

Chapter 108

The morning was much quieter than either one of us expected. I was thankful Brandon rarely seemed to be home, since he loved to stir things up between him and Asher. How Asher hadn't lost his temper and banished Brandon from the pack was beyond me, but I treasured every peaceful moment his infuriating brother was absent for. ①

We had expected a small uproar. It wasn't everyday your Luna was revealed to double as the Vampire Queen. My priorities were quite literally divided down the center, between two groups of people that wanted to kill one another. While there was some outcry by many of the older, seasoned members of the pack, there hadn't been the large-scale uproar we were expecting.

During the battle and warring back home, rumors had spread across the country. The struggle between our pack and the Vampire's was common knowledge. Thankfully, us werewolves were a tough breed. There weren't many of us who feared a murderous Vampire or rogue.

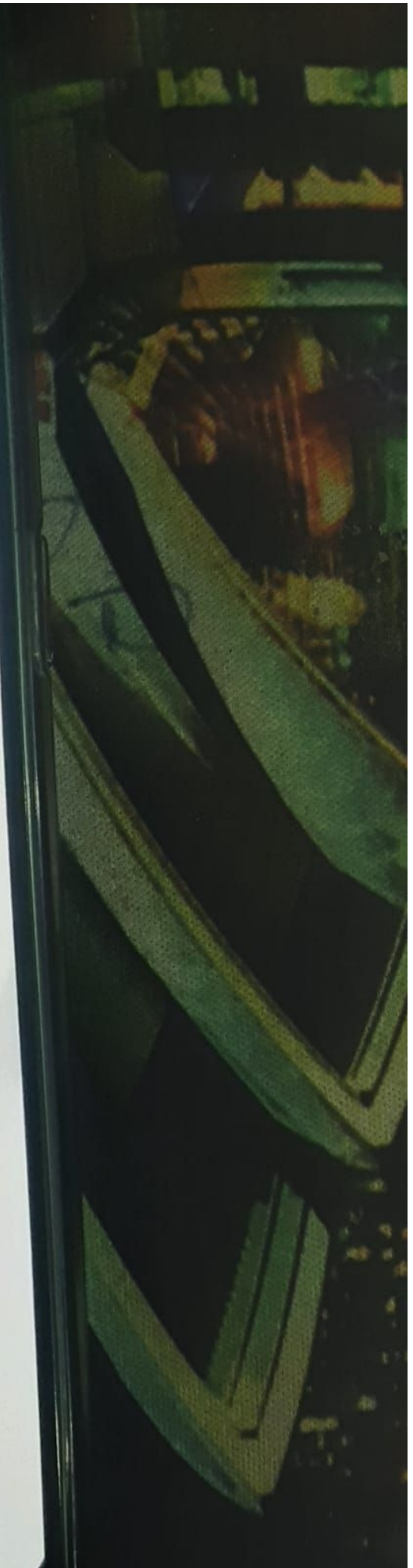
feared a murderous vampire

That morning we met up with Rowena at the house Giovanni and Breyona were staying at. The rather small living room was packed with werewolves, vampire's and the odd witch or two. The scent of blood and food intermingled in the air, like a strange and decadent perfume. 1

Giovanni and Tristan each leaned against the wall, from their respective sides of the room since neither had called a cease-fire on their feud. Tristan hovered closer to where Holly stood, only a few feet from the stairs so she could make a hasty retreat. He had managed to get her into the living room, but she hadn't yet stepped foot from the house. I perched myself on the arm of the couch, beside where Breyona sat. Asher stood to my right, and Mason to his right.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Holly."

Rowena smiled warmly. Her auburn hair was twisted into a loose knot on her head, and the mossy wrap around dress she wore swished with her every move. It was odd to see how friendly and non-threatening she looked, especially after last night. The knife-wielding, blood



last night. The knife-wielding, blood magic practicing pre-school teacher, was an enigma I planned to learn more about.

Holly's eyes roamed Rowena's face, undoubtedly seeing the same radiance I had first noticed. She brushed the strands of onyx hair from her face, the same color and length as my own. It was the only feature, along with our slate-grey eyes, that Holly and I shared. 2

"You're the blood-witch?" Was all she said, her voice much softer than mine.

"I'm not a practicing one, but I know the craft." Rowena nodded pleasantly, reaching down to where her bag sat on the floor. She pulled two leather-bound books from within, the covers dry and peeling. They smelled of oils and dried lavender as she held them out for Holly. "I understand how difficult this is—for both of you. To be unprepared for your own awakening, it's not something I would wish on any young witch. I am not here to force you into anything. These books are to read at your own pleasure, while you decide if my help is something you might want."

I hadn't realized I was holding my breath



until Holly moved ever so slowly and took the books from Rowena's hands. Clutching them to her chest, she retreated back to her place. My eyes flickered to Asher's and understanding passed between us. It was an improvement, and even the smallest counted.

"A word of warning from someone with years of experience; ignoring what is going on inside of you will only make it manifest harder. Gaining control of your magic, that is the cure you seek."

Breyona left with Asher and I, going back to the house to get ready for the party. There was a hint of nerves bundled in my gut, especially since coming out as the Vampire Queen, but I had always loved a good party. That hadn't changed, nor had it for Breyona.

The sweltering sun mixed with the coveted shade that blanketed the sprawling lake, I began to understand why this place was adored by so many people—and why the locals tend to keep it a secret. Trees of pine and oak surrounded the lake, which was larger



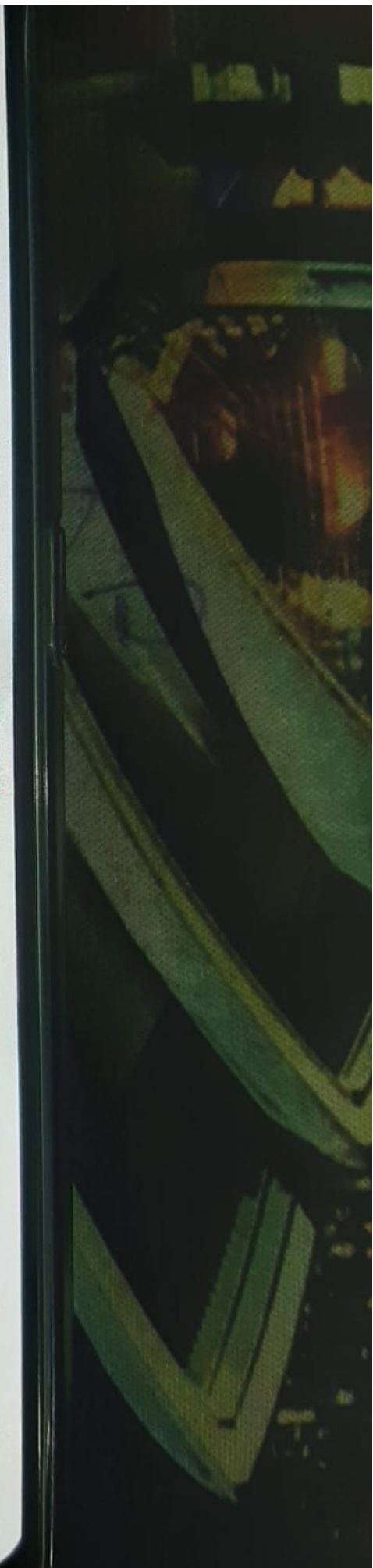
than any I had seen before. It was clearly well taken care of, because the water was free of any algae or growth and the small pavilions were free of any litter. A large beach area surrounded the lake, along with numerous piers every fifty or so feet.

Pick-up trucks were backed onto the sand, the beds stacked with beach towels and cases of beer. College students and young adults milled about, some in bikinis and swimming trunks while others sported your usual jean short and tank top combo.

I adjusted the straps on the bikini I wore and followed Breyona from the Escalade while Asher found some place suitable to park. Breyona's sky-blue bikini matched the shade of her eyes, and the bottoms tied into little bows at her hips. There were numerous looks casted our way, some lingering far longer than others. ①

"Gio's coming down to the party once the sun sets. Figured it might be a safe way to introduce a Vampire into the pack. He can be a bit overprotective...since I can't shift and all."

"Gio? How does he feel about this new



nickname?" I smirked softly, still feeling that pang of guilt in my chest for my best-friends fate.

"Oh, he hates it." She sighed dramatically, her face falling. "I thought I'd try it until it stuck, but it's not really working, is it?"

"Not really." I replied, laughing at the forlorn look on her face.

"Hey, gorgeous." A raspy, self-assured voice called out. I turned and found myself staring at the chest of a blond-headed male. I had to crane my head upwards to see his tanned face and chocolate eyes. Sand covered his shoulders and chest, and a volleyball was wedged between his arm and torso. "You're sure grabbing everyone's attention — you and your cute friend." 1

I opened my mouth to answer, but another guy beat me to it. One with shaggy brown hair jogged up and clapped him on the shoulder, his eyes wide and roaming my face. I didn't miss how he inched his friend away from me, or how the nearby people stopped their conversations to watch

nearby people stopped their conversations to watch.

“Bro, this is the Luna.” The one with the brown hair hissed, his voice inching lower. “You better hope Alpha isn’t nearby.”

“He’s never come to a party before...”

Blondie hesitated, his eyes growing wide as he swallowed and looked towards his friend. “The Vamp chick?”

“The one and only, but I’m going to be upset if you call me that.” I warned, keeping my tone light. The last thing I needed was to freak everyone out. This was about getting the pack to accept me and the rest of the Vampire’s looking for peace. “Asher decided to tag along, but he won’t skin your hide for calling me gorgeous. Mistakes happen, we’re just here to enjoy the party.” ①

Looping my arm in Breyona’s I steered the two of us away from the shell-shocked males, hearing the whispered tidbits of our conversation flow from other people’s mouths. We found Asher nearly ten minutes later, as the rush of people attending grew heavier. It hadn’t been us who spotted Asher first, but his

childhood friend, Cassidy.

Her sun-kissed hair ran down her back in golden curls, and the white bikini she wore highlighted the rich tan to her skin. She looked as though she belonged on a beach in LA, not living deep within the forest in the middle of a pack of wolves. She spoke very animatedly, using her hands as she chatted with Asher.

There was always that twinge of possessiveness whenever he spoke to another she-wolf, no matter their position in his life or pack. I swallowed that bitter feeling down and followed Breyona to his side.

“I swear, finding your mate instantly makes you the jealous type.” Breyona snickered under her breath, “I nearly took Giovanni’s head off for letting the grocery store clerk touch his arm.”

‘I don’t like her.’ Maya said simply. ‘She gives me a bad feeling.’ 4

‘She doesn’t give me a bad feeling.’ I snorted, knowing Maya would instantly detest anyone she viewed as a threat. ‘Besides, she hasn’t so much as touched

Besides, she hasn't so much as touched him. She's just overly enthusiastic.'

"Luna, I'm so glad you've made it!" I heard Cassidy squeal as soon as we came into view, proving my earlier statement. It was hard not to return her smile, especially when she genuinely did look pleased. There was no doubt in my mind, she had heard the announcement and knew the truth just like the rest of the pack. Her golden curls bounced as she chirped, "I spent hours setting this entire thing up, sorting through everyone who wanted to come. We had to keep it invite only, since your big announcement and all of that—but this will give us plenty of time to get to know one another! Oh—who is your this?"

"This is Breyona, one of my best-friends." I grinned, reigning in my laugh as Breyona gave Cassidy a stunned look. She did come on strong, but so far, she had been nothing but friendly.

"It's so wonderful to meet you!" She tittered, her eyes darting across the crowd as though she saw someone she recognized. "I'm going to run and grab us all some drinks. Afterwards we can find



a good spot to put our towels. Wait until you see this place at night! I swear, I put enough lights in the forest to turn the town into a beacon.”

“She’s a bit intense.” Breyona giggled.

“Cassidy’s always been enthusiastic—about everything.” Asher snorted, making my mouth go dry when he removed the black t-shirt he had been wearing. I ignored the blatant looks coming from at least fifteen different she-wolves and focused on the fact that his churning eyes on me. “Her and Brandon had always been closest. I preferred spending most of my time alone, but there were times when I would hang out with them.” ①

“Somehow, I’m not surprised you like to spend most of your time alone.” Breyona teased lightly.

Cassidy came back with a smile on her face, carrying three cans and a glass bottle. She handed Asher an amber bottle of some strong-smelling beer, while handing me a can of those fruity margaritas. I set my open drink on the trunk of a nearby car whilst taking my



think of a nearby car whilst taking my own t-shirt off. 1

Asher brought the bottle to his lips, and the way his nose scrunched disdainfully had me erupting in laughter.

"Is it good?" I teased.

"As good as cheap beer can be." He grunted, his eyes dragging down the length of my body until he stopped just where my hands were, fumbling with the button to my shorts. 1

"Not all of us can afford that fancy bourbon you drink." Cassidy giggled, but Asher's attention was otherwise diverted. "I personally think it tastes like gasoline either way."

In one long stride he stood inches in front of me, swatting my fumbling hands away with ease. As his fingertips grazed across my lower stomach, undoing the button that had been giving me trouble, whilst also making my core clench painfully. For a split second, I glanced at the surrounding forest and contemplated our chances of being spotted should we slip away. 1

The corners of his lips twitched ever so

slightly.

'Eavesdropping on my thoughts?' I mused, stuffing my clothes into my backpack while snatching up my drink. I had yet to taste it, but from scent alone, I could tell the taste of beer would well overpower the strawberry flavoring inside.

'Only when they have to do with you dragging me off into the forest to seduce me.' His voice sounded lower, raspy with need.

'Wait until night falls.'" I warned him, bringing the canned margarita to my lips. 'I might still follow through on that plan.' 1

The sizzle of carbonation hit my lips when a gleeful whoop filled the air, carrying a voice I had been dreading hearing all day. I set my wasted drink on the chromed-out bumper of someone's pick-up truck. The prospect of drinking no longer sounded so alluring, not when Brandon was currently wandering through the crowd, his eyes blown wide with gleeful interest as he sauntered my way.

Chapter 109

“Brandon.” Asher’s voice held a warning beneath its calm façade, as did his eyes, which were currently latched onto where his brother stood.

“Oh, relax. You’re awful uptight considering the big secret is now out. What was that saying—oh, that’s right. The truth will set you free. Do you feel free, brother?”

He held a beer bottle in his hand, the condensation still running down the sides in thin rivulets. With both Asher and Brandon standing before me, shirtless and in swimming trunks, it was easy to see the similarities between the two.

Asher’s hair was a tad darker, but both had the same jaw shape and broad shoulders, the athletic body that bordered on massive in size. Where Asher was stingy with his facial expressions, Brandon held absolutely nothing back—even when he should.

“How can I ever feel free, Brandon? I’m Alpha to the largest pack in the country,



and you're my brother." Admittedly, I held my breath for those few seconds, unsure what Asher's reaction would be. A few dryly tossed words I could handle, so long as the blistering sun didn't set them aflame.

"You two, I swear." Cassidy shook her head at the two of them before giving me a smile that said, 'this happens often.' She strutted over to where some of the water coolers sat, smirking at a few guys who turned her way. The familiar hiss of carbonation sounded from the bottle in her hand. Shoving the opened beer towards Brandon, she laughed. "Quit looking for a fight and enjoy the party. It's never been packed like this before." 1

"That's because our Alpha has never dared grace one of our lowly college parties, and I already have a beer." Brandon snickered but took the beer from her hand and drank deeply.

I didn't bother hiding my look of absolute disgust and rolled my eyes when he winked playfully.

"You're almost finished your first, and you know how busy your brother is."

Cassidy snorted, "Besides, Erik says there are a lot of kids here from Stratford Prep and—"

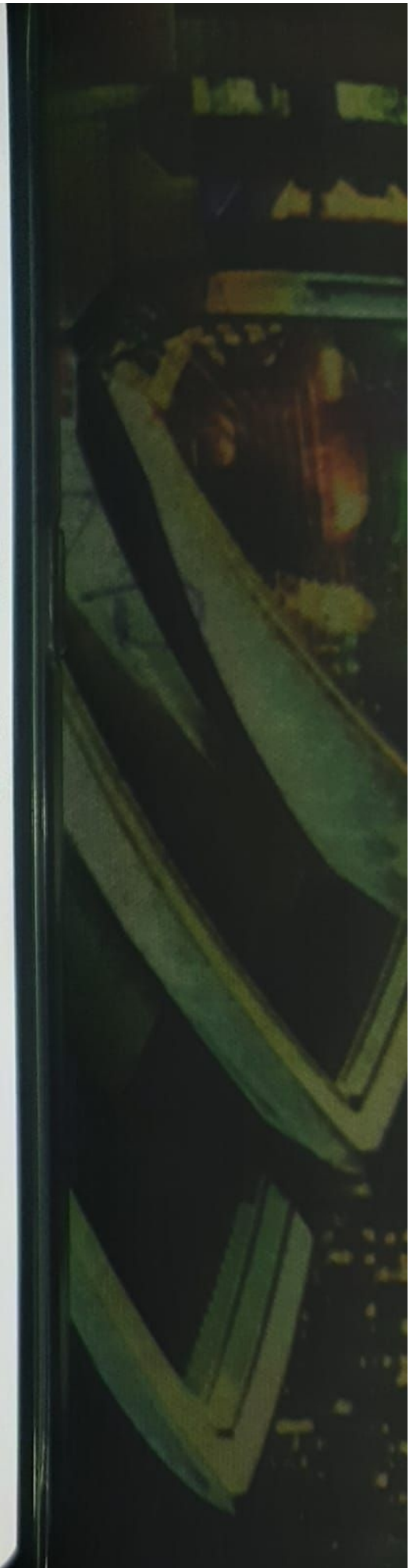
"For it to be a college party, you have to be in college, Brandon." Asher commented, swiveling his eyes downward to the two beer bottles in his brothers' hands. Brandon, ever the challenge, gave Asher a teasing smile and took another long drink.

"Cass is in college, and she bought the beer. Same shit if you ask me." He shrugged but perked up as he registered what Cassidy had said. "Did you say Stratford Prep?"

"I sure did." Cassidy's petal-colored lips tilted up in a feminine smirk, which Brandon devoured with one of his sultry smiles.

"Sorry, gorgeous. It's not going to work out between us—not tonight, anyhow."

I visibly jumped when Asher's snarl rang out into the air, making all conversation within a ten-foot radius halt. It took me a few seconds after his threatening snarl, staring at Brandon's muscular back as he



●ring at Brandon's muscular back as he retreated, to realize he had been talking to me.

"Is there something special about Stratford Prep students?" Breyona asked curiously.

Cassidy chuckled low, a coy smile on her face. "Stratford Prep students wear uniforms. Brandon has a very passionate love for plaid skirts and thigh-high socks. And if he ever tries to deny it, I have proof."

Suddenly, an image came to mind. I could tell from the clarity and vividness that it wasn't coming from my head, but Asher's. All too quickly my eyes strayed from the background, which happened to be a rugged office with animal pelts and lots of dark cherry wood, to Asher's form. He sat in the desk chair, his hair and eyes dark as night. The unyielding look of hunger and violence on his face did something to my insides. He looked like the CEO of a company—or the King of a country, staring down at all those smaller than him.

And on her knees in front of him,



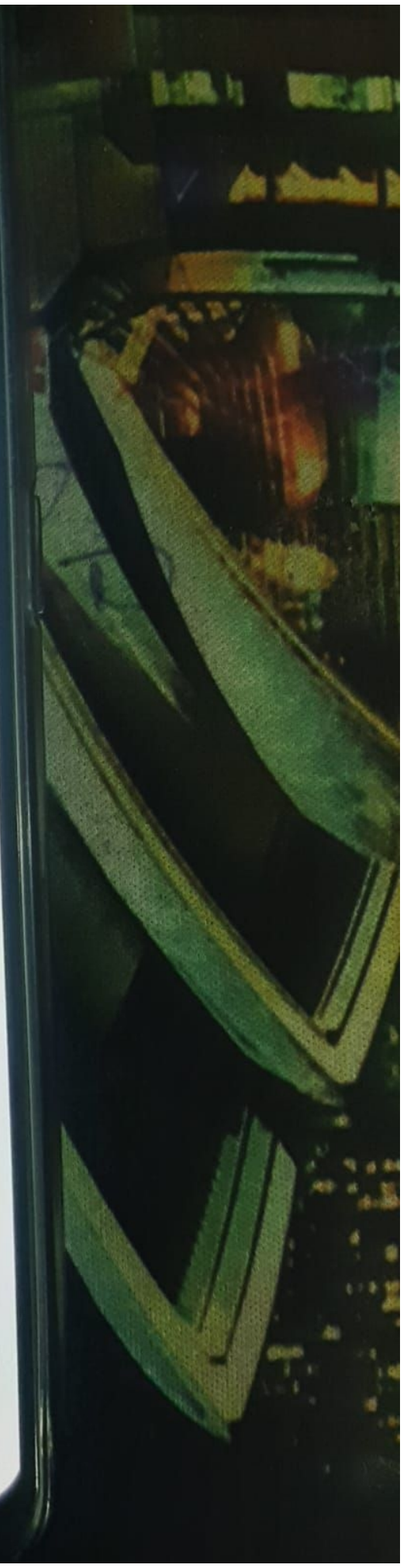
●d on her knees in front of him, wearing nothing but a pleated skirt and long socks, was me.

My mouth went dry instantaneously, and I regretted setting my opened drink unattended on the bumper of someone's truck. Heat coursed through me, coating my skin in a thin layer of sweat that had nothing to do with the sun, and everything to do with the way Asher was looking at me.

I hadn't seen him move, but I swore time halted around us as his arm snaked around my waist. My hands fell flat against his chest, my palms tickled by the sparks that danced between our bodies — our bonded souls. I could feel him in the deepest corners of me, intertwined in everything that made me who and what I was.

His depraved words, leaking desperation that only I could satiate, they controlled the very functions of my body until it bended to his will.

As his lips fell on my own, sucking the words and breath from my lungs. A gasp managed to emerge when his tongue darted out and grazed my own



Managed to emerge
darted out and grazed my own.

'Say the word, Lola.' His voice was deep, raspy and dark with need that had been held back for far too long. 'Say the word and I'll drag you into the forest—I'll make sure everyone can hear how addicting your little whimpers sound.'

"Oh, Alex is here! I have to introduce you to her, Luna!" Cassidy's soprano broke the spell between Asher and I, drawing my attention to a dark-haired girl nearby. She stood at one of those cheap plastic tables, grabbing at the various bottles of cheap liquor as she poured and mixed them into a single cup. As she flipped her hair over her shoulder, I noticed the distinctive lime-green streak running down the side of her head. "She's Asher's cousin, and she's been chomping at the bit to meet you! Especially after last night's announcement."

"You can call me Lola—"

Cassidy quickly got her attention, nearly making her spill the concoction she had spent the last five minutes making. Alex came jogging over, unleashing a dimpled



grin that perfectly matched her pale colored eyes and electric green streak. The swimming trunks and bikini top she wore were the same vibrant shade of lime green. My eyes were drawn to the bit of jewelry that dangled from her septum, and the ones that dotted her ears.

“It’s an honor to meet you, especially after that big reveal last night. The name is Alex, our Alpha’s only tolerable relative.” From the confidence in which she said it, and the ghost of a smirk on Asher’s face, I took it most people found Brandon as insufferable as I did. I noticed as we talked, there were others listening in. Heads were cocked in our direction, eyes darting anywhere but to where our small group stood. It was still new to me, being the center of attention. “I’ve got to say, it’s pretty badass that you’re the Vampire Queen. For however long you and my cousin stay in town, I know you’ll run into some hateful people. Try not to listen to them, there’s plenty of us who are on your side. We know that when change comes, it’s not always the most comfortable thing.”

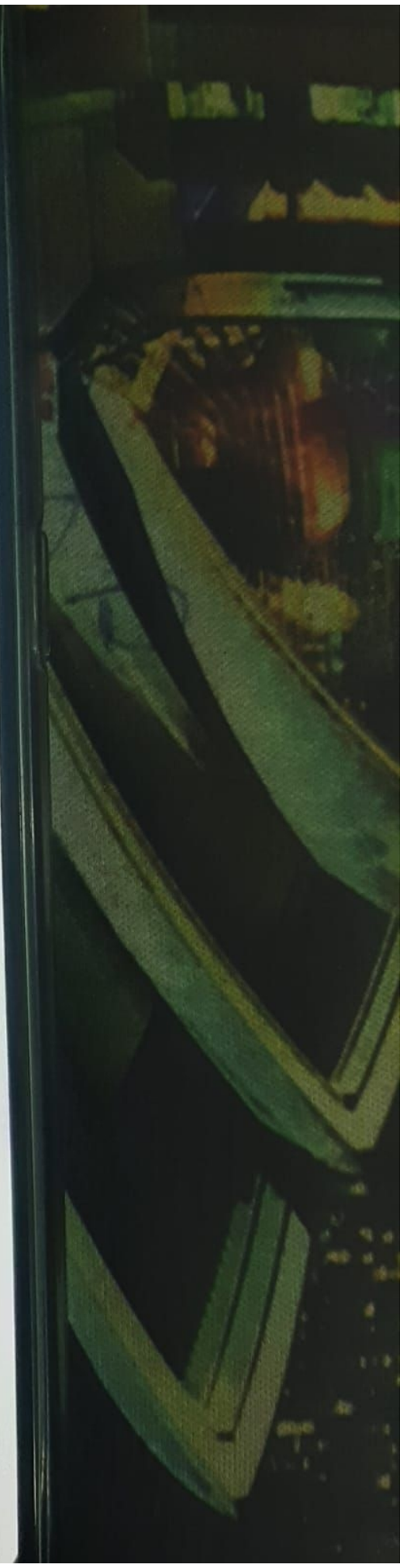
“I really appreciate that, Alex.” I told her

genuinely, hoping the eavesdropping werewolves were listening closely. She took a long drink of the concoction in her hand and nodded, satisfied with whatever flavor she had created. "It's been hard, figuring everything out—but I don't scare easily."

"I'm sure you don't. You wouldn't survive being mated to my cousin if you did." She laughed, but her eyes were snagged by someone further along the beach. Her eyes lit up, like small oasis's. "Oh, that's my girlfriend over there! I'll catch up with you later and introduce you to her, Luna. It was great seeing you again, Cass. I'll send you a call later tonight!"

"Talk to you then!" Cassidy shouted back as Alex waved and ran off towards a curvy redhead. She turned to Asher and gave him a nod, "If you don't mind, I'm stealing your mate and her best-friend. I want to get to know them better without you looming around and scaring the unmated males off."

"He does loom, doesn't he?" Breyona snickered under her breath, averting her



He does seem, doesn't he? They said
●ckered under her breath, averting her eyes when Asher's intense gaze fell on her.

"I think I'll locate Zeke before he finds the Stratford Prep students." Asher grunted, giving me one last look before turning and walking through the parting crowd. I could still feel the heat in his eyes along my skin.

Girls and guys, both lounging on towels and playing in the glittering water, watched their Alpha move through the crowd. I had to remind myself that this wasn't something Asher typically did.

The first thing I did was leap into the startingly cold water, letting out a great sigh the moment it wiped the sweat from my skin and doused the heat blossoming inside of me. Breyona followed while Cassidy climbed the small hill and jumped in via the rope swing. A slew of cheers rose as she landed with a splash.

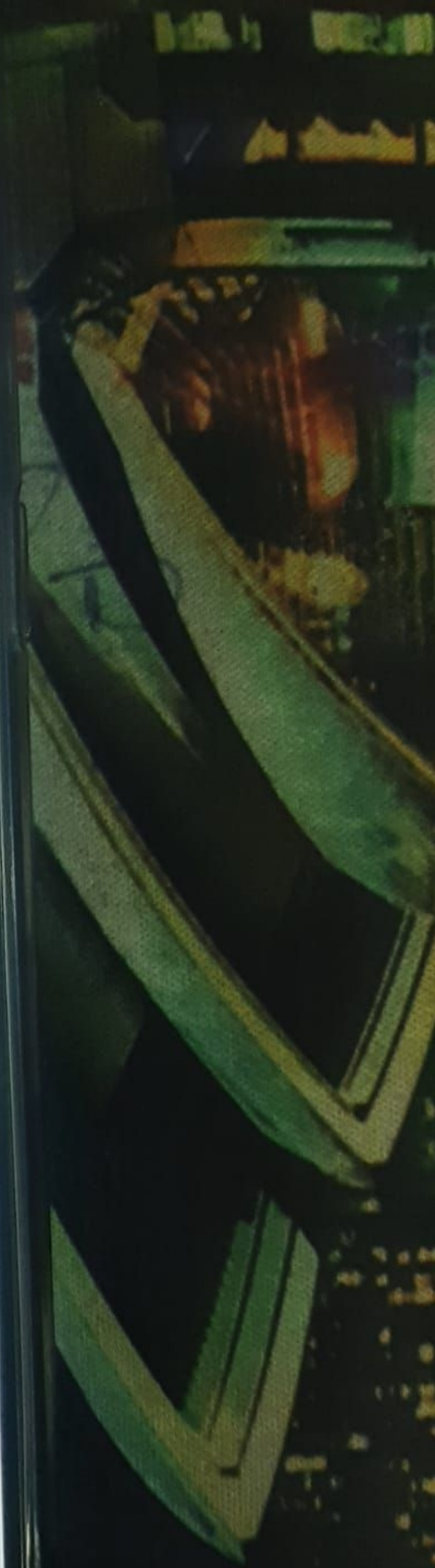
Chapter 110

After almost an hour, I felt a pair of arms wrap around my waist. Unlike when Brandon touched me, there was no gut feeling telling me this touch was wrong. I turned around and grinned at Asher, placing my hands on his shoulders as I bobbed up and down. The tips of my toes grazed the silt at the bottom of the lake, just barely.

“I should have put floaties on your arms.” His lips twitched into a smirk, and his eyes narrowed playfully.

I gave him a look full of offense and frowned, “I’m short, that doesn’t mean I’m going to drown. I still know how to swim. Besides, if I had floaties on, then I wouldn’t need to do this.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, letting my fingers tangle in the unruly strands of his hair. He was beginning to need a trim, which gave me plenty to grab onto. I felt his reaction the moment I slid my legs around his waist. All too quickly, my hands left his hair and traveled down the hard expanse of his chest, marveling at the feel of his wet



chest, marveling at the feel of his wet muscles.

“And how is our good friend Zeke doing?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow when Asher sighed.

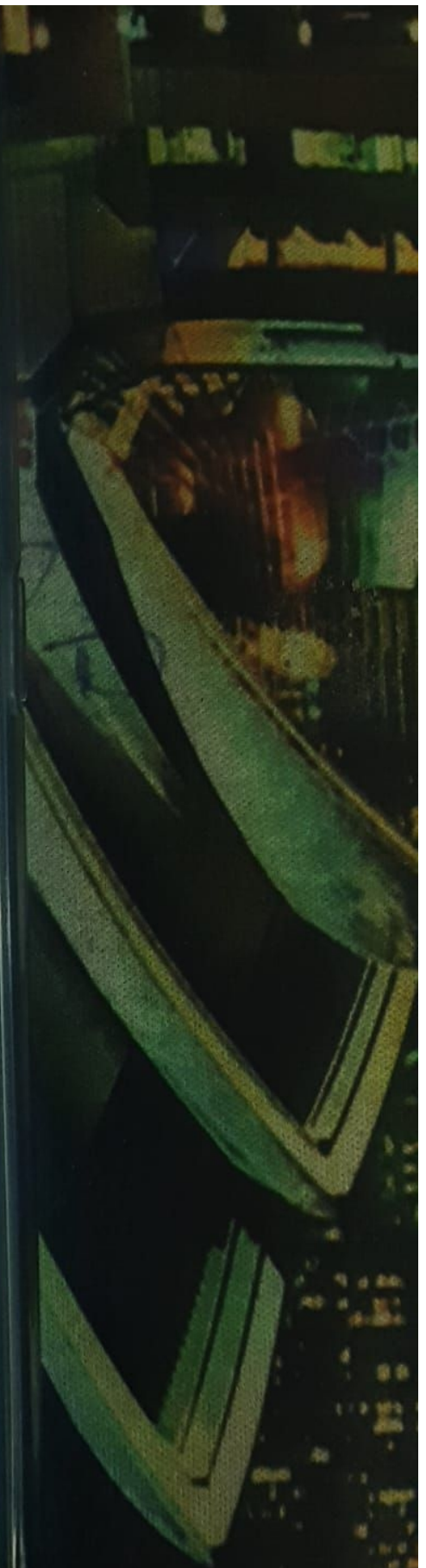
“He’s ‘searching for his soulmate while having a few drinks to take the edge off.’” Asher quoted, giving me a look so dry that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“So, he’s getting drunk and flirting with a bunch of she-wolves.” I smirked.

“Naturally.” He grunted.

“Is that what you did, Asher?” I asked, my voice growing low as I moved my lips inches from his ear. Jealousy, jagged like glass, sliced through my gut and yet I continued. “When you needed someone to fill your bed, would you go to a party and bring some girl home?”

“I never needed to search, there were plenty of she-wolves more than willing to jump into my bed.” His honesty seared my insides, but I wasn’t one to cower and hide when emotions grew too tough. His words challenged mine, earning a snarl from my lips that was smothered when he continued, “It had only ever been sex in



done it, she stretched her tanned legs out slowly.

'Oh, she's good.' Maya murmured.

It took Cassidy twenty minutes of flirting before her and Lars, the guy with the eyebrow scar, were ready to ditch the rest of us. I stood along side of her, dusting the sand from my sweatshirt and shorts.

"I'm going to find Asher." I assured her with a friendly grin, "It was really nice hanging out with you, Cassidy!"

"Oh, are you sure? I feel horrible ditching you." She frowned, eyes darting to where Lars was talking with his friends, a beer in his hand. Her hair formed a golden halo around her shoulders. "We absolutely have to plan something, just for us girls! Oh, and call me Cass. Everyone does!"

"It's all good, I need to find him and Zeke anyway." I smirked, nodding towards Lars. "Have fun, Cass."

"Oh, I plan on it." She winked and ran up to Lars, linking her arm through his as she easily melted into the conversation.

'You think college would give us better

social skills?' Maya asked as we ventured away from the bonfire, further down the beach. I continued walking, watching as the cars began to thin out. The next fire was at least fifty feet away, a small speck of flame in the distance.

'I don't think so. Doesn't change the fact that neither one of us have a filter.' I shrugged unapologetically.

'I don't typically mind the lack of self-control, just don't go challenging anymore Alpha's.' She snorted.

'I don't plan on it—'

"Just the Vampire Queen I've been lookin' for." It wasn't Asher's raspy voice I heard, but someone unbearably similar. I was immediately on the defensive when I turned and stared into Brandon's glassy eyes. It was clear he was tipsy or borderline drunk, but there was still a good bit of lucidity to his gaze.

"I wasn't aware there was more than one Vampire Queen." I commented, turning on my heel as I planned to make a hasty get away.

got away.

His hand closed around my wrist, and I froze.

“C’mon, Lola. I’m not that bad. I swear, I’m just an ass when I drink.” Any other girl would have missed the teasing tone his voice had, how it was buried beneath layers of practice and skill. I could tell it was there because Asher did the same thing. “My brother doesn’t deserve the Queen of all Vampire’s as his mate—”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me clearly the first time.” I began, my back still turned and my wrist still fully in his grasp. “I have a tendency to mumble.”

I turned on my heel, feeling my muscles bunch and coil as I used the inhuman speed of both my werewolf and vampire heritage. Time slowed and I could see the surprise as it dawned across his drunken face, filling his glossy eyes until they overflowed with it.

My fist slammed into his stomach, crushing his abs beneath my knuckles. I gave him no time to recover as he doubled over and sent my knee careening into his balls—the same bits I had seen

to his balls—the same bits I had seen when he welcomed Asher and I into town. He grunted and groaned as he went down, his knees sinking into the damp sand.

I stared down at him, knowing he could see Maya stirring within my eyes.

“I don’t care what your problem is with your brother, I don’t care what strange feud you two have going on. You will not use me to get a rise out of him, and you will not lay a hand on me.”