries to calm the humans. They will fight. The wolves will kill the humans. Shadowfield will be lost. The wolves will be forced into hiding. Humans will kill humans thinking they’re supernatural creatures.”

“They’re doing that now,” he said, “because of the vampires. The world is now full of monsters and the humans are losing their minds.”

“We’re not monsters,” I said, but I kept my voice emotionless.

“Sorry.” He squeezed my arm. “Kait.”

Shadowfield began filling up again as the wolves slipped from the woods. It wasn’t something I saw, but I felt it. I felt the alpha, most of all. Gradually, voices began to

drift to us, and fully clothed people walked from buildings and stood in clumps to talk. They'd all gather in the admin building where discussions would begin about what had happened and what their futures held. They'd been taken off guard. They were nonhumans, yes, but they'd integrated so deeply into a human world that they'd become careless.

It wouldn't happen again.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Mayor Hedrick and his wife Amy were wonderful people. They were also stubborn as hell.

“It would be good for the city, Kait. Let me put you out there. I won’t mention that you found our child after he was abducted. I understand that would put you in an impossible situation. I simply want to give them a champion, to bring someone out of the shadows who has been here fighting for us all along. I want them to know that long before they were aware of vampires, you were actively hunting them, killing them, protecting us.” He slid forward on the sofa and reached across to take my hands, his deep brown eyes sweet and earnest and totally fierce. He wasn’t going to let me say no. He knew it, and I knew it.

Still, I had to try. “Mayor—”

“Louis,” he insisted.

“Louis,” I said, though that felt wrong. “I’m not one for the spotlight. And I’m not the only one fighting the vampires. There are more...likable people out there.”

“You’re extremely likable,” Amy said. “And you look like the champion this city needs. You’re so...” She hesitated. “I hope you won’t take this the wrong way, but you have a look about you, Kait. It’s...otherworldly. And you see spirits. You’re not a normal human, and it shows. It’s frightening to look into your eyes for very long.” She laughed, but it was just a little uncomfortable. “Even now, I have to fight not to look away from you.”

I could have told her right then that I wasn’t human, but I couldn’t bring myself to.

Just couldn't do it.

"Kait," Louis urged. "Let's give them what they need before it's too late."

So I capitulated. "What do you want me to do?"

He slapped his leg. "Thank you, Kait. Thank you. I'll take care of everything, and I'll call you with the details. I'll contact some people and get things set up. We'll get you on TV—and anyone who works with you, bring them if you'd like—tonight. We'll do it tonight, when it's scary as hell out there. It'll give our city hope. They'll concentrate on you and what you can do instead of the bad guys."

"Also," I said, not quite looking him in the eye, "they need to know that not all vampires are murderous sons of bitches. They've been here with us all along."

He nodded soberly. "Good. That's good, Kait. You'll tell the city everything they need to know, including how best to remain safe. They'll listen to you instead of the "experts" spouting their nonsense. Did you see the professor on the news last night telling people that if they eat garlic every three hours they'll be immune from vampire attacks?" He hesitated. "That's not true, is it?"

"No," I said, trying not to smile. I could smell the garlic on both the mayor and his wife. "These rogues aren't trying to find someone tasty to eat. They're just killing people and causing trouble. They're going to do that no matter how a human smells or tastes. But," I added, "a hungry vampire will avoid biting a human who tastes like garlic. You can't eat enough garlic to kill the bloodsucker, but you can make him sick."

"Then that's something important to tell the people," he said. "We need to calm them down. They're killing each other in their panic."

I'd do my best to convince Jakeston that they had people fighting for them. That we were stronger than the vampires. And that not all the vampires were the bad guys.

I left the mayor's house and outside, Rick was waiting for me—and Remy Simon was with him. The detective smiled—sort of—when he saw me. He reached into his overcoat pocket and pulled out a lanyard from which a laminated ID dangled. “I knew you'd lose at least one,” he said, “so I had extras made.” Then he felt the tension, saw the way Remy and I were looking at each other, and he immediately dropped into cop mode. He stiffened. “What's the problem?”

Remy laughed. “I thought Kait was a hunter like me, but it turns out she's just something I kill.”

Rick had his gun pressed to the back of Remy's skull before either one of us was ready for it. The men in the mayor's security detail, three of whom were posted outside, started toward us.

Remy lifted his hands. “Whoa, there, Detective. I didn't say I was going to kill her. Kait and I will work through our shit.”

I was shocked at Rick's sudden ferocity, but I was pretty sure I didn't show it. I gave Remy a cocky grin. “Maybe we will,” I agreed. “But until we do, you might want to watch your mouth.” Then I turned my back to him and walked to my car, dropping the lanyard over my head as I went. “Thanks, Detective,” I called.

“Anytime,” he replied, his voice emotionless.

Before I got into my car, I turned back to look at them. Rick had put his gun away and he and Remy both watched me. “Where are you going?” Remy asked, finally.

“I'm going home,” I murmured. I wasn't going to tell them that I had to get dressed

to stand with the mayor and speak to the city, but then I thought better of it. Even if I had to put myself in front of the people and be the voice for the ones who protected them, having a crew beside me could only help. “Both of you go make yourselves pretty. Mayor Hedrick is calling in the press and we’re going to be on camera tonight.”

They only stared, unsure.

I shrugged. “If I have to put myself out there, I’d like the ones helping me to be there, as well. I’ll text you when I get a meeting time from Louis.”

I’d call in Max, Joe, Zach, and the alpha as well. Lucy and Ash could come, too. And because it would be dark, I’d ask Bastien for his support.

Maybe the mayor was right and seeing “superheroes” might give the humans some hope. There was a chance it wouldn’t do anything but piss them off. We’d see.

I called Lucy. “I’m on my way home.”

“So are Ash and I,” she said cheerfully.

I sighed. She was supposed to wait until I got to the house before she even left Shadowfield, so I could make sure the house and area were safe. With everything going on, it was easy to forget that there was a human serial killer with his sights, apparently, on Lucy.

“If you get there before I do, stay in your car with the doors locked, Lucy.”

“I’ll will,” she assured me. “Don’t worry.”

“Why aren’t you worried?” I asked, a little aggravated.

“Because...” Her voice strengthened. “Because things are going to go how they go. Besides, Susan is with me. She’s almost as good a bodyguard as you are.”

“Hi Kaity,” my mother called. “There’s a car full of wolves right behind us. Eli wouldn’t let us leave without protection.”

“They’ll be taking her back to Shadowfield later,” Lucy told me.

I wasn’t sure if taking Lucy home was a good idea—I just knew there was danger everywhere. She’d nearly gotten shot at Shadowfield. “And Jared?” I asked, my voice a little too casual.

“We didn’t see him before we left,” Lucy told me.

I knew the alpha was going to be extremely busy making sure Shadowfield was protected against raiders, human or otherwise. He was also going to blame himself for his wolves getting hurt in the first place. Shadowfield was about to change, and the wolves would change with it. It was how they would survive.

I wasn’t sure how the pack was going to feel about me accidentally calling all their wolves, but I’d deal with that when the time came. I shouldn’t have been able to force their shifts. I wasn’t their alpha. Without a doubt, it was going to cause some issues.

Maybe with Jared, as well, who I hadn’t seen since he’d gone into the woods to heal his gunshot wound. But I had enough on my mind without adding extra worry, so I shoved the uneasy thoughts of him and his pack away.

But I wondered, as I was sure Jared wondered, if I could have done such a thing if we hadn’t forged an unbreakable bond in his bed.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

The city seemed to have calmed slightly, whether because of the heavy police presence or mere exhaustion, I couldn't have said. I was sure that if Avis had anything to say about it, it was simply the calm before the major storm she was about to bring.

Even in the daylight, the streets were nearly empty, and a hazy, eerie pall hung over the city. Some shops had been burnt out, and the sidewalks were full of overturned grocery carts, garbage, and the occasional brave—or inebriated—person.

I saw a total of eleven spirits and twice I spotted men who looked like they'd picked up a demon. I kept going. Later I would deal with spirits and demons. Right now, the vampires were getting all my attention.

I called Joe, Max, Zach, Bastien, and the alpha on my way home. Bastien would be sleeping, but Jared didn't answer either. I left voicemails asking them to come and to gear up for a battle—not only for the viewing audience, but just in case Avis and her rogues appeared.

Lucy's car was parked in my driveway when I arrived home, and the “car full of wolves,” as my mother put it, was parked at the side of the street. There were three wolves inside it—more than enough protection if a killer dared approach Lucy. The wolves were overkill, really. My mother could easily have handled a lone human serial killer.

I waved at the wolves, then walked my mother, Lucy, and Ash into my house. I inhaled, pulling in the familiar scents, as Lucy hurried into her bedroom to drop her bags and my mother went into the kitchen to put on coffee. I figured she didn't want

to be alone with me just yet. She wasn't ready to talk about what had happened at Shadowfield. Her daughter was an alpha. Her daughter had forced her shift.

Yeah. I wasn't quite ready for that conversation either.

I sat on the sofa and patted my lap, and Ash jumped up to get some love. Funny how he could make the stress melt away—at least for a little while.

Then Lucy came in and sat beside me. Ash lay down between us and went to sleep immediately, as though he knew playtime was over and it was time for the adults to have a serious discussion.

"I'm going to cook something," my mother called. "Lucy, when you can, come help me?"

"I will," Lucy murmured, but she stared pensively at Ash as she ran her hand over his back, and finally, as I opened my mouth to prompt her, she spoke. "You've lost some weight," she said. "And I've lost the serial killer dreams."

"Maybe that's a good thing," I said tentatively. "Maybe that means he's not coming for you after all."

"Yeah," she said, attempting a smile. "Maybe that's what it means." Then she sighed. "I've been having other dreams instead. That one had taken over for a while. Every time I closed my eyes, I was with the killer. I felt him, and it was overwhelming. I've never been so immersed in my dreams in my whole life, Kait. I should be glad they've stopped, but..."

"What, Lucy?" I took her hand and held it, squeezing gently, because she seemed to need the comfort. "Tell me."

She couldn't look at me. "My dreams, when I'm having them, are reality. I'm there. To me, it's not a dream. Sometimes when I dream I become the person I'm dreaming about." She waved her free hand impatiently. "Anyway. This serial killer." Finally, she looked at me. "I...I like him, Kait. I like being with him, even though I'm aware of what he's doing to those women. Even though I'm aware that he killed them. Not dreaming about him upsets me."

I didn't pull my hand away. "You've connected with him." I wanted to say "bonded" but that was somehow worse.

"I've never done anything like this. No matter what I dream, the bad guys are the bad guys and I detest them." Abruptly she pulled her hand from mine and stood. "I'm going to help Susan. I have a name. A first name. It's Samuel. I don't know if that'll help Detective Moreno or not, but it's something." Just before exiting the room, she stopped. "I've had that name for two days, Kait. I just couldn't bear to tell you in case the information got him captured." She laughed, and it was full of panic. "I don't want a serial killer, a man who kills women, to be caught." She walked away and I let her go, because nothing I could have said would have made a difference.

Lucy was losing it.

"We'll have a meal ready in half an hour," my mother said, when I finally got up and wandered into the kitchen.

"I'll get cleaned up," I said. My stomach growled ferociously, but no one laughed. There was too much weighing on our minds.

The mayor called as I was getting out of the shower. "Can you be here at ten? I've got everything set up. I've had announcements going out to TV, the Internet, radio stations...nearly everyone in the city will be tuning in."

“I’ll be there,” I promised. “And I’ll bring some people.”

“You needn’t call Rick,” he said. “He’ll be here by the time you arrive. Can I send a car for you?”

“No, I’ll drive over. Are we doing this outside?”

“Absolutely. I’m not inviting vampires into my house, not even if you’re likely to kill them.”

“Outside is better,” I assured him. I was hoping Avis would show herself. So was the mayor. She was going to be watching for information, so chances were, she’d be aware.

“Dress like you mean it, Kait,” he said, before hanging up.

I knew what that meant. He wanted me to go into full badass mode for the cameras. I could do that. For the first time in a while, I pulled my vampire kit out and opened it up, checking to see that everything was inside and that I didn’t need to replace anything.

When I walked into the kitchen, Joe, Max, and Zach were already there, happily eating up all the food my mother and Lucy had prepared. “Damn, guys,” I complained. “I was only gone for twenty minutes.”

“I saved you a plate,” Lucy said, jumping up to grab a foil covered plate from the oven. It weighed about five pounds, so mollified, I took it and looked around for a place to sit.

Zach offered me his chair. “I’m finished anyway. The only one of you who eats less than me is Max.”

“Hey,” Lucy said, pausing with a chicken leg halfway to her mouth. “I don’t eat more than Max.”

“Where’s my mother?” I asked, sitting in Zach’s vacated chair. Ash immediately left Joe’s side to come sit closer to me. He sat on his haunches and stared at me, waiting to see if any food would jump off my plate and into his mouth.

“She left with the wolves who escorted us here,” Lucy told me. “She said to tell you to call her after your meeting with the mayor. She has something important you need to talk about.”

I nodded. My mother had changed somewhat since we’d gotten a pack. It was important for a wolf, and she didn’t want to lose that. She knew that as an alpha, I wasn’t going to be Jared’s wolf, not really. Maybe she believed I might try to fight him for the position. I’d reassure her that would never happen. I might be alpha, but I was certainly not the type to want to head a pack or wreck the one I belonged to. A wolf alpha was too restricted, too wrapped up in pack politics, too overwhelmed and shackled with the responsibility of dozens of people. I shuddered. No, that wasn’t me.

“Max,” I said, happy beyond words that we were all together in my house again. “I want the people to see you, but if by some chance we get lucky and the rogues come—”

“I will be standing closest to the door,” he said, licking a smudge of cake icing off his finger, “and if a bunch of vampires appear, I’ll jump into Lucy’s arms and she’ll run us both to safety.”

All of us laughed but Joe. “I’ll be there,” he growled. “If Avis shows, I’ll make sure you get to safety before anything happens to you.” Then, he added, “And Lucy, of course.”

Lucy giggled, and I was glad to see she had thrown off her cloak of despair and seemed to be back to her normal bubbly self. “Thank you, Joe.”

“I hope Avis shows,” Zach said. He briefly touched the hilt of his blade, then crossed his arms and stared into the distance.

He may have wanted her more than I did, but if I got to her first, I was going to take care of business.

Finally, it was time to go.

We took Ash with us. With everyone gone, I was worried Sam the serial killer might break into my apartment, and I certainly didn’t want Ash there alone if that happened. I could leave him in the mayor’s house with people watching over him.

The gates were closed at the end of the mayor’s driveway, but two guards were there to open them for us. We wouldn’t want humans there tonight. It wouldn’t be safe. A couple of police cars sat outside the gates, and I thought about telling them they should either go home or come inside where they’d be better protected, but in the end I decided to mention it to Rick and let him handle it.

Reporters were waiting on folding chairs, their cameramen standing patiently, and a couple dozen suited security guys stood watchfully around the area. They didn’t try to hide their holstered guns or stakes, some wood, some metal. A couple of them had large crucifixes on silver chains around their necks, and one guy smelled so strongly of garlic that I gagged.

The mayor wasn’t outside, but Rick stood talking with two of the guards, and he watched me as I climbed from my car. Lucy and Zach were with me, and Max had ridden with Joe.

I turned when a loud black car sped up the driveway and a few seconds later, Remy Simon climbed from the vehicle. He was dressed the way the humans would expect a hunter to dress—in all black and dripping with silver blades. Remy was a good-looking man, but a person didn't have to look hard to see the cold killer in his stare. He was eager for what the night might bring.

He wasn't the only one. There were a couple of officers who strutted around the area with bright eyes and barely suppressed grins, their fingers eagerly brushing their weapons as they searched the shadows, hoping for something to kill. They weren't terrified of their new world. They were excited by it.

Had any of the security present tonight actually fought and killed a vampire? No. The rogues were too good to get caught by humans.

At least by most of the humans. My stare flitted from Remy to Zach, both humans, both hunters, both dangerous. They would give the vampire rogues some trouble. And there was another human who could fight a vampire, as well, especially after his abduction. Rick finished his conversation with the guards and stood off a little to himself, watchful and silent, ready for anything. He'd changed since the vampires had gotten their fangs into him.

I hoped he would never remember what he'd done while under Axton's control, but I was nearly certain that in time, he would. I couldn't guess what he'd do then.

When Louis came out into the courtyard, followed by four of his security team, I immediately took Ash's leash and went to meet him. "Can he hang out inside?" I asked him.

"Absolutely." He bent down to scratch Ash's head. "Noah will love him." He gestured and one of the guards came to take Ash inside. "Do you think the vampires will show up?" he asked me, as we watched Ash trotting away.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I do.”

“Wonderful,” he said. “I don’t want to just tell the people of Jakeston you’re able to protect them. I want to show them.”

“If they come,” I told him, grimly, “get inside with your family. Don’t hesitate, no matter what. Okay?”

He took a deep breath, and it shook a little when he released it. “Okay, Kait Silver.” He straightened his shoulders and took another deep breath. “Can we get started?”

But as we walked toward the reporters, another car arrived.

Jared.

And for the first time since I’d arrived, something eased inside me. “Yes,” I murmured. “Now we can get started.”



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

“There’s coffee inside,” Lucy whispered, as we waited for the mayor to situate himself behind the small lectern. “Do you want me to grab you a cup?”

I started to reply when the mayor put his mouth to the microphone and called my name. There was a feeling of déjà vu as I remembered my agreement to work for the council, and I wondered if my agreement to give myself publicly to the city would cause me more trouble than it was worth.

I’d kill vampire rogues whether the council or the mayor told me to or not. Apparently, they just liked to make things official. On the plus side, they could throw cash and other resources at me whenever I needed them.

As I joined the mayor, Jared, Rick, Joe, Zach, and Remy spread out around me, Max, and Lucy, walking us to the tiny, impromptu “stage.” Six of Jared’s wolves—including Wyatt and Avery—stood back by their alpha’s car, ready to attack should the vampires arrive. I hoped none of them would get overly excited and shift but with adrenaline pumping and chaos surrounding them, it would be hard not to.

I stood at the mayor’s side, my people surrounding me, and I knew how they’d look on TV. Larger than life, scary, and as mean as any of the vampires. Wearing countless weapons and dark frowns, they’d be sure to give the humans some confidence.

Only one of the people I’d asked to join us hadn’t. Bastien Martel, current master of our county.

“Let me present Ms. Kaitlyn Silver,” the mayor said. “Some of you have heard of her.

I would bet that some of you have availed yourselves of her unique services.”

“What does she do, Mayor?” one of the reporters asked.

“She’s a human who has been fighting the evil of this city long before any of us even knew such evil existed.” Louis’s regard for me was obvious, but he would never tell them the real reason for it. “She protects us from not only invading demons and lost spirits, but the vampires who are even now attacking our city.”

I was about as uncomfortable as I could get. Then I glanced at Remy, and he mockingly saluted me just as the mayor called me “human.” And then I was about as uncomfortable as I could get.

Bastard.

I’d dressed a little over the top, as we all had, wearing black leather and tall—but low heeled—boots, a long, thin duster coat, beneath which I’d donned very nearly every belt I owned. I crisscrossed them across my chest and buckled them low on my hips, then filled them with silver blades, bottles of holy water, spirit traps, sharp stakes, and my demon blade. I’d considered leaving the blade at home, but in the end, I found I really didn’t want to part with it.

It wasn’t like I’d be shifting with all those human eyes on me.

“Before I step aside, allow me to introduce Kait’s team,” Louis said. And one by one he pointed out each person who stood with me, surprising me. He probably knew a hell of a lot more about all of us than I’d realized.

“I’ll step back and let Kait speak,” he said when he’d finished, and some of his security team escorted him, Max, and Lucy away. I watched approvingly as Louis murmured something and then Max took Lucy’s arm and the two of them went inside

the house. Louis stayed just outside the doors. Finally, I put my attention on the cameras and began speaking to the people of Jakeston.

“There are things you can do to keep yourselves safe,” I started, not wasting any time. “As you know, vampires can’t come out into the sun...” No way was I explaining to them about Avis Vine’s particular magic or the fact that she and her rogues could do a hell of a lot more than any vampire should be able to do. “When it begins to get dark, go into your homes, lock your doors and windows, and don’t open them for any reason until morning.”

And then, despite the fact that it went against my hunter instincts, I told them that not all vampires were bad vampires. “Some of you already know this,” I said calmly, interrupting half a dozen reporters all asking questions at once. “Some of you go to their clubs. You understand that they won’t hurt you, because you’ve gotten to know them. The vampires attacking our city and our world are rogues. Their council sends people like me to kill them, and in the end, we will win. We will kill them.”

“How do we know if they’re the rogues or not?” a young woman asked.

“You don’t,” I told her. “Not yet. Once we’ve handled the rogues, then...” I shrugged. “You can go back to living with the vampires the same way you’ve been living with them for decades. You didn’t know they were here, but they’ve been here all along. And you’re still alive.”

“They’re murdering humans,” another female reporter said. “Why haven’t you killed them yet, if you’re so...powerful?” She was condescending and skeptical, and she didn’t care if I knew it.

I curled my lip. “Because I can’t snap my fingers and make all the rogues line up for a nice juicy stake and a beheading. Hunting takes time.”

“We don’t have time,” she snapped. “So you might want to stop posing in front of cameras and get to work. If you—”

“Look,” I said, interrupting her and turning to the cameras. “These rogues are no different from human killers. The police are right now trying to hunt down a human serial killer. There are bad vampires, just like there are bad humans. But not all vampires are bad. Over the next few weeks, I’d like to introduce you to some of my friends who happen to be vampires.” Yes, I stumbled over the word “friends,” but not too badly. “I will introduce you to the vampire master of this county. He is the one who keeps his vampires in line. And when he gets the rogues, he will make them wish they’d never fucked with the humans.”

I told them about the council, as well. I talked until my voice was hoarse and my throat was raw. I answered questions, dealt with anger and snark without punching anybody, and finally, I gestured for Remy to take my place. He could ease tensions and charm the reporters a hell of a lot easier than I could. I walked away from the little knot of people to stand further in the shadows, and the detective broke away to follow me.

He handed me a bottle of water. “I don’t think they’re coming,” he murmured. “Maybe it’s too well-lit back here.”

It was terribly bright, but still, those lights weren’t the sun. “It’s not the lights.” I gulped the water down and then crushed the empty container. “She’s not stupid. She knows why we held this meeting after dark. And Avis Vine does not want to give us anything we want.”

“We’d have been better off spending this time hunting,” Zach said, coming to join us.

“No,” the detective told him. “The people needed to see you. They needed to know they have people like you fighting for them.”

Zach corrected him, surprising me. “People like us,” he said.

I nodded. He wasn’t wrong. The detective was one of us. But he couldn’t physically fight like we could, and his vulnerability worried me. “You’re one of us,” I said. “You protect this city against the bad guys. But you’ll be killed if they attack and you fight, Rick. If they come...”

His smile was somewhat dry. “I know my limitations. I’ll get Louis to safety, and I’ll protect him and this household. It’s the job he has asked me to do, and that’s the job I will do—at least until I get a supply of silver bullets.”

I couldn’t hide my relief. I looked up when the reporters laughed at something Remy said, and my gaze drifted immediately to Jared. As though he felt my regard, he turned his head slightly and looked at me, and so much heat sizzled inside me I was sure everyone close to me would feel it. Abruptly overheated, I shoved the crushed bottle into my coat pocket and then shrugged the coat off, though that did little to cool me off.

Jared’s lips twitched even as his stare sharpened, gleaming and savage, and I could not turn away from the blue fire of his alpha wolf’s eyes. My own wolf responded, fierce and feral, ready to forget the vampires and do something a lot more fun than wait for a fight that might never come.

There wasn’t a sign of the wound that had nearly killed him, but I knew he wouldn’t forget how close he’d come to death. Neither of us would.

I was so wrapped up in him that I started toward him, and maybe I’d have pulled him away right there in front of everybody and let him slam me up against a wall deep in the shadows, but that was the moment Avis Vine decided to attack.

Oh, she didn’t personally come—she wasn’t ready for the endgame just yet—but she

sent vampires, and she sent something worse. Demon-filled humans.

Shit.

The reporters scattered and the security team flew into action, pulling stakes and blades, some of them fumbling with their guns before they realized they couldn't use them. They'd only shoot each other, and their bullets weren't going to hurt a vampire anyway. But old habits died hard and thinking calmly under such pressure was difficult for even the ones who'd been fighting the supernatural for a long time.

One of the reporters—the woman who'd seemed so contemptuous earlier—stood with her cameraman against the brick wall surrounding the yard, talking excitedly. She wasn't about to leave, though both of them had to be terrified. Their need to get the story was bigger than their fear.

I left the vampires to the others, and I went after the demons. I had the demon blade, and I was the only one there who could extract the demons without killing their hosts. And sticking that blade into the demons gave me an almost orgasmic satisfaction. I didn't just wield the blade—I was part of it. It was part of me.

When the humans were down, empty of demons, I turned on the vampires. I was full of energy, bloodlust, and exhilaration, and I was full of crazy. I felt like I could have taken them all on by myself and won. Maybe I was wrong, but my wolf and I, we would always have a hell of a time trying.

It was like every time I went into a battle, I came out a little less...human.

Still, I worried about my friends, even now. Rick had raced away to protect the mayor, but he didn't go inside himself, damn him. Not at first. He'd meant to, I was sure, but he ended up helping reporters and cameramen to the safety of the house. He did go inside, finally, leaving me and the wolves to fight the intruders.

But there was also Joe and Zach, and along with Rick, they were the most vulnerable. Not that they weren't holding their own. These vampires were not as strong, fast, or deadly as they usually were. They began to fall.

And I understood suddenly why.

These vampires were newly turned. Perhaps a night ago, or an hour ago, they'd been human. They were fighting out of desperation. They'd been ordered to do so. Mostly, though, they just wanted to eat.

Their fangs were almost as grotesque as Avis's, and their claws, though long, bluish black, and sharp, were delicate. They hadn't had time to strengthen. The vampires hadn't had time to grow their power. They were still infants. Starving infants.

It was...horrifying.

We killed them, of course, because they were vampires, and there were no other choices. And the humans who saw what happened tonight were going to forget their temporary hope. They were going to forget every word I'd said, because they would see that the vampires were turning humans—and so very quickly—and things were going to go to a whole new level of horror.

I turned, plunged a stake into a vampire's chest, and as he fell, I looked up and saw two of the newly turned vampires take Joe down. Every single person in the security detail had already fallen or fled, because they were human, and they were not hunters.

They should not have been fighting there that night, and Joe should not have been fighting either. But if he survived, he was going to end up being a spectacular fighter. He had a hunter's blood in his veins, and he was too good not to end up a hunter—and it was clear that he loved the work.

But first, he had to survive the night.

I'd help him with that. If I'd have been thinking clearly and if the air hadn't been so veiled with blood that I felt I was isolated in that courtyard, then maybe I would have been more careful. I'd have slowed down a little. I'd have been less...nonhuman. But I threw myself into the vicious joy of the fight, and I forgot to hide.

When I reached Joe, he was buried beneath the bodies of four hungry vampires, and at least one of them had his blood on their nasty fangs. I could smell it. And that just pissed me off. I flung them against the brick wall, hard, so hard, breaking bones and smashing skulls. I left them there for one of the others to stake and behead. I was intent only upon making sure Joe was okay. That he would live. That his scars and trauma would not be bigger than his desire to fight another vampire another night.

He was my friend.

But when I pulled the last vampire off him, Joe's face was a mask of blood and his eyes were closed, and for a millisecond, I thought I was too late.

"Joe," I yelled, and when I felt for a pulse, it was there. Barely, but it was there. I looked around at the waning battle and spotted Jared loping toward me.

"I've got him," he told me. He scooped him off the ground and tossed him over his shoulder, then held his hand out to me.

But the night was not finished with us yet. As my fingers touched his, Farrow, the vampire who'd first asked me to save Bastien, leaped from the brick wall and landed hard in the courtyard, crouching on the pavers like a wild thing.

She only ever came to me when Bastien was in trouble. I guess I knew now why the county master had refused my invitation to meet.



Most likely, he'd found Avis.

Or she'd found him.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Immediately there were half a dozen wolves surrounding her, low growls floating from their mouths. But Zach shoved his way between them and stood with Farrow, his blade in his hand. “Stand back,” he told them. “She’s not here to fight.”

“She’s here to die,” Remy muttered, holding Dolly, his favorite, bloodstained stake. He wanted to stake the vampire, but he would have to fight the wolves for that honor.

“Kill her,” Wyatt snarled.

They were seconds away from ripping each other to shreds when I interfered. “Stop,” I told Wyatt, who was shaking with his need to control his shift. I dropped to my knees beside the vampire girl. “Farrow. Why are you here?” I didn’t have time to talk, really, with Joe possibly dying in the alpha’s arms. Still, she wouldn’t have come if there hadn’t been an urgent reason for her to do so.

“Bastien sent me. We are under attack. Avis knows the property better than anyone, and she is ripping through the glamour shields and exposing us to the humans. She wants the humans to bring their pitchforks and torches to the clan, so they will die. So we will all die.” Her fangs were elongated—apparently she was too stressed to retract them. “Bastien sent me to you. You have to come, now.”

“She doesn’t have to do anything,” Wyatt snarled. “We will—”

“Wyatt,” Jared said, interrupting him. “Quiet. Carlos, Avery. You’ll drive Joe to Shadowfield, call Ben on your way. Kait, do you know his blood type?”

I stood and took Joe’s cold hand. “No. I don’t know it.”

Then Max was shoving through the big wolf bodies. “He’s O positive? And I’m going with him to Shadowfield.” He got a look at Joe’s face when Jared handed him over to one his wolves and he turned to me, his lips pressed into a tight line. His eyes were too wide, and I could see terror in his stare. He wasn’t afraid of the bodies on the ground or the wolves or the vampire Farrow. He was terrified for Joe. “Kait?” he whispered.

I gripped his shoulders. “Dr. Hayes will fix him up, Max. Go.”

“Kait,” Farrow said, her voice hard with impatience. “We have to get to Alexandria. Bastien needs your help.”

“We don’t help vampires. We kill them,” Wyatt said, unwilling to give an inch. He gestured at the ground. “As you can see.”

“We’ll go to Alexandria,” Jared told him, getting angrier by the second. “We’ll do whatever it takes to end the rogues. We will fight with the county master’s vampires tonight. Do you understand this?”

Wyatt nodded, but reluctantly. “We’ll fight.”

“I’ll be there,” Zach said.

The sudden paling of his face told me he didn’t want to go, but the determination in his eyes said he would anyway. I wished I could have forced him to stay behind.

“Want a ride?” Remy asked him. He patted his stake. “Dolly is still thirsty.”

“Thanks,” Zach said, and without another word, the two of them jogged away.

I wanted to speak with the mayor, and I wanted to check on Lucy and Ash. I also

needed to give Lucy my demon blade. I would shift to fight Avis and her rogues and didn't want to lose the blade. Also, I was slightly afraid that Avis might somehow end up with it again, and I was happy enough not to have to take that chance.

"Go," I told Jared. "I'll catch up."

Then I turned and ran to the house, eager to get to Alexandria before Avis took off. Lucy, Rick, and the mayor were waiting at the door, and I noticed immediately that Rick grimaced when he moved. Ash rushed to me and shoved himself against my legs, and I leaned over to pet him as I spoke to the detective.

"You got hurt out there," I said, unable to keep the accusation out of my voice. "You promised me you'd go inside with Louis."

He shrugged. "I'm all right. I did some of what I needed to do." He seemed angry that he hadn't killed a couple of vampires in the process.

"Are you all right, Kait?" the mayor asked, and didn't seem convinced when I nodded. "Let me know as soon as you can if you get that awful woman."

"I will, Mayor."

I handed Lucy my blade.

"I can take the blade," Rick offered.

I shook my head. "I have a feeling you're going to have your hands full without adding blade-sitting to the mix."

"It's safe with me," Lucy said. "It'll be waiting when you return."

“I’ve asked Lucy and Ash to stay here until you’ve handled the vampires.” Louis smiled at my relief. “Amy and I,” he told me, “are happy to do anything to help you, Kait.”

“Thank you, Louis,” I murmured.

I straightened after giving Ash one last pat and took a second to gaze at them all, just in case by some chance I didn’t make it back. In my life, not making it back was always a distinct possibility. Many of the mayor’s security detail—the ones who’d lived through the attack—stood quietly in the room, shellshocked but ready to act should they be needed. They’d be better against human attackers, and if a certain serial killer attempted to get his hands on Lucy, they would take him down. She was safe.

Five minutes later I’d ripped off my clothes, my lanyard, and my thin, protective vest, shoved the entire bundle against the exterior wall of a dark, silent house, and shifted. Honestly, there wasn’t much that felt better than becoming my wolf.

And she was ready to kill some vampires.

I sprinted away, gathering my legs beneath me, the wind whipping my face as I ran very nearly as fast as any vampire, eager to reach Alexandria and Avis Vine. I felt the alpha a few seconds before he burst from the darkness to run with me, and even my wolf’s feral heart softened. But only for a moment. It was not a night for a soft heart.

We were fast, the alpha and I. We kicked up great clods of earth and sent stones and debris flying as we ran faster than any animal should have been able to run, and we reached Alexandria faster than we would have in a car. The wolves who’d gone on ahead were already there, already fighting.

But that wasn’t what made me stand, my breath whooshing in and out, and stare in

frozen silence.

Alexandria was a small town full of humans. They'd had no idea that vampires lived in a nice part of town in a cluster of homes that no fictional vampire would ever have lived in. The community where the county master lived with his many, many children looked like any other community one would find in any town. It blended, it was clean and quiet with well-manicured lawns and playsets and bikes and flowers and nicely tended trees.

None of that was real, of course. It was a glamour created by sorcery to fool the humans. The real cluster, the tiny community into which the county master's main house spread like a grim disease, was the stuff of nightmares.

The glamour was not just fading, it was blinking in and out violently, black and red and flashing like explosions of blood against the dark sky, showing the humans more than they would ever have wanted to see about the reality that lived within their world.

The vampires were not just in danger of being exposed, they were exposed. By the time we got there, the street was lined with cop cars, flashing lights, and policemen standing behind their open vehicle doors with guns drawn.

News vans, screaming reporters, and terrified humans who wanted to run to safety but were unable to tear themselves away. And all that mattered to me, really, was catching Avis.

It mattered that the humans were seeing the wolves—Jared and I weren't the only ones who had shifted—but I shoved the worry away. They weren't going to know my wolf was me. I could still hide my shifter side.

It looked like the world was on fire. I shot through those fake flames and up the

driveway, not even hesitating as I caught glimpses of wolves and vampires fighting. There were rogues, yes, but the wolves weren't just trying to kill them. They'd lost their human commonsense in the fight, and all the wolves cared about was killing vampires. Any and all.

I knew how they felt. My natural instinct was to rip out the throats of the bloodsuckers as well, but I was single-minded in my need for Avis. If I caught her, all the bad stuff would stop. It wouldn't really, of course—it was much too late for that—but that's what I kept in my head. Everything would be okay if Avis were dead and held up like a gory trophy for the city to see.

The scents were overwhelming and hard to separate but finally, I caught Avis Vine's scent—that particular smell of rot and magic and evil that had burrowed inside my brain and might never leave again. It was there, and it was strong.

The “house” was nothing like the vampires had spelled it to look to outsiders. It was massive, sprawling and dark and full of nooks and crannies and rooms, both up and down, that would take a person a very long time to explore. But I wasn't there to explore. I concentrated solely on the smell, ignored the screaming, the growling, the huge, hot wolf bodies, the vampires, the fires, everything.

Until I saw Bastien. He flung himself at me, forcing me to stop, and I went for his throat before I realized he was simply trying to talk to me. Farrow was there, as well, trembling against the wall. I'd never seen her look so afraid.

Bastien took my face between his hands. “You should not be here. She is going to take you tonight, and she is going to kill you if she gets you. Go home, Wolf.”

“Bastien,” Farrow started, and then fell into a quaking silence when he snarled at her.

I understood suddenly the reason for his rage. He hadn't sent for me at all. Farrow

came to get me because she believed I could save Bastien, even if I had to be sacrificed. He wasn't willing for me to die in his place. She was.

I didn't care what either of them believed or wanted or feared. Avis was there—I could feel her. She was close. She was waiting for me, and I was going to get her. For as much as she wanted me, wanted to hurt me, wanted to kill me, I wanted to do those things to her a hundred times more. Because she was fueled by revenge. I was fueled by the need to save my people.

Would I sacrifice myself to end her?

Fuck yeah. In a heartbeat.

I shoved Bastien back against the wall with my big wolf's body, then stared into his eyes. Finally, I pressed my nose against his throat, and then, when he sighed and whispered, "Kait. No," I wheeled around and streaked toward where Avis's scent was the strongest. I sped down a long, endless hallway until finally, there was an old stone staircase, heavy with decades of dirt, blood, and mold, and I bolted up stairs that seemed to go on forever, and waiting at the top, as I had known she would be, was Avis Vine.

The awful thing was...

She was not alone.



Lennon. Shit.

Avis had her arm wrapped around Lennon's neck, and the witchwolf's own wand pressed to her throat. "Kait. Finally. We were beginning to think you weren't coming." Avis laughed and when she did, two of her teeth fell from her mouth, long tails of blood trailing from their ends. "Fuck," she said. "Oops."

She was dying. Her dead master's magic had kept her alive long enough for her to fuck up the city, but it was failing fast. I padded toward her, but not too close, because I didn't want to get a surprise hit with that wand.

What I couldn't understand was how she'd gotten her hands on Lennon, who I hadn't seen much of lately. Lennon's magic was strong, yet somehow, Avis had gotten her and her weapon—the wand I had coveted for myself.

"Kait," Avis said, "Your wolf would be fun to torture, but right now, I want to discuss things with the woman. Shift."

I only growled, my head low between my shoulders, imagining how much pleasure it would give me to tear out her throat and carry her head back to the humans, proof that she was dead. Then Lennon shrieked as Avis drove the end of the wand into the soft flesh beneath her jaw and Avis waited for her to go quiet before she once again ordered that I shift. "Time is running out, Wolf. Don't make me tell you again. Shift, or I will hurt this bitch."

I could have walked away. I could have let Avis do whatever she was going to do to Lennon, and I could have waited patiently for another chance. But why would I do

that? The vampire was right there in front of me, and she already had Lennon. Even if I traded myself for her, there were no guarantees that Avis would let her go. So I tensed my body to pounce, gathering my legs beneath me as I drew back my lips in a snarl of rage, and I started to attack.

“I have Lucy,” Avis said, freezing me in place. “Well, I don’t physically have her, but she’s under my control. It was stupidly easy to get her. Stupidly easy. I’ll tell you about it after you shift.”

I did nothing. She was lying. I couldn’t say that, because my wolf couldn’t speak, of course, but she knew what I was thinking.

“Listen,” she said. “Do you hear that? That’s the sound of your city crumbling, Kait. The vampires, wolves, humans...all of them are all tied up together, and all of them are dying. You killed my love, and you killed me. So I’m going to kill the world.”

I pawed the hard floor, trying to shut out the sounds of the battle. The room we were in was a circular room with a stone floor, short stone walls, and no roof. If I shifted, I could try to sling her over those walls so she’d smash herself on the ground far below. I would fight her, but as my woman, I wouldn’t be quite as strong as a vampire—especially one who, though it was failing, was bolstered by a mad magic. And I didn’t have my blade.

She sighed. “You don’t believe me.” She caressed Lennon’s throat with the tip of the wand. “That hurts my feelings.”

“Kait, please,” Lennon moaned. “Make her stop.”

But still, I hesitated. I did need to shift. I could think more clearly than my wolf. She simply wanted to kill. She wasn’t as concerned as I was with saving people. She wasn’t as attached to Lucy or worried about a witchwolf.

I slipped another couple of steps closer to Avis.

“Larry,” she yelled, suddenly.

A vampire moved from the wall, a vampire neither I nor my wolf had seen, sensed, or smelled. He moved and suddenly he was there. Fucking vampires.

“Show her,” she said. “Kait, don’t eat my friend Larry. You’re going to want to see what he has to show you. Oh don’t worry, it’s just a picture.”

The changes in Avis were astounding, really. No longer was she the mad, wild creature who seeped magic and showed little of the human she’d once been. Now she seemed more human. Maybe as the magic faded, so did the feral creature Axton had created.

Larry didn’t hesitate. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket, tapped on the screen, then placed the device on the floor. Then he melted back against the wall. When I watched him, I could see him, but when I glanced down at the phone and then back up, he’d disappeared once again.

“Look at the image,” Avis said, then spat out another tooth.

I didn’t want to. I knew it’d change my mind. I knew from experience that looking at a vampire’s phone or screen or whatever else they wanted to show me was a bad idea. I’d seen the detective that way, and Bastien and the girl Farrow, and now, I was about to see another horrifying picture.

I looked.

Avis hadn’t lied. She had Lucy. There was an image on the screen of her pale face, lips tight and a disbelieving look in her eyes as she stared up at her captor. She didn’t

look as scared as she might have. She looked angry, and she looked shocked. But a hand was around her throat, and though I couldn't see his face, I recognized the suit. I even recognized the hand pressing against her windpipe.

“One more chance,” Avis said. “Shift, or I will order him to hurt her. He will hurt her, and it will be your fault, just as all this is your fault.” Then she looked down at the diminutive Lennon. “You were right that she wouldn't die for you. But she will die for the human. What a strange wolf she is.”

So I shifted, because it didn't matter anymore. Wolf form or human form, I would fight to the death so that I could save Lucy. I would not die, and neither would she.

“How the fuck,” I said, my long, unbound hair my only clothing, “did you turn my detective into a monster?”

Because the man in the image with his fingers around Lucy's throat was Rick Moreno, and I was devastated.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

“Remember how I said he’d done some very bad things? He’s done worse than this, Kait Silver. Sorry.”

I hardened my emotional, aching heart. I’d think about Rick later. I was good at compartmentalizing, thankfully. “You have to know you’re not going to leave here tonight alive,” I told her. “Even if you somehow escaped me, the wolf alpha is here. And Bastien—”

“No one can find this room,” she interrupted. “This is Frederick’s creation. His and Kaloni’s. They will never find this room.”

“I found it,” I said.

“Because you were led here, and you were allowed in. They will only see you again when you are dangling over the wall.”

“What do you want, Avis?” Of course I knew what she wanted. I was stalling, hoping that maybe she’d go ahead and die and save me the trouble of killing her. More worried about Lennon now that I was not ruled by my feral wolf brain, I skimmed my stare over her tearstained face, her tattered clothes, and the bruises ringing her throat.

She didn’t look at me, though. I understood. She’d told me once that she wasn’t made for fighting. She didn’t like it, didn’t want to do it, wasn’t good at it. She wanted to stay in the safety of Shadowfield and do what seers did best—see things and report to their alpha.

Eli was going to lose his mind when he discovered that she’d been taken. Jared had

left him in charge of the pack while he came to fight with me, and somehow, Avis had taken Lennon right out from under his nose.

“I want you to give yourself to me,” Avis said, “to save your friends. This one...” She kissed the top of Lennon’s head. “And the one your human friend is holding for me. I’ll give Lennon back her wand and return her to her pack, and I’ll free the little dreamer who means so much to you.” She hesitated and then cocked her head, her stare quizzical. “Do you believe me?”

“Not even a little bit,” I said.

“I wouldn’t believe me either,” she said ruefully. “But you really don’t have a choice. I came up here because this was Frederick’s favorite room. He’d often stand at the wall and gaze down into his world, dreaming, making plans, trying to be happy. It’s so hard for vampires to be happy. Did you know that?”

I only nodded. She wasn’t really talking to me anymore. She was preparing to die.

“Frederick was terrified of death,” she murmured. “Terrified. There is no God waiting for vampires. No rest or peace or heaven. Only nightmares.” Finally she blinked and focused on me once again. “You sent him there. I can only imagine his pain and terror right now. When I die, I’ll find him.” She shook Lennon, a little. “You promised, didn’t you, Witchwolf? You promised that your magic would lead me straight to him.” She was crying, her pink-tinged tears sliding down her face, proof of her despair. “I miss the life we had. The most depressing thing is knowing I can never get that back. There’s only death now, and the hope that maybe it isn’t as bad as Frederick believed it would be.”

Pity swelled inside me, shocking me with its abrupt intensity. No matter that she’d done horrific things that could never be undone, she was agonized, and I felt sorry for her.

That pity would not stop me from killing her, but it would make me show her mercy. I wouldn't make her suffer or give her to Zach for closure or hand her over to Bastien for centuries of torture.

I would simply kill her.

Then I would go deal with the aftermath of my choices.

I closed my eyes and sent up a prayer that Rick would not kill Lucy, that Lennon would survive my attack, that Avis wouldn't suddenly be filled with energy and throw us both over that wall.

I would have given just about anything for my demon blade, but I would make do with everything I had naturally—and not so naturally. There was magic inside me that came in times of desperation, and I could only hope it'd rise to aid me when Avis and I began to fight. She was sick, and she was dying, but she was not weak and she was not slow. Not yet.

Without another hesitation, I partially shifted and leaped at the unspeakable mutation that Frederick Axton had created. As I crashed into her, Lennon flung herself away, screaming, but she took time to snatch her wand from Avis's grip. Good. With both of us fighting her, she was not getting away. We would take her down and end her miserable life.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Avis called for the vampire who had faded himself against the stone wall to attack, and he flew suddenly toward me—but I was too busy with Avis to bother with him. "Lennon," I yelled. "Stop him!"

She had a very powerful wand that I had witnessed an action. I knew what it could do. I knew it could stop the vampire, or at least distract him. So I trusted her to have my back, and I put all my attention on Avis.

As I had known, Avis was not weak. She was still a challenge, no matter that she was half dead. She had pure hatred driving her on. She would've liked to of dragged things out. To torment me further. But she knew she had run out of time.

The only thing left for her to do was kill me.

The vampire behind me began his brutal attack, even as I attacked Avis. The stone room was abruptly full of flying blood and sounds of pain and I had two adversaries to battle. No, that was wrong. There were three enemies in that room.

I was hurt quickly. But I was used to pain, and I shrugged it off, because there was nothing I could do about it and no time to care. My injuries would be dealt with later. If I survived.

And that was beginning to look a little more uncertain, because Lennon turned her wand on me. She crouched against the wall murmuring, and she sent her power right at me. She was good, as I'd known she was, and the blast of magic slammed into my body.

It was like being hit head-on by a train. That feeling wasn't new. I had been in a lot of fights with a lot of powerful people, and I had had my brain scrambled by most of them. And then I realized the reason Avis had wanted me to shift to my human form.

She had cut me up badly with her claws and though I believe that her terrible magic had waned, I once again felt it surging through me. It wasn't as painful as before. It wasn't as potent. But it was plenty strong enough to keep me from shifting to my wolf. And without my demon blade, shifting to my wolf was the one thing I really needed to do to defeat the three people I battled.

Obviously Avis was using Frederick Axton's mind control magic to make the detective do her bidding and to make Lennon attack me. She'd turned my friends into



lumps of mind-controlled evil. It was the only explanation. At least the only one I could accept. And if Avis could be believed, and I believed her, no one was coming to help me. I was going to have to handle shit myself, which would be fine if I could wake up my inner psycho. I needed that power. But Avis's magic was coursing through my body, magic from Lennon's wand was making me feel like my entire body was caving in, and the blasted vampire who apparently guarded the room was attempting to remove my head from my body. He had dug his claws into my flesh as though he could simply pinch my head right off. I was pain.

Then Avis made a stupid decision, and I knew that was what would save me. Her need to be the one who hurt me, who killed me, who made me pay for what I had done to her and her master. "Stop," she screamed. "You said I have to be the one to kill her."

There was no time for me to be confused about her comment. It was enough that the other two stood down immediately to let her end the fight. The glorious magic inside me was stifled by the poison she had sent into my body, but I was strong enough anyway. I was desperate enough.

I had nothing but my hands and my teeth and my determination, and I used them all to get me what I wanted, what I needed. She leaned over me, poised to pierce my throat with her hideous fangs, and I gathered up everything inside me, even the pain, and I yanked her to me. I hadn't even realized I was on the floor until that second. She fell off balance and on top of me. I wrapped my arms and my legs around her, held her head still with a hand that had managed somehow to partially shift into a claw—I couldn't have shifted if I tried, so I guessed my wolf was lending me as much help as she could—and I ripped out her throat.

It wasn't enough to kill her, though. As she seized on the floor, blood and magic exploding from her torn throat, I let her slide off me and I crawled to Lennon to get her wand. I could end Avis with that wand.

Avis wouldn't stay down for long. Even now, despite the way she looked, she was slowly healing herself. Maybe I could have summoned enough strength and energy to lift her over the wall, but I was no longer sure that was the right thing to do. I had no guarantees that she would die if I did, and she absolutely had to die.

Here. Tonight.

And I had to kill her.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

I ripped the wand from Lennon's hand, and though she fought me, she really wasn't a fighter. I punched her in the face, holding back so I wouldn't kill her, and when her grip loosened, I took control of her wand. I managed to get to my feet, and I stumbled and staggered to Avis, and I did not hesitate. I lifted the wand and plunged it into her heart. To me, that wand was simply a wooden stake. But the wand had other ideas.

It exploded with magic. Power shot up my arm and into my shoulder, so intense and shocking that I gave a hoarse scream, but I didn't let go of the wand. Avis's heart exploded with the magic, pieces of it hitting my face, the wall, the floor.

The vampire never moved away from the wall, but Lennon ran to me, and while I was stuck in the magic of her wand, she hit me in the head with what felt like a large rock she'd either pried up from the floor or wall or maybe had simply found it lying there. She was as caught in Avis's awful magic as I was in the power of the wand, but then Avis died, and Lennon continued to hit me.

I was flung away, finally, as though I'd held a live wire that finally let me go, and I held a hand up as Lennon started toward me, her face twisted and wet with tears. "Stop, Lennon. She's dead. The spell will wear off now and you'll be okay. Just wait."

"Give me my wand," she cried, attempting to grab it.

But I knew if she got the wand before the magic was gone, she'd kill me with it. "When you're calm," I told her, holding her off as I finally managed to stand. Then it was just a matter of holding the wand out of her reach. She was short, and I was tall. She wasn't getting the wand.

Seconds later, she fell to her knees, head hanging, and began to sob. “What have I done,” she cried. “Oh, God, Kait. Why did I try to hurt you?”

Barely able to stand, I crouched beside her. “It wasn’t your fault, honey. She did the same thing to Detective Moreno.” I slid the wand to her, but reluctantly. I really did want that wand. “But Avis can’t hurt anyone anymore. Let’s get out of here.”

She accepted the wand almost gingerly. “Let me help you heal,” she whispered. “I can purge you of the magic that’s keeping you from shifting. And I can at least wipe away some of the pain.” She looked at me, finally, her eyes brimming. “I’m so sorry, Kait. I’m just so fucking sorry.”

I patted her hand. “Not your fault,” I told her. “Do what you can to heal me. My wolf and Dr. Hayes will do the rest. We need to hurry. I have no idea what’s going on below.”

“The rogues will be easily controlled with Avis gone,” she said, her voice stronger. She straightened her shoulders. “The world is different, and we will adjust. Hold out your hands so I can push pain relief in through your palms.”

I held my hands out obediently, and she circled them with the wand, whispering words I didn’t understand. The light that wrapped around my wrists was warm, blue, and numbing, and I began to feel immediate relief as it spiraled up my arms. But then the light became restrictive, like rope, and I frowned.

“Just another minute,” she said, then fell back into whispering nonsense.

I didn’t know how long it took me to realize she wasn’t trying to heal me. She was trying to restrain me—and she was succeeding, because I’d patiently sat there and meekly held my arms out so that she could wrap them with her magic.

“Lennon,” I said carefully, trying to tug my arms away, “what are you doing?”

But she wouldn’t stop chanting, and then, I was well and truly caught. I was cocooned in invisible ropes of magic, and I could not fight my way free. Not from that.

Then she pushed herself away from me and sat with her back against the wall and her knees drawn up, her wand securely in her grip. “A long time ago,” she said, “I “saw” you. I was shown that you were a danger to me, my pack, my alpha. I knew I would be forced to have you killed, eventually, because as long as you’re alive, no one is safe. You destroy things, Kait. The councils have made you judge, jury, and executioner and though you have yet to completely immerse yourself in that role, it’s coming.” She grimaced and put her fingers to her throat, then continued. “Avis promised to help me. She’d see to it that Lucy disappeared and she would kill you, and I would go home and pretend none of this happened. I didn’t want to see you die.”

I shook my head. “You’re not the bad guy, Lennon. You can’t be.”

She hiccupped, then darted her tongue out to lick the tears sliding over her lips. “Of course I’m not the bad guy, Kait! You are the bad guy. I just want to protect my people. It’s simple as that. My pack and my alpha are everything to me. I’ll do anything I have to do to protect the nonhumans. To protect our world. But you have no loyalty. You’ve lost your way. You don’t even know who you are.”

“I would never hurt Jared or the pack,” I told her. Honestly, I was stunned. Was she right? Was I the bad guy? Is that how the nonhumans saw me? But I shook it off. I couldn’t feel sorry for myself. I couldn’t feel guilty. I needed my rage.

I forced myself to relax, then concentrated on using my own magic to try to break the bonds she’d restrained me with.

She looked at me with pity and frustration in her eyes. “You’re the reason all of this happened. You could have made different choices. You accepted the council’s request. You killed Axton. You destroyed his seer—and I saw that you would also destroy me. Just as your old pack alpha knew you would destroy him, which is why he forced you out of his pack. He didn’t want to kill you, so he sent you away. And guess what? You will kill him. Because of you, the nonhumans are in awful danger and the humans are dying. You are not a champion of nonhumans, and you cannot live in our world.”

“You’re the reason the pack hated me so much, aren’t you?” I asked her, filtering out her accusations. I would look at them another time, if I kept my life. “You planted fear and doubt. It wasn’t just that they thought my father was a traitor, though they hated me enough for his sins.” I needed to keep her talking. Her reluctance to do the dirty work and kill me could possibly help me survive this night.

“Your father was a traitor. He wasn’t a good man. He abused you your entire childhood, and you think he was a god.” She shrugged. “Maybe that, combined with your hobbled wolf, made you the horror that you are. You’re a traitor, too, Kait, and I was not going to allow you to destroy my pack. Unfortunately, I didn’t stop you before you succeeded. I was soft. I can’t be soft any longer.” She gave a sob, truly upset that she would now have to kill me. She squeezed her wand and began a tiny flurry of movements that would likely end in my death.

“What about Lucy,” I said, desperate to slow her down. I could feel the magic weakening. I couldn’t break the bonds, not yet, but I was getting there. I was sure of it. “Why did you want to hurt her?”

“She sees too much. Her dreams are confusing to her at times, but she would have become very powerful eventually. She would have known what I’d planned for you. She saw herself with a serial killer, didn’t she?”

“Rick is the serial killer?” I whispered, horrified.

“God, no. He’s a man whose mind is trapped by a dark magic he might never escape. It wasn’t his fault he was taken by Axton. That was on you, too, wasn’t it? No, Lucy saw herself with the serial killer because she was with the serial killer. Quite often. She was falling for him. Falling for a killer.” Her expression hardened. “Just as my alpha is falling for one. And I must protect him. You understand that, deep down, don’t you?”

Like she needed my permission and understanding so she could be at peace with her decision to murder me. And I was not going to break the bonds of her magic in time to save myself.

Finally, as the effects of Avis’s paralyzing and painful magic drifted away, rage began to swirl in my stomach. My mind slid into darkness, and my heart began to thud faster and harder with hatred. Maybe I was the bad guy. Maybe I would kill everyone who pissed me off. Maybe I hated the world.

The council wouldn’t have chosen me if I were weak enough to let one fucking seer kill me. I smiled as an eager joy added itself to the dark rage.

Hello, Psycho.

“Go ahead and kill me then,” I murmured. “Let’s see how strong you are, pretty girl.”

She jerked so hard the back of her head hit the wall, and a blast of hard purple magic splashed from the wand. It landed on the floor with a splat, and the stones broke beneath it. Genuine terror lit her gaze, and for a brief second, I saw myself through her eyes.

Was I the bad guy?

Yeah. Right then, I was.

She scrambled to her feet, and there was no more delaying. Her fear and revulsion were larger than her reluctance to kill. She steadied her shaking hand and whirled her wand, leaving beautiful traces of color in the air, and then she sent all the power she could muster at me. “Please die,” she whispered. “Please just die.”

Poor thing, so upset at having to kill me. I guess she’d blame that on me, too.

I braced for the impact, but really, one couldn’t prepare for a killing magic. For a few seconds after it hit me, I thought I was never going to survive it. It wasn’t meant to be survived. Simply put, it hurt like a motherfucker.

God, I wanted that wand.

But whatever was inside me didn’t flinch from the pain. It welcomed it. It absorbed it and used it and in the end, it broke her magical bonds. She screamed as I ran toward her, and then fell as she tried to scramble away from me. But I couldn’t let her go, just as I couldn’t let Avis go.

I took the wand. Lennon didn’t deserve such a gift. “Don’t worry,” I told her. “I won’t destroy it. I’ll use it for what it was meant to be used. A weapon.” Then I frowned at her. “Why haven’t you shifted?”

“Because I don’t want you to hurt my wolf,” she murmured, and she was dead serious. “I didn’t want any of you to hurt my wolf.”

“I guess I’m not the only one who has trouble separating my wolf from myself,” I told her. “But you know I’m going to kill you.”

She didn’t scream or run or even try to hit me. She didn’t shift. She slid to the floor,



her back against the wall, and stared up at me with a complete lack of hope in her eyes. “Please, Kate,” she said. “Show me mercy. Give me back to my pack, to my alpha. Don’t let me die here.” Then she said nothing more, and she didn’t take her stare from mine. She was almost calm as she waited to die.

And psycho or not, I couldn’t kill her.

“I’ll turn you over to Jared,” I told her. “But I’m keeping the fucking wand.”

Her eyes widened. “Kait. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” I said. “Jared will not go easy on you. If he doesn’t kill you, he will do something worse.” But I could see by the look in her eyes that she didn’t believe me. For a moment, I wavered. He might blame me for everything. She could definitely twist Eli into believing whatever she told him.

If I killed her now, I could blame it on Avis. No one would ever know. And I wouldn’t have to tell any of them the things Lennon had said about me.

But I didn’t kill her. “How the hell,” I said, yanking her up from the floor, “do we get out of this place?”

“Only Larry can admit or expel a person,” she said. “That’s what Avis told me. But I don’t know how to get him to let us out.”

“Larry,” I called. “We’re ready to go. Open the door.”

And apparently it was just that simple. Apparently anyone could give Larry orders and he’d obey. He detached from the wall like a sinister shadow, walked toward a section of the wall, and reached for a doorknob that hadn’t been there a second earlier.

But I couldn't go, not yet. There wasn't a nonhuman or counsel on earth that wasn't going to want to see proof of Avis Vine's death. I had to take her with us. I wound her hair around my hand—and the wand—and I dragged her across the floor and out the door.

When we were in the hallway, Larry shut the door, and it was simply gone. There was no doorway, no room, and no living Avis Vine.

Not anymore.

But her legacy, that would live on forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:29 am*

Outside the room the wolves, vampires, and turned humans were still fighting. It was as though I'd never left. I kept a tight hold on Lennon's arm, using her to hold myself up. I could barely walk. I'd taken too many hits, and now that the adrenaline and desperation were wearing off, I was feeling every pain, injury, and shock that I had received there that night.

Oh, I was still desperate to reach Lucy, the detective, and Ash, but I was no longer in fear for my own life. Maybe that didn't make sense, seeing as how I was half dead. I was also naked. And naked made me feel vulnerable. So I did what I always did after a shift. I found a dead body and stole its clothes. Lennon made no attempt at all to run. She didn't believe she needed to.

"Kait," a hoarse male voice yelled, and I turned my head to see Jared loping toward me. Bastien was at his side.

"After you ran," Bastien said, "I tried to find you. I couldn't find you." He sounded honestly devastated about that but overjoyed to see the enemy dead and in my possession. "You did it. You killed Avis Vine." He gestured at his house. "The glamour will hold now."

I was pretty sure it was too late to put the glamour back into place. "Get her to the Council," I said. "Can you do that, Bastien?"

"Yes," he said. "I can do that."

"Damn you, Kait," Jared murmured. He pulled me and Lennon into his arms. "What happened to you?"

“Get us out of here, Jared. I’ll tell you everything, but we need away from here.” I couldn’t tell him about Lennon. Not there. He kept one arm around her quaking shoulders, his face a mask of concern. He was going to be so hurt by her betrayal. And yes, part of me was afraid he wouldn’t believe me when I told him. “I need to find Lucy.” I stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn’t been supporting me with his arm around my waist. He lifted me into his arms, glancing briefly at the wand I still held.

He hurried us out the back, through doorways I hadn’t even known existed, and when we slipped out into the night, a car was waiting. Lennon got into the front seat with the driver, so serene and quiet I got worried all over again. She was a seer after all, and apparently she wasn’t seeing anything that scared her. Or maybe she hadn’t seen anything yet. Maybe she just didn’t think her pack and her alpha would turn on her. She didn’t think they would take my word over hers. She was probably right.

But there in the back seat, with Jared’s arms tightly around me, I told him everything. He didn’t say a word. Lennon turned her head to look at us once, her face occasionally illuminated by streetlights that we passed.

“Alpha,” she said softly. “You’ve known me my entire life. You still don’t know her.” Then she turned back around, leaned her head back against the seat, and for all I knew, she went to sleep. She never said another word.

Jared leaned forward slightly. “I need a phone,” he said, and the driver immediately handed him one. “I’ll call Louis. Maybe the image you saw was doctored. Then I’ll call Rick. We’ll find her, Kait.”

“Rick is not himself,” I said. “But maybe now that Avis is dead, whatever hold she had over him is gone, the magic broken.” I could only hope.

The mayor told him that Rick had taken Lucy and Ash to his house. He seemed to

think they would be safer there, though Louis had no idea why. Jared told him that I had killed Avis Vine but gave him no more information.

Rick answered on the second ring.

Jared handed the cell phone to me. “Rick,” I whispered, suddenly unable to make my voice work correctly.

“Kait?” His voice was groggy and thick and there was confusion just under the surface. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Where’s Lucy,” I asked. “Rick, you took Lucy. Where is she?”

“Took Lucy? Why would I take Lucy? She’s with Louis.”

“Why are you home?” I asked, keeping my voice as calm as I could. “Why would you go home and go to sleep with everything going on?”

He said nothing for ten seconds. Then, “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

“We’re on our way to you. Stay there, okay?”

“Yeah.”

By the time we reached Rick’s house, I was feeling a little stronger. My wolf, whether or not I shifted, would help me heal. I would heal faster and better if I could shift, but there was no time to shift. Not yet.

There was also the matter of Lennon. “Jared,” I said, as the driver parked the car behind Rick’s. “Lennon—”

“Concentrate on finding Lucy. When that’s settled, we’ll figure everything out. Okay?” He pushed my hair behind my ear and leaned forward to kiss me. It was probably the best kiss of my life, because to me, that kiss meant he was behind me. He believed me. He trusted me.

Didn’t it? Any why the hell did I care so much?

What had I been afraid of? That he’d try to kill me instead of Lennon? That he’d look at me the way she looked at me, like I was a monster?

Maybe I was afraid that if he didn’t see my heart, I didn’t have one.

Fuck that. I knew the truth. And I was damn sick of feeling like the pack was all that mattered and my worth or “goodness” hinged on their approval or rejection. Not just theirs, but the alpha’s.

“When this is over and things have settled down,” I murmured, and the words were only for myself even though I said them aloud, “I’m going back to my office, and I’m dealing with spirits and humans and the odd rogue nonhuman who needs me to kick his ass.”

“You’re a lone wolf with a mission,” Lennon said, and though she kept her voice light and infused with humor, I wasn’t fooled. “You’re better than us, and you don’t need anybody. We’re aware, Kait.”

She’d hated me from the very beginning. Or maybe she’d just been afraid. Either way, I’d had no idea. It was starting to seem like seers were all assholes. Except Lucy, who was a seer of sorts. If Lucy were alive.

Strangely reluctant to find out, I had to force myself to get out of the car after Jared climbed out and stood in the open doorway, waiting for me. I took his hand and let

him help me out.

“You need to shift,” he said, when I sucked in a painful breath.

“As soon as I find Lucy and Ash.”

Before we started toward Rick’s house, Jared leaned into the open doorway. “Lennon,” he said, “do not leave this car.”

“Of course not,” she said, but there was a waver to her voice. Maybe she wasn’t as sure as she pretended. “Alpha,” she said, suddenly. “I know you won’t want to return my wand to me just yet, but could you keep it safe for me until you decide?”

“No,” I said immediately. “It’s not your wand anymore, Lennon. Its magic has crossed with mine, and we’ve accepted each other.” I had put the wand into the pocket of the too-large jacket I’d taken from the dead vampire, and I slipped my hand into my pocket to reassure myself that it was still there. Apparently I was the stealer of awesome weapons. I had nearly the same possessiveness over the wand as I did the demon blade. “Besides,” I added, “dead people have no need for weapons.”

She flinched. “I’m an angel compared to you. And Jared will see that. My pack will see that.”

But I was already limping toward the detective’s porch. Halfway there, though, Lennon’s words caught up with me. One word in particular.

Angel.

“Are you okay?” Jared asked, when I stumbled.

“Yeah,” I said. “A memory or...something. It’s nothing.”

“Kait,” Rick said, his voice gravelly.

He hadn’t turned on the porchlight. None of us wanted to draw attention to ourselves in these strange and dangerous times. He pushed open the door and then followed us inside the dark house, and only when he flipped a light on and then turned to face us did I get a good look at him.

He looked...bad. His face was dead white, his eyes dry and slightly protruding, and he was wearing a stubble and a rumpled, dirty suit. The same suit he’d been wearing at the mayor’s, and there were bloodstains on the left shoulder and down the front of it. The dark circles under his eyes were pillowy and purple, and his lips were flaking and colorless. He looked like he’d been sick for a very long time, yet I’d only left him a few hours ago.

“You look like hell,” he said.

He surprised a laugh out of me, but it sounded more like a sob. “Back atcha, Detective.”

“Rick,” Jared said, impatient, continuing to keep a grip on my arm, “Tell us what happened.”

Rick shook his head. “I don’t know. I was at Louis’s house, and then Kait called. The phone woke me up. I think I have a memory of the time between, but it doesn’t feel real.” He looked at me. “Did I hurt Lucy?”

I wanted to hug him, but I couldn’t. Not yet. I had to see Lucy first. “We need to search your house,” I said.

He only nodded, then stumbled to a chair and fell into it.



“Fuck,” I whispered. I doubted he’d ever be the same person he’d been before the vampires had gotten him, and that broke my heart.

But right now, I needed Lucy and Ash. They were all that mattered. “Lucy,” I yelled.

“I smell blood,” Jared murmured. “This way.”

A few seconds later, I caught the scent, as well. We tracked it to the staircase, and I knew as I stood at the bottom looking up that Lucy was upstairs. I didn’t know if she lived.

“Stay here,” Jared said, when I hesitated. “I’ll check.”

“No.” I grabbed the banister and hurried, as much as I could hurry in my current condition, to the top of the stairs. The first door I saw was closed, and there was a smudge of blood on the frame.

Jared shoved the door open, shielding me despite the fact that I didn’t want to be shielded, then reached to the wall beside the doorway to flip the light on.

“Lucy,” I cried, my voice cracking.

She was in a wooden chair, so much silver duct tape wrapped around her that all I could see were her eyes, swollen with tears, and her little nose.

She was alive.

We ripped off tape with our bare hands, using our claws to slice into it, sometimes catching her flesh as well. She didn’t care, though, and neither did we. She was alive.

Almost before she was completely free, she flung herself into my arms. “You died,”

she cried. “I saw it! How are you here? Ray is the serial killer, but his name is Samuel. Rick did this to me. Ash is gone, Kait. Oh my god, Ash! Rick tore his leash from my hand and left him on the street when he forced me into his car.” Finally, she ceased her babbling and broke down into sobs. Just like for the rest of us, the night had been too much for Lucy Shannon. And then, she did something that made me cry out with joy. She forced her trembling, likely numb fingers into the top of her tall left boot, and she pulled out my demon blade. “I kept it safe for you.”

“Thanks, Lucy,” I whispered.

Jared lifted her gently away from me, then reached down to help me to my feet. We turned to leave the room, and Rick was there, filling up the doorway, his eyes filled with horror.

Lucy screamed and began to struggle, and no amount of soothing or reassurances could calm her. At last, Jared scooped her up into his arms and looked at Rick. “Move,” he said.

Rick grabbed the doorway to keep from falling as he stumbled to the side, and Jared strode from the room, holding the hysterical human against him with one arm, his free hand wrapped around my upper arm to either support me or to make sure I went with him. Rick slid to the floor and huddled there, his fingers to his chest.

He needed me, Lucy needed me more, and Ash was out there alone on the streets. Still, I took a moment for the detective. God knew he’d taken enough of them for me.

I pulled free of Jared’s grip and went to crouch in front of Rick. “Detective,” I said sharply. “You’re stronger than the fucking vampires. What they did to you is not your fault. Take a shower, eat something, and get a grip. Call me when you can.”

He didn’t even look at me.

I grabbed his chin and forced his face up, and I made him look me in the eye. “Shit happens, Princess,” I said, my voice hard. “Suck it up. Get a fucking shower and stop wallowing. We’ll sort this out.” I leaned closer, until my nose nearly touched his. “You didn’t hurt Lucy. The vampires hurt Lucy. And the shit they planted inside you is gone, Rick. I killed Avis. The magic is gone. Do you hear me?”

“It’s not gone,” he said, his voice so ragged and thick I could barely understand him. “I feel it. I feel it wrapping around my brain, digging into my chest, controlling me. I feel it, Kait.”

God, the pain in his eyes. Still, that pain didn’t smother the darkness. Not completely.

And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do for him, except maybe kill him, and I was pretty sure he was going to do that himself. I couldn’t blame him. What if the magic never faded? He couldn’t live that way. He wasn’t even himself now. It was like the man I knew had already died and this pain-wracked, guild-ridden creature had been plopped down in his place.

But then, I felt the wand pressing insistently into my thigh, and I realized I could help him. The magic in that wand was strong enough to force out the sick, sinister magic of Axton, Kaloni, and Avis. It had to be.

But I couldn’t wield it, not like that. I could kill with it, but I had no idea how to heal with it. Only Lennon could do that.

I closed my eyes. “Fuck.”

Lucy was quiet, now, and when I turned to look at Jared I found her watching me. The hysteria had fled, and she understood. She knew it wasn’t Rick who’d hurt her, not really.

I stood. “Jared. What are you going to do to Lennon?”

He frowned. “This isn’t the time to—”

“Are you going to kill her? Because she can heal him. She can fix him, Jared.”

He understood abruptly. “You want me to bargain with her? Her life to save his?”

I nodded. “That’s exactly what I want.” And maybe Lennon had known. Even if she hadn’t known the exact circumstances, she’s surely known she was going to escape with her life. I wasn’t sure that was a good thing for her to keep.

Still, Jared hesitated. “I can banish her,” he agreed, finally. He set Lucy on her feet, and she didn’t argue. She didn’t move from his side, either, but she was calm. “I can mark her as a traitor and no pack in the world will take her. All nonhumans will shun her.”

“Yeah,” I said, still a little bitter. “I know how that feels.”

I stiffened as the stairs creaked, and we all stood silent and motionless as Lennon crept up the stairs, her beautiful face tranquil. “Give me my wand,” she said. “I will heal your human, and you will never see me again.”

It was one of the hardest things I’d ever done in my life to hand her the wand and allow her access to Rick. She might hurt him. She might kill him.

But at her core, Lennon wasn’t the bad guy. She was deluded by visions that had burrowed into her brain and twisted her up into a woman who had made awful choices. And even now, those choices, to her, had been the only ones she could have made.

“I did it for you,” she told Jared.

“You let the demon-possessed humans into Shadowfield,” he said, almost gently. “They nearly killed me.”

“She did it,” she snarled, jerking her chin at me. “She is responsible for it all.” Then she softened. “Put the blame on me if you must, but I wasn’t going to let you die, Jared. You just...you were so wrapped up in her that you were unprepared. I needed you to see before it was too late.”

I swallowed hard, trying to control my anger. I hadn’t even thought about the possibility that Lennon had allowed the attackers into Shadowfield—and just to teach Jared a lesson. And I understood one thing more. Lennon was in love with her alpha.

“I wanted to make everything right again,” she murmured. “I could have.”

Then she took her wand, knelt before the detective, and forced out the bad magic that lurked inside him. She healed him.

When she finally stood, I realized I’d been affected by the magic of that wand and that seer, as well. Maybe she’d done it on purpose, or maybe it was just because I was somehow connected with its magic. Whatever the reasons, I was healed a little, too.

Lennon looked at me. “This will always be my wand, Kait. But if you want it badly enough, you find me. You come and try to claim it. I’ll be ready for you.”

Then she walked up to Jared, and there was no fear in her eyes. But there was anger. “Do it,” she said flatly. “Do it and know in your heart that all I ever wanted was to protect my pack.”

Jared struck like lightning, destroying her beyond beautiful face with an alpha magic

and a half-shifted claw.

Then she walked away, and no one made a single move to stop her. And she took her fucking wand with her when she went.

Maybe she deserved it.

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Humans were resilient. Once Avis was gone and the attacks stopped, Jakeston picked itself up and slowly, with confusion and anger and lingering fear, began the long, arduous process of rebuilding their communities and figuring out how to live with their new normal.

The nonhumans simply went away. Bastien took his clan and they peppered themselves into new communities, unable to live as they had. Their lives were as chaotic and tenuous and frightening as the humans', and maybe more so because now, they were known. The humans would be coming for them, and eventually, they would find them. They would find all of us.

Maybe governments would create divisions and teams and secret or not so secret labs, and the images of Avis and her vampires massacring humans in the diner would be shown, taken apart, added to, and used to keep people afraid. But for now, the rest of the world was torn. Some of them believed that Jakeston had been attacked by creatures who weren't human. Some of them were hunters and knew the truth. But mostly, people who didn't live in the city simply didn't believe the stories of vampires on a rampage—or that vampires existed.

The councils were doing heavy damage control. So was the mayor. It made it easier that most of the world would rather laugh at Jakeston and its apparent out of control drug population than believe such horror existed. But humans had died, and more than one government organization sent agents into Jakeston.

Jakeston became its own little world, a world that knew the truth. Some of the people left for less dangerous places, but some of them stayed, and who knew what they thought. The media who'd attended the mayor's meeting to introduce me were

handled. I didn't know how, and I didn't ask. What they aired was heavily edited and while it still showed me and my friends as protectors of the city, the fight it showed after could easily have been staged. Most people believed it was.

The wolf packs stayed in their communities, for now. For now, the humans were suspicious of pale skin and people who couldn't come into the sun. At least shifters had the sun. If Avis had succeeded in her attempts to make vampires less sun sensitive, things would have been worse for not only shifters, but humans.

We would continue to hide in plain sight for as long as we possibly could.

On the outside, things were calming. Life went on. But some of us knew that the power to turn humans with a single, poisonous, powerful bite was still out there, somewhere. Avis appeared to be the only one who possessed such power, but if she could do it, others could. Even now, the new power might be hidden in the humans she'd turned so quickly. Bastien was still master of the county, and he sent out teams to find and destroy the new vampires. But would they get them all? Unlikely.

I sat now on a park bench with Rick Moreno, staring out at the cold, empty grounds, discussing the threat we had yet to control. Samuel, aka Ray Christian, Lucy's boyfriend. Serial killer.

Ash lay between us, his face on my leg, and I kept my hand on his warm body, reassuring myself that he was there. That he was okay. We'd gone to look for him after Lennon had disappeared, combing the streets for hours before finally, I'd gone home to change clothes. Ash had been lying by the front door, asleep. He hadn't even been hungry. One of the neighbors had spotted him there and had given him a bowl of water. She'd also dumped what appeared to be half a bag of kibble on the porch.

Lucy was bouncing back to her normal bubbly self, but shadows lingered in her eyes. She couldn't be near Rick, though she understood he had no memory of attacking her. She understood he wasn't the one who'd hurt her, but still. It would take time.



She was furious with herself for misinterpreting her dreams about the serial killer, upset for having feelings for him, disappointed in herself for not seeing that the man she was dating was killing women. She'd never been happy with her gift, and now, it appeared as though she actively hated it.

"I'm no longer dreaming," she'd told me, staring out the window of her room in Jared's house. The Rose Inn was currently being renovated. One of the other pack members was going to run the place, and it had been renamed simply Shadowfield Inn.

Because Samuel was still free, Lucy couldn't go home. She didn't really want to, anyway, because she was still dreaming. She just couldn't remember them when she woke up. She woke up screaming every single night, and my neighbors were done with that shit, especially after the nightmare of the vampires.

All our lives were in flux, and it was a rare person who had come out of November the same as when they'd gone in.

Rick didn't believe the killer known as Samuel had stopped killing. He believed he'd been killing more, but with the chaos caused by the vampires, there were a lot of deaths to sort out. A lot of missing persons.

It was the perfect time to be a serial killer.

And with a serial killer's instincts, it didn't take him long to figure out we were on to him. A lot of that had to do with the one excuse Lucy made to him when he called her. She told him she couldn't go to dinner because she wasn't feeling well, so he offered to come over and cook for her. He'd nurse her back to health, he'd said. She'd frozen and hung up on him. He'd called back one time, and when she didn't answer—I had been rocking her sobbing, shaking body in my arms while Rick and two other cops got to work trying to track the bastard.

They hadn't found him, and in the past two weeks, there'd been no sign of him. Maybe he'd gone to a different city. Maybe.

Lucy and I continued to believe that her dreams hadn't been a portent of Samuel capturing her—they'd simply shown that she was with him. They'd given her the warning, the feeling of doom, the fear. That was all.

Rick didn't believe any of that. He believed that one day, Samuel was going to take Lucy. He wasn't finished with any of us yet. Just in case, until he was caught, Lucy was going to be surrounded by constant protection. The killer wasn't a powerful nonhuman—he was simply a man with a twisted brain, and God knew there were plenty of those in the world. Joe, completely back to normal, and three of the mayor's security team were her constant, subtle companions. Wherever she was, they were there, as well, though she couldn't see them.

Jared had offered his wolves to help, and they would have done it simply because he asked, but they didn't want to. They had their own lives and worries to deal with. I'd refused his offer.

Saul, my "handler," had informed me yesterday that a meeting had been scheduled between me and the council for the eighteenth of December, and they would send a car to pick me up. I hadn't refused that.

"How are things with Jared?" The detective was a little too casual with his question, but I could see the tightness around his eyes. Jared had given Lennon her freedom in exchange for her healing Rick, but he'd done that for me. Not the detective. Whenever they were around each other, there was a tension in the air that hadn't been there before.

Lucy said it was because Jared knew Rick cared too much about me. He also believed that I'd chosen Rick over the pack. He was wrong about that. I'd chosen me over the pack. The pack didn't want me there, even more now that Lennon had been marked

as a traitor and banished, despite the fact that she'd only been trying to drive me out and protect them. I didn't hear them speak those words, but I saw the accusations in their stares. I noticed how they avoided me when I came to Shadowfield.

My father had planted the seeds, and Lennon had tended them, watering them until they'd sprouted into a huge, thick, impenetrable forest of trees.

And that was okay. I didn't belong there. I'd always known that, really. I belonged in the city, chasing out ghosts and talking to spirits and killing rogues with my friends. The city had changed, and we would change with it.

Then we'd see—but I believed we—we being the wolves—would be okay. For now.

“Things with Jared,” I replied, “are...different. Just like everything else. November was a real son of a bitch, Detective. It appears as though the demons were either killed or sucked back into their own worlds. And the spirits, if they found themselves here, are being quiet.”

Honestly, I knew next to nothing about what had happened to the demons. I'd killed some of them. Maybe there weren't a lot to begin with. I also had no idea how Avis had gotten them to do her bidding. Someday I might get the answers to the questions of the worst November I'd ever experienced, but if I never did, I wouldn't be surprised.

“Some of the spirits that came through,” he said, his gaze distant and his voice somewhat wistful. “Do you think they're still here? Just hanging around, waiting to cause trouble?”

Almost before the question was completely out of his mouth, a scarred, beautiful black angel with tangled hair and glass-green eyes sat down beside me.

“Nicole,” I murmured. “I remember you now.”

“Pardon?” Rick said.

I smiled. “Yes,” I told him. “I think some of them are still here.”

Waiting to cause trouble?

That remained to be seen.