

BOOK THREE OF *THE LITHIA TRILOGY*

THE LAST MILE

A NOVEL



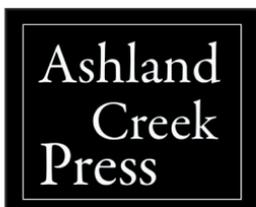
BLAIR RICHMOND

THE LAST MILE

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A novel by
Blair Richmond

Book three of The Lithia Trilogy



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“These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume.”

— William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

PART ONE:
SERPENTINE

ONE

Ashes to ashes.
These words run through my head as I walk through the forest holding a man's wristwatch. A golden timepiece warped and charred by flames into some misshapen, glittering ingot. The time has been frozen at the exact moment its owner was consumed by the conflagration—nine thirty-five.

This was my father's wristwatch. Now it is all that's left of him—all but the memories. And these memories I also carry, though these are much heavier and much harder to bear—most of them are better left forgotten.

Still, by now even the most painful memories are slightly less painful—my dad and I had a rare chance to reconnect before he died, an opportunity I know I should feel grateful for. Our last days and weeks together were not exactly warm and fuzzy, but during what turned out to be his very last moments, he seemed to have turned a corner, becoming a father I might've liked to know.

Yet if he'd lived he may have changed back again; he always

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did—nice one moment, vindictive and sneaky the next. It's probably better that everything related to my father is now and forever in the past.

I've spent most of my life feeling alone, and certainly since I ran away, to Lithia, I've been on my own. But until now I haven't been an orphan—the last member of my family to walk this earth. My mother has for years lain buried in the town cemetery, and now I'm saying good-bye to my father here on this mountain.

There has to be a reason for it all—the death of my mother, then my father, both so violent and premature. There has to be a reason they both died in these hills, high above Lithia, the town of my birth, the town I now call home. But what is the reason? It's not easy finding one. Maybe it's just bad luck. Or maybe it is meant to be, and I'll never know why.

Ashes to ashes.

Ashes are all around me, everywhere I step, over charred branches and tree trunks, burnt leaves and grasses. The smell of charcoal wafts up as I step lightly on the blackened earth.

Ashes are all around, and yet I have none to spread. There wasn't much left of my father when they found him—only the watch. He'd been up here looking for me, thinking I was trapped by the wildfire as it blew down the hills toward Lithia. But I had already escaped the fire; I'd found my way down by a different route. I was safe, worrying about him at the same time he was running into the fire looking for me.

It was the first truly selfless act I could remember from my father. He'd put on quite a show in the weeks before that, telling me he wanted us to be a family again, telling me he wanted to help me save the land I'd inherited here—only to turn around and steal it from me. He didn't care about me, or the land, or the animals

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who make their homes here—he only cared about money. It was his only persistent goal in life: to get rich.

My father spent his life in constant pursuit of a quick buck, and even as he scammed people he didn't realize that he was vulnerable to the same scams himself. He used the developer Ed Jacobs to take the Horton property from me—and then he was shocked when Ed Jacobs turned around and used my father to take the land for himself.

Despite the flames that tore through here, ravaging the beginnings of Ed Jacobs's development, most of the trees remain healthy and untouched. Fire is nature's way of housecleaning, clearing the undergrowth of all the dead matter so that new life can grow. Fire tells the older trees to release their seeds, which they do, and, in turn, they give birth to the next generation of forest. In nature, fire is a necessary evil.

My father never understood that the land is a gift; he was always seeking something from it, only interested in what he could take from it. Since I was a child, he'd been looking for gold in these hills, and he never found it. Ironically, I was the one who finally found the gold my dad knew existed here—I'd found enough to buy the land back, and enough to care for it and keep it undeveloped, free of humans forever.

I am more like my mother—she loved this land, which is why Mrs. Horton had willed it to her, and that's how it eventually ended up coming to me. My mother died on the trails when I was just twelve. Back then, everyone thought it was a bear attack—and most still do. I know better.

This part of the forest is now famous for mysterious, fatal “bear” attacks of the worst kind—and yet no bear is ever seen or heard around the time of these incidents. The authorities simply

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blame bears because they don't know who to blame, and the locals have taken to just pretending it can't happen to them or hoping it never will. After my mother died, the killing stopped for a long time—but lately, it has been happening all too often.

After my mom died, I was dragged by my drunk father to Texas, where I got by until I couldn't take it anymore. I finally ran away, back to Lithia, the only place I knew to go, the only place where I remembered having good memories. After I returned, I began to find the life I always dreamed of living. It hasn't been easy—I've lost friends, I've lost love, I've lost my father—but I do know that I'm back where I'm meant to be.

And I've also learned that everything comes full circle. My mother raised me to treasure the land, and because of her friendship with an old widow who loved her, the land will now be protected. My father entering the circle again, my mother's ghost making an appearance—it all spun and spun, the land won and lost and won again—and now, here I am, full circle, wandering in search of the secret pond that my mom and dad had brought me to as a child to swim, the pond in which I later discovered the lost entrance to the gold mine.

I keep hoping I'll see my mother's ghost again, even though I know I won't. She had a role to play—to make sure I became the caretaker of the Horton land. And, thanks to her, I did, though the journey nearly cost me and Roman our lives. And now that her job is over, I won't be seeing her again.

But she's still with me. I touch the necklace around my neck—a polished stone of serpentine held in place by a silver chain—the one thing my father gave me that I'll treasure forever. My mother's necklace.

I'm still wandering, and I'm no closer to finding that pond.

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The landscape has been so transformed that there are no familiar landmarks to go by—and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the pond, and the mine within, is lost forever.

I'll have to make do with the land in front of me.

I set down my backpack. I open it and take out a small camp shovel and get to work digging a small hole.

I had hoped to find the spot where I'd discovered the gold not so much to say good-bye to my father but to seal it up for good. But I imagine the earthquake that rumbled through here did the work for me. The land always takes care of itself.

Once the hole I've dug appears deep enough, I hold my dad's watch over it. I had taken gold from the earth so I could save the earth. That's what I tell myself. And now it's time to return gold to the earth—and to put my father to rest.

"Good-bye, Dad," I say, and then I drop the watch into the ground.

I feel as though there's more I should say, but I can't think of what it might be. In the end, we didn't know each other well. I stand for a moment, staring down at the watch, thinking of his last moments, of the day he gave me my mother's necklace. It's the one thing he never took back, probably because it has no monetary value, only sentimental value. But the fact that he wanted me to have it means the world to me.

I like to think that he is in a better place now, happy at last, free of material obsessions. I wonder if he is with my mother, whether they have reconciled or have become whoever they once were together. Wherever they are has to be easier and less complicated than being here, in the real world.

I fill in the hole with dirt and ashes and stomp it solid, until it blends in with the rest of the ground. That's when I realize that

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I've done such a good job of concealing my work that, unless I put up something to mark this location, I won't be able to find my way back.

But maybe it's better this way. The memories will never be lost, and the rest is just a watch frozen in time, returned to the earth. It's better if I forget. Say good-bye forever.

"Rest in peace," I say.

"Amen."

The voice comes from behind me and nearly stops my heart. I spin around.

It's Victor. His face is pale, his eyes glowing red, and he is standing way too close for comfort.

I'm not unused to vampires—after all, I've fallen in love with two of them. But they are different from Victor. Roman and Alex have both given up blood, while Victor is as hungry as ever. Right now, his fangs dangle over his lower lips.

"What are you doing here, Victor?"

"Paying my respects."

"This doesn't concern you," I say.

"Well, my dear Katherine, the truth is, *you* concern me," he says. "And if you don't mind my saying, I should likewise concern you a great deal. Didn't Roman or Alex warn you about walking in the woods alone?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Ah, but you should be."

He's right. I should be afraid. Any mortal should be afraid of this monster, this indiscriminate killer of men and women alike.

Yet I feel an almost serene calmness in my arms and legs. There is no longer any urge to run or even back away. I should be terrified right now, lungs frozen, ears pounding with the blood

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I know Victor so desperately craves. My mind knows I should be afraid, and yet my body refuses to play along. And I begin to wonder if this is how death feels the moment before it becomes real. I don't want to die, but I also don't want to run any longer. Not from my past, not from myself, and certainly not from Victor.

He takes a step closer. At this point he and I could reach out and touch hands, not that I'm tempted to. I should take a step backward, and yet I don't. In fact, I feel the urge to step toward him, to force him onto his heels.

"Why don't you leave Lithia?" I ask him, stunned by my boldness. "You're not wanted here. You know that."

"Katherine, my sweet, why should I be the one to leave? I was here first, after all. It is I who should be asking you to leave."

I stand as tall as I can, though I can't possibly match Victor's stature. Still, my voice doesn't waver: "You'll have to kill me first."

"I fully expect to," he says. "I should have done away with you a long time ago. But I thought Roman would tire of you first and save me the trouble. I overestimated him. I expected him to remain loyal to his patron. To his destiny. To his nature."

"His nature has evolved. For the better. And if you weren't so stubborn, you'd follow his lead. Roman and Alex no longer need to kill people, and they've never been happier."

"They're freaks. Freaks of nature."

"No, Victor. You're the freak. You're an anachronism."

He smiles. "Anachronism? I'm a vampire. I'm an anachronism by design."

"That's where you're wrong. Everything evolves, or at least has the potential. Everything and everyone. It's how we survive. And you and your kind will never survive unless you evolve."

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You'll have to change."

"Is that right?" His eyes narrow and his voice grows deep, like the bone-rattling roar of a lion. "Were these the same words you used to brainwash Roman?"

"I didn't brainwash him. He changed his mind entirely on his own."

"You inspired him, surely. You led him to the proverbial river."

"I merely told him that he could live a life free of guilt. That's what inspired him. Knowing he didn't have to spend the rest of eternity preying on others and leaving behind a wake of suffering. Are you telling me you have no guilty conscience? No guilt whatsoever?"

"If one has no conscience, then one has no need for guilt."

Victor's fangs are growing longer, his eyes burning red. I know I should back up, turn, run—anything to protect myself from this beast. Yet I'm not moving—or I can't move; I'm not entirely sure. It's as if my body is no longer under my command; I'm frozen to this spot.

He takes another step, and I feel the chill of his breath.

I remain still.

"Guilt," he says, with a low, hideous chuckle. "What a romantic and utterly useless concept."

"People who say they feel no guilt," I tell him, "are those who feel the most remorse." My voice sounds strong and certain, though I am all too aware of how much closer he's getting—and how few options I have.

"Then why don't we test that theory with you, my Katherine?" He seems to rise above me, and I have to look up to keep his face in my sights. "Let's see how much—or how *little*—remorse I feel once you are no longer among the living."

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Then his hand is on my shoulder, in a death grip, and the air around me freezes icy cold—and all I can see is Victor's face, closer and closer, his mouth open wide, fangs dripping, and I close my eyes, ready to die. The words still ringing in my ears.

Ashes to ashes.

TWO

A bright flash of lightning knocks me backward into a tree. I hear the sound of an otherworldly scream, smell sulfur in my nostrils, and open my eyes to see Victor on the ground in front of me, a hand over his face.

Smoke drifts up from his mouth. He rises unsteadily to his feet, sizing me up.

I don't know what just happened. I look up at the sky, but it's clear and blue—not a cloud anywhere. Where had the lightning come from?

Victor is staring at my neck, fangless, his eyes dark and angry. “Your necklace,” he says. “Where did you get it?”

“It was my mother's.” Instinctively I reach up to my neck. It feels warm to the touch, as if it has just emerged from an oven or microwave. I remember my mother used to think it brought her good luck. Of course, she was not wearing it the day she died.

Now I'm wondering: Could it be more than good luck? Could the necklace be so powerful that it had just saved my life?

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Victor holds out his hand. “Let me have a look.”

I step backward. “I don’t think so.” I run my hands along the smooth edges of the marbled green stone.

“You are fortunate to have had such a generous mother. Pity she wasn’t wearing it the day Alex found her on the trail.”

My anger fueled, I take a step toward Victor, and, amazingly, he takes a step back.

“This isn’t over between us, my dear,” he says. “As a matter of fact, it is only just beginning.”

He turns and becomes a blur of movement as he disappears into the woods. The next thing I hear is the sound of my lungs exhaling. I begin to pace, with one shaking hand on my necklace, as if to protect it, as it had somehow protected me. I don’t know what exactly happened, but whatever it was, I just faced death head-on and survived.

“Katherine.”

I spin around, my heart leaping into my throat, ready for another attack.

But it’s not Victor—it’s Roman, running up the trail. He’s not wearing running clothes, just jeans and a T-shirt, so it’s clear that he’s not out on a jog. That he’s coming for me.

“What are you doing up here?” I ask. I still wonder how he instinctually seems to know when I need him. He and Alex both have this same uncanny ability.

“I had quite a disconcerting sense that you might be here,” Roman says. “I also feared that Victor was not very far away.”

“Is he ever?” I say.

Roman embraces me, and I collapse into his strong arms. Then I remember my necklace and how it hurt Victor. I push Roman away.

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He looks surprised and hurt. “What is the matter?”

“My necklace. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Your necklace?” Confusion quickly turns to recognition. “Katherine, did Victor attack you?”

“He tried to. But my necklace—it fended him off. I think it burned him somehow. He wouldn’t come near me after that.”

Roman has a knowing look, but he doesn’t say anything.

“It’s like I have garlic around my neck,” I say, prodding him to tell me something.

“That’s a myth, Katherine. Some vampires actually have quite a fondness for garlic.” There is teasing in his voice—rare for my ever-serious Roman.

But right now I want answers, not jokes.

“Roman.” I give him a look. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on with this necklace, or do I have to guess?”

“I don’t want this to give you a false sense of security,” he says. “Yes, your necklace protected you. This time. But Victor is persistent and creative. He will find a way around it.”

“I don’t understand. If it can ward off Victor, how come it doesn’t hurt you?”

“Because I’m no longer a killer,” Roman says. “Make no mistake—I’m well aware of its power. But because I have changed, because I have no desire to harm you, it cannot harm me.”

I pull the necklace, still warm, away from my neck to get a better look. “What’s the deal with this stone, exactly? My mom thought it was good luck, but I figured she was just being superstitious.”

“The stone is serpentine,” Roman says. “And serpentine is a very old stone. Not just any type of rock but one blessed by the Native American spirits. The natives believed that serpentine held

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special powers, that it could channel energy from the earth. What you're wearing is an ancient necklace."

"My dad said she got it from someone in her family."

"Remember, Mrs. Horton was a pioneer descendant, and she was like family to your mother."

"So you think my mother got this from Mrs. Horton?"

"It's possible."

"She was trying to protect her," I say with a sigh. "And it didn't work."

"Mrs. Horton was a wise lady," Roman says. "And I know for a fact that Victor always hated Mrs. Horton. He was very careful to avoid her."

"That's why she lived such a long life." I sigh again. "I guess it's an accomplishment in this town to die of old age."

Roman nods. "Victor has lorded over this region for a very long time—there have been absences, thankfully, but he always returns. Perhaps the natives figured out a way to protect themselves from him. And perhaps some pioneer families learned a trick or two as well."

I run my fingers over the stone. I wish I knew why my mother wasn't wearing it that fateful afternoon on the trail. I'll probably never know, though I suspect my father might've taken it from her, thinking he might pawn it. She was always "losing" things—a pair of earrings, a tennis racquet—and she didn't learn until later that he would pawn whatever he could that might be worth something, anything to make a quick dollar. Maybe he couldn't get any good offers for what looks like an ordinary stone held with a thin, inexpensive chain of silver. It is beautiful to me, handmade with love—but I can understand a pawn shop owner not seeing much value in it. No gold, no gems.

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Yet what a valuable stone it is.

I suddenly feel so much more powerful knowing that I can stand up to Victor, knowing I can live my life without worrying about what's lurking behind the trees and outside my cottage door. Maybe I can finally get a full night's rest for once.

"I told you that you shouldn't be up here alone," Roman says.

"I wanted to say good-bye to my father."

"It's not safe."

"I'm not going to live in fear. You'd be proud of me, Roman. I didn't back down to that monster. Not a step."

But he doesn't look proud; his pale, handsome face is taut with worry. "Katherine, please, I need you to listen to me very carefully," he says. "That necklace does not give you immunity. Victor may not be able to touch you while you are wearing it, but that doesn't mean he will stop trying to hurt you. He will stop at nothing."

"What does it matter, as long as I wear it all the time?"

"He will try to take it from you, directly or indirectly. Promise me you won't come up here alone."

It's been more than a month since I've been able to go running with any sort of consistency, with the craziness of school and theater, but I've longed to start again. I know if I just nod and smile, this will ease Roman's worries—and yet I can't do it. I can't bring myself to lie to Roman, and I'm too stubborn to let a man—or a vampire, for that matter—tell me where I can or can't go.

"I'm sorry, Roman. I can't promise you that."

He gives me such a disappointed look that I almost change my mind. Almost.

"Roman, I'm sorry," I say. "But you know that's no way for me to live, always looking over my shoulder, or staying close to

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you like some child in need of protection. And you said yourself that Victor isn't going to leave me alone no matter what I do."

"True. But that doesn't mean you should be alone so often. It's too risky. You must let me protect you."

"But you can't protect everyone in this town. The best thing you can do is figure out a way to get Victor to leave Lithia once and for all. That's the only way we'll all be safe."

"Believe me, Katherine, I've tried. But how do you bribe someone who has no interest in money?"

"So what does he want, exactly?"

Roman says nothing, and then I realize I already know.

"Okay, I guess it's obvious—he wants me dead. But why?"

"You know why."

I guess I do. "Because you love me."

The look on Roman's face tells me I'm right. "He knows you're my only true weakness, Katherine."

Then comes the sound of leaves rustling in the forest around us, and both of us go on alert. I feel my body tensing, ready for Victor to reappear—though I should know by now that when there is noise, I have much less to fear, since Victor makes no sound at all.

Still, we can't know what's coming around the bend, and I hold my breath until I realize that it's moving faster than a bear; it might be a deer. Then, from around the bend, moving swiftly, comes a woman dressed in form-fitting running gear and dark sunglasses. She blows right by, stepping nimbly to the edge of the trail to get past us and not breathing heavily at all. She looks familiar, though I can't place her; she went by too quickly for me to say hello even if I could remember who she was.

I feel the urge to join her; it's been weeks since I've run this

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trail. I'm a little envious and decide right then that it's time I got back into fighting shape. With Victor breathing down my neck, I'm going to need to be.

I turn back to Roman. "Is that hidden pond around here?" I ask. "I couldn't seem to find it."

He nods. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to see it again. Can you take me there?"

"Will you stop running by yourself if I do?"

"No."

He shakes his head. "I had to ask."

He brushes past me to lead the way, and I follow a few steps behind as he holds the branches for me. We are off the trail now, climbing through thick forest and deep ruts in the earth.

After a few minutes we arrive at the pond. We're in the middle of the woods—I'd never have found it again on my own.

I stare down at the water, at this magical place. It's where my mother and father used to take me when I was a child, where I swam and played and dove down deep. It's where I discovered the gold and, thanks to that discovery, saved Lithia—and all these trees and all the animals that need them—from Ed Jacobs.

I reach down to touch the icy water and am met with a different sensation entirely. "Ouch!" I pull back, stung by the heat.

I look up at Roman in shock, but he doesn't seem surprised.

"Why's it so hot?"

"Mount Lithia," Roman says.

"What do you mean?"

"The earthquake that sealed the gold mine shut must have set free geothermal channels," he says. "So now it appears we have a hot spring."

"Just like that?"

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“Just like that.” But I can tell there’s something he’s not telling me.

“Out with it,” I say.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tell me the truth, Roman. Hot springs don’t just happen like this. Do they?”

“It’s unusual,” he admits.

“Is Mount Lithia in danger of erupting?” I ask.

“It’s a volcano,” he says. “That is what volcanoes do.”

“I know that, but are *we* in danger?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s comforting.”

“You shouldn’t worry. If this mountain gets close to exploding, I’ll let you know.”

Suddenly a woman’s scream pierces the forest.

Before I can turn my head toward the sound, Roman has disappeared, a blur woven into the thick trees.

Vampires move far too quickly for most humans, and though I may be a competitive runner, I’m out of shape, and it’s hard for me to keep up. I do my best, following the noise. Still, I make a few wrong turns, and when I finally reach the trail, I turn right, hoping I’m heading in the right direction.

I round the bend, and there is Roman, helping a woman to her feet.

It’s the runner—the woman who passed us earlier. She looks badly shaken up, and she has several bleeding scratches on her arms and neck.

And then I remember her. Her name is Erica Summers; she’s a professional runner and, the last time I checked, she hates my guts. She was the reigning champion of the women’s Cloudline competition, and I narrowly beat her in the last race—a grueling

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run to the top of Mount Lithia. She couldn't even look me in the eyes after that race, and I didn't think she'd ever forgive me for beating her.

She meets my gaze but doesn't appear to recognize me. She must *really* be shaken up.

"I don't know what happened," she says, her voice trembling as much as her body. "Somebody grabbed me from behind. And then"—she wrinkles her brow—"I don't know, I sort of blacked out or something. Next thing I knew, here you were. You must've scared him off."

Roman holds her steady. "It was a bear."

She looks startled, then doubtful. "It couldn't have been a bear. It happened too fast, and I didn't hear a thing. No way a bear can move that fast."

Apparently Roman doesn't remember what a know-it-all Erica is, or he'd have come up with a more convincing story.

"I saw him," Roman says, his usual serious expression and old-fashioned way of speaking adding a bit of credibility to his words.

"Really?" Erica spins her head around, as if to glimpse the bear for herself. "Are you *sure*?"

"I'm quite positive," Roman says smoothly. "A black bear, a male juvenile. When he saw me, he turned and ran away."

Erica is still looking around for evidence. "I'm pretty sure I'd have heard something as big as a bear."

"They don't always announce their presence," Roman says.

"And you were in the zone," I say, speaking runner talk in hopes of changing the subject. "I don't hear anything myself when I've got a runner's high on."

Erica looks Roman right in the eye. "What did you say to it?"

He puts on a surprised look. "What did I say—to the bear?"

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“I could have sworn I heard you shouting.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” he says with a patient smile. “You’ve had quite a fright.”

Erica stares at him for another long minute. Then she sighs and begins brushing the dirt off her legs.

“Strange,” she says.

“Bears usually don’t hurt people,” I offer. “You must’ve startled him or something.”

She’s still ignoring me, talking directly to Roman. “You know what else is strange? It got really cold, just before I got attacked, like I was having a flash of hypothermia. That’s never happened to me before.”

If there had been any doubt in my mind—which there hadn’t—this tells me that it was definitely Victor. I catch Roman’s eye, and he quickly looks away.

“That sounds unusual indeed,” Roman says. “Let us walk you back to town. It sounds as though you might need to see a doctor. You may be getting ill.”

“And we’ll alert the authorities about the bear so they can put up warning signs,” I add. I feel as though it’s our best shot at keeping people away from Victor, but on the other hand, bear warnings aren’t likely to deter the residents of Lithia from going up into the hills. They’ll be a little more heads up, maybe, but it won’t stop them. They all know that bears are generally harmless and prefer to steer clear of humans.

Erica finally turns to me, and I see the recognition in her eyes. “I know you. From the race.”

I nod.

“Pat, right?”

“Kat.”

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“You running Cloudline this year?”

“No,” Roman says.

“Yes,” I say, at the same time.

“Well, are you or aren’t you?” Erica says.

“Actually,” I admit, “I’m undecided.”

“You injured?”

“No.” I don’t want to tell her I’ve let myself get out of shape.

“Then you’ve got no excuse,” Erica says with a smirk. “What is it—afraid you won’t be able to defend your title?”

“Not at all.”

“If I’m running, bear scratches and all, you better be running.”

More fun than saying yes to her challenge is answering with a little shrug, which seems to annoy her greatly.

Roman gives me a look and starts leading her down the path.

“Let’s go back to town,” he says. “I must be off to the theater soon.”

Erica looks back at Roman and then, amazingly, she smiles—a real smile, something I thought this woman was incapable of doing. “Oh, you’re that actor. You were in *Hamlet*, right?”

“He *was* Hamlet,” I say, in a rather obnoxious and possessive way.

Roman smiles. Apparently even after more than a hundred years, he still enjoys having two females competing over him. I roll my eyes and follow them as Erica tells him about all the plays she has seen him in on her journeys up here to Lithia; she’s flirting with him as best she can. I resist the urge to butt in, or to take Roman’s hand in mine to show that he and I are together.

I distract myself by thinking about Cloudline. The race is just a few weeks away. With all the recent craziness in my life—losing the Horton property, getting it back again, my father’s death, the fires—I had nearly stopped running altogether. Even

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though I knew the race was fast approaching, I've been telling myself that there will be other years, other races.

But I'm beginning to realize, now more than ever, that timing is everything. Just moments ago, Roman saved Erica by a matter of seconds, or less. They say you should live your life as if you only have a short time to live—that if you do, you spend time on all the things that matter. And the fact is, with Victor on a mission to get rid of me for good, I may only have a short time to live—for real.

What if this really is my last chance to run Cloudline?

Better to spend my time doing what I love most, whether or not Victor manages to get his way. The one thing that is true is that time does not favor the undecided. I have to be decisive and proactive.

And I want to run Cloudline.

I want to feel the rush of competition and the meditative runner's high that feeds me while I train in these hills. I want to challenge Erica again, to prove I can and will defend my title. Roman may not like my running up here alone, but he will have to understand. Or he can simply join me; Roman is an avid runner himself and winner of the last Cloudline race in the men's division; there could certainly be worse people to train with.

But what about Victor and his most recent violent streak, targeting innocents as he did with Erica? As we head back to town, my mind is still trying to figure out exactly what happened a few minutes ago. If Victor wanted to kill Erica, he would have done so. It would've been all too easy for him.

No—Victor was sending a message. It was a message for me, or for Roman, or for us both. And I continue down the trail with the ice-cold realization that my necklace can only protect one person at a time.

THREE

I'm standing offstage in the main theater of the Lithia Theater Company watching Roman—I mean, Romeo—kneeling over Juliet, thinking she has just killed herself. Roman's hair has been cut short for the role, to make him look younger, and he does; he has captured the character perfectly as Romeo holds up a vial of poison, prepared to follow in Juliet's tragic footsteps:

Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!
Come, bitter conduct; come, unsavoury guide!
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark!
Here's to my love!

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Roman puts the poison to his lips, and I think of the irony of the moment. How this man—this vampire—can never die, and how unimaginable it must be for him right now to pretend he is dying. But then, Roman’s a great actor.

Romeo drains the vial and utters his last line.

O true apothecary!

Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

As I watch his body go still, I feel thankful that I’ll never know this moment for real—that Roman, for better or for worse, is here on earth to stay. And that I’ll never have to be without him. At least, I don’t think so—I’ve heard there are ways to kill vampires, but they can’t be easy, or we wouldn’t have to worry so much about Victor.

Lucy, standing next to me, leans over and whispers, “Romeo’s not the brightest bulb on the tree, is he?”

It’s true. The character of Romeo is more impulsive than thoughtful. If only he’d waited a few moments longer, he would have discovered that Juliet was alive, that she had taken a potion only to make her *appear* dead.

But timing is everything in drama—and in life. And Romeo arrived a bit too early.

“He’s not hard on the eyes, though,” I whisper back to Lucy.

I’m not here watching rehearsal because I’m an actor in this play; I’m actually a stagehand. My job is to shuffle furniture and props around between acts and scene changes. I hover in the

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wings waiting for the director to call for a prop to be moved. I enjoy being a part of the production, even though my role feels infinitesimal. At the same time, it's every little detail that makes all the shows here so good.

Lucy, whose dream is to be an actor, has been given a huge break. After seeing us perform at Lithia College, the director of this production asked us both to audition—a chance to work in a real, professional theater. *Romeo and Juliet* is a late addition to the normal theater schedule; usually the theater season winds down after the summer winds down, but this year—in part because the prodigal star Roman returned to town after a long absence—the theater decided to stage a special production of *Romeo and Juliet* for just three months. It was a lucky break not only for Roman, who needed a job and to prove himself again, but also for Lucy, who got the role of Nurse—a verbose, bawdy, and, at times, overbearing character. As Lucy herself will admit, she was a perfect fit.

I auditioned for Juliet, but I knew I was facing steep odds. I'd played Isabella in *Measure for Measure* at the college, but I think I'd gotten lucky somehow, not only to have gotten the part but to have pulled it off. Isabella was the perfect character for me at just the right time in my life, and I think that's how I did it. I learned that I love acting, but I also learned that I'm not so much a natural actor as really good at channeling my own energy. I was nervous during my Juliet audition, and I knew even as I was reading my lines that I'd never get the part.

I'm still planning to minor in drama at the college, though. If I'm going to major in environmental studies, it will help to have acting skills. When you know your life is going to be made up of fighting to save land, and animals, and all the other things that need saving, it helps to know how to face an audience, to develop

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the poise you learn so well by being onstage.

For the time being, though, I don't mind being backstage. The girl who won the role of Juliet, Christine Arbor, is a professional actor. She's as young as I am but has been in movies and television since she was ten. She'd also played Juliet in other productions and already knew most of the lines by heart. I study her every moment I can, watching how she prepares herself for the role, how she carries herself. She *is* Juliet when she steps on that stage.

I have to admit I watch her closely because I'm a bit jealous when I see her and Roman lock lips, or gaze into each other's eyes. I have to keep reminding myself that they're excellent actors because they sure look like they're enjoying themselves. In one scene, Romeo wears only a skimpy pair of pajama bottoms and struts around stage half-naked, and Juliet's eyes follow his every move.

Yet I know in my heart that Roman only has eyes for me. I'm not sure I'll ever understand why, but the fact that he changed his whole life around just to be with me is proof enough. But it's been good for him, too—giving up the killing has lightened him somehow, helped him move on a bit from all his past mistakes. He couldn't help who he was then—but he's become a new person with a new future. And when you live forever, the future is something you really need to be able to look forward to.

I still feel like we're the ultimate odd couple, Roman and me, maybe even real-life versions of Romeo and Juliet. The vampires are the Montagues and the humans are the Capulets, and Roman and I are caught between them—two tribes seemingly at odds. And Lithia is like Verona, whose residents only want peace. We know how Shakespeare's drama ends—and now, with Victor back in Lithia and looming around everywhere, I'm anxiously

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wondering how things will end up here. I hope it's along the lines of a Shakespearean comedy—which ends with a wedding—instead of a tragedy, which ends in death, usually a whole lot of it.

Despite our differences, Roman is more like me than most humans. He subsists on a plant-based diet, just like I do. We both love to go running in the woods. And I think we're both equally stubborn, which is sometimes a challenge when we want different things, like the fact that I want to train for Cloudline and he wants to keep me off that mountain and out of the woods.

Victor does frighten me, though I don't like to let Roman know how much. What's even worse is knowing that Victor frightens Alex and Roman, too; I tend to think of both of Alex and Roman as invincible—and maybe they are, at least physically speaking, but not emotionally. They've both lost a lot in their lives, and they don't want to lose any more.

Still, some things are stronger than fear—and for me, it's my love of the land. Victor may be determined to use me to punish Roman for giving up the life he was born into, for becoming a vegan vampire and living off the trees, living a life of peace—but I'll never give up on Lithia. And as long as Roman never gives up on me, we will persevere.

Right?

If only I could be so sure.

Even Alex, though he knows I've made my choice to be with Roman, is still worried. The two of them used to hate each other, and seeing them united in the common mission to protect me has been strange indeed. A few times, I've left for work in the morning only to find either Alex or Roman standing right there, looking a bit groggy from being there all night but ready to escort me wherever I'm headed. I've tried to resist their caretaking, but

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there's no doubt among any of us that Victor is out for blood. My blood. Even if it's only to hurt Roman and Alex.

I'm brought back out of my thoughts by Stan Bedford, the play's director, calling out for a five-minute break.

Roman walks off the stage toward me and Lucy. "What do you think?" he asks. "Was my demise believable?"

"Not bad," says Lucy. "It's the living part that needs some work." She studies his preternaturally pale face. "Do you *ever* get any vitamin D, Roman?"

Lucy, despite being my best friend, doesn't know there are vampires in Lithia. Let alone that I'm dating one.

Roman turns to me. "Remind me again, Katherine, how long I have to endure having Lucy as a fellow cast member?"

"Only three months and twelve days more." I smile at his growing attempts at humor, at getting along with me and my friends. I always have to remind myself that he is more than a century old—and even if you're not, it can be hard to keep up with Lucy and her banter.

He smiles back me and heads toward the dressing rooms.

Lucy rolls her eyes. "You two are so cute it's gross."

I shush her up and change the subject. No one here at the theater knows about my romance with Roman, and I made Lucy promise not to broadcast it, though she said they'd find out about it soon enough. Small towns. Small theater companies. *Secrets don't stay secret for very long*, she said, and she's right.