

## **The Unraveling of Luna Forester**

### **Cast**

#### **Welcome to Matthew & Luna's family.**

**Luna** – A seventeen-year-old who lives in an isolated cabin in an alpine forest. She lives with her father and together they foster their found family.

**Matthew** – A seventeen-year-old who loves to run. He is Luna's best and oldest friend.

**Piper** – A fifteen-year-old mute with native ancestry. She is religious and is also adept at natural medicine and healing herbs.

**Alessandra** – One of the older members of the group, she is prone to wearing long skirts and numerous bangles and is often a voice of reason when the others are bickering.

**Faith** – A no-nonsense sixteen-year-old who strives to be a professional ballet dancer, even if she does have a smart mouth.

**Hope** – A fifteen-year-old who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks. To ease her worries she draws in a sketchbook.

**Tyler** – A seventeen-year-old varsity football player, he thinks of nothing more than the cheers of the crowds.

**Kalisa** – One of the older members of the group, she follows her own religion which centers on a medallion she wears at her neck. She is wife to Joseph, and mother to Caleb, Jasmine & Nell.

**Joseph** – A quieter member of the group, he can be easily spotted by his beaded, blond dreadlocks. Husband to Kalisa, and father to Caleb, Jasmine & Nell.

**Caleb** – A twelve-year-old boy who loves nothing more than to run wild in the woods, building dens and chasing Ulrich. His siblings are Jasmine & Nell. His parents are Kalisa & Joseph.

**Jasmine** – An eight-year-old girl who loves to play with Ulrich and make stick dolls. Her siblings are Caleb & Nell, her parents are Kalisa & Joseph.

**Nell** – A one-year-old baby. Her siblings are Caleb & Jasmine, her parents are Kalisa & Joseph.

**Kerry** – One of the newer members of the group, he is a mysterious, Irish drifter who takes Luna on fast rides on his motorbike, and smokes constantly.

**Ariel** – Over four hundred years old, Ariel is the oldest member of the group and is also an angel. She wears white clothing and only offers advice when asked.

**Beacon** – A supernatural creature in the form of a humanoid light who is without the power of speech.

**Obsidian** – A black-feathered gryphon.

**Ulrich** – A telepathic fox, happiest in Luna's or Jasmine's company.

**Monty** – One of the newest arrivals of the group, brother to Robin. Handy with a shotgun.

**Robin** – One of the newest members of the group, sister to Monty, mostly interested in Matthew's best interests.

**Chapter 1 - Luna**

Unable to drag a breath past my chest, I ran down the hallway, scraped at the door handle, desperate for it to turn. Finally, it opened. I stuck my head around the door and peered into the gloomy interior. Caleb slept, his mouth open and his covers kicked off to the floor. Tyler's massive bulk faced the wall. I swiveled my gaze to Matthew. He held a book and a flashlight in his hands. A hardback textbook of some kind. I couldn't make out the title.

He raised his head and smiled. "Couldn't sleep?"

I shook my head and inched into the room. With a trembling hand, I wiped the sweat from my brow. Even the roots of my hair were damp. I shut the door behind me and leaned against it. The smell of dirty trainers and sweaty socks lingered in the air. "I had a nightmare."

Matthew sat straighter, his book falling to the floor with a soft thud. "The same one?"

I nodded.

He held out his hand.

Thank God for Matthew. He never minded me interrupting his nights. He was the only one who could banish the images. I tiptoed across the room and sat on the edge of his bed. He threw an arm around me and gave me a squeeze. A tear leaked out of my eye. All I could see was the blood in my dream. But it wasn't just a dream. It was a memory.

"*Shhh*," Matthew said. "You're whimpering. You'll wake the others."

Tyler stirred. Matthew laid a finger across my lips while we waited to see if Tyler would wake. But he rolled over, his toned bicep covering half his face. I hadn't seen much of him over the summer. He'd been training for weeks, determined to retain his varsity quarterback position when the school year began. His arms rippled with newly defined muscles. I liked to watch him chop wood on the stump in the yard. Such power. Such strength.

Caleb muttered in his sleep. Sweet Caleb. I longed to reach out and wipe the smudge of dirt from his young cheek. He'd spent all summer building dens in the woods and camouflaging his face with mud. And sometimes terrorizing his little sister with sticks, pretending they were swords.

“Shall we go outside?” Matthew asked. “So we don't wake the others?”

I stood. Matthew went to the sash window and threw it open. He climbed onto the roof and offered me his hand. I scrambled after him. He slid the window down behind us, leaving it open a fraction. The sweet smell of pine trees drifted toward us from the forest and helped to settle my stomach. I inhaled deeply, and my hands ceased to tremble.

I gazed over the yard and forest beyond. The dark pines stretched up to the full moon, almost reaching it. As we settled ourselves on the roof, I shivered. The cold of the slate tiles leached through my pajamas. I lifted my toes so only my heels were in contact with the cold roof. Raising my face skyward, I shivered again.

The stars were out in all their infinite glory. This far up the mountain, their undiluted light shone almost supernaturally. The immense blackness of the sky hinted at what lay beyond; the stretching, never-ending universe. Sometimes I wished I could be among the stars. Maybe things would be easier. I spotted the constellation Orion. My favorite. Orion the hunter who slayed animals and loved the Goddess Dawn.

Obsidian's wings beat against the black night. It took me a moment to locate him, camouflaged against the inky darkness. I followed the path of the blotted-out stars. He flew in high circles, throwing me the occasional squawk. It echoed through the trees, and I wondered why no one else had ever discovered him. A gryphon of midnight black and a wingspan equal to the length of two buses, almost as big as the house itself, one of its kind, hidden away. And then I remembered. No one else would ever know him, because he was all mine. Only mine. I smiled.

“The nights are getting colder,” Matthew said. He removed a loose roof tile and brought out a tin. Opening the small box, he took out a pre-rolled joint.

Looking at him, I threaded my arm through his. My chest tightened as I felt a rush of love. He was my favorite. Of course he was. He always would be.

“School starts next week,” I said, accepting the joint. I bent my head as he lit it. Inhaling deeply, I felt the headrush and the edges of the nightmare slip away. “SATs soon. They’re going to work us hard this year. Are you ready for it?”

Matthew smiled. “I’ve got pre-season training first.”

“You’re the fastest person on the track team.” I rested my hand on his thigh. His warmth seeped through his sweatpants and into my cold hand. I took another hit on the joint and offered it to him.

He shook his head at the joint. I could never tempt him. He took his training and health seriously. I was slightly envious of his willpower, of the clear lines he lived by. But he never judged. That was one of the things I loved about him.

“You haven’t had the dream for a few weeks.”

I shifted my gaze to his face. A small frown interrupted his smooth brow. “Six weeks, two days.”

“You’ve had a nice summer. No dramas.”

I exhaled a perfect smoke ring toward the sky. The stars wobbled, the effects of the marijuana taking hold.

“It helps, being around all of you. Not seeing the pitying stares at school.” I shivered again. In the distance, an animal barked. Or yelped. Maybe it was Ulrich.

“Do the others know?” Matthew touched my hand and a fire flamed under my skin.

I looked through the window. The rest of my convoluted family slept during this dark hour of the night. None of the others had trouble sleeping. Except for Hope. Occasionally.

“About my mother?” I asked.

Matthew shook his head. “No, I meant, about you. And them. And...you know.”

I did know. But I didn’t like to talk about it. When my father went away to work, Kalisa and Joseph took care of us all. And Alessandra. They were the oldest members of our group. The surrogate parents for kids that didn’t belong. I didn’t belong. Not really. Not without them. And I didn’t like to think about it too much. It magnified my differences. If I could change, I would. If I could get along without them, I would. My throat went dry at the thought. I needed them, especially after what happened to my mother. The blood. So much blood.

I gripped Matthew’s hand. “Protect my secrets.”

He looked up, concern softening his eyes. “Of course.”

“You’ll always take care of them, won’t you?” I asked, suddenly gripped by the fear that something would happen to them. Us. Me.

The furrow in his brow deepened and his lengthening hair flopped over his eyes.

“Take care of them? What do you mean? They’re here because of you, not me.”

“I know.” I tapped my toes against the roof. “I just worry.”

“That, I can help you with.” He tapped the joint and grinned. “And anyway, that’s what the grownups are for, aren’t they?”

“I suppose,” I replied, taking another drag. But Matthew had different qualities. He knew how to keep them all together. “I think they need you more than you think.”

Matthew snorted, then rubbed the accumulating dew from the slate tile with a finger.

I pulled my knees against my chest. “Not everyone likes each other.”

“Of course not. Even in a traditional family, that’s not unusual.”

“And there are seventeen of us.”

Matthew smiled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

*Nor me.*

“With great power comes great responsibility,” I said.

“You’re quoting superhero movies at me now?” Matthew laughed.

“You’re the only one who likes them as much as I do.”

Another yelp peeled through the quiet forest. Farther away. Maybe Ulrich was hunting. Sometimes he brought me the carcasses of rodents from his night-time hunts. Sometimes he would sit in my lap and let me work out the tangles in his fluffy tail. Other times he would just follow me around.

“I think I’m ready to go back inside.” I stubbed out the joint and threw the remains in Matthew’s tin.

Without speaking, Matthew took my hand and led me back across the roof to the window. He pushed it up and we crept in, careful not to disturb Caleb and Tyler. Once he shut the window again, I hesitated. His flashlight lay on the floor, illuminating the title of the book: *Abnormal Behavioral Psychology*. I’d forgotten he was studying psychology this year. An extra credit class so he could up his GPA.

Matthew reached for my hand. “Do you want to sleep here?”

I nodded. He lifted the blankets and I crawled into the bed, next to the wall, where I would be sandwiched between it and Matthew and nothing bad could get me. He climbed in after me and placed his warm feet next to my freezing ones.

“Thank you,” I murmured, as my eyes drifted closed.

Matthew picked up his book and flashlight and continued to read.

**Chapter 2 - Matthew**

Smoke billowed along the cabin's upper hallway, obscuring the windows, turning everything hazy.

"Fire!" Matthew yelled.

*Luna.* He had to get to Luna. He ran down the hallway, pounding on the bedroom doors. The timber frame of the house shook under the power of his violent thumps.

"Fire! Wake up! Fire!" He coughed, struggling for breath, and lifted his T-shirt over his nose and mouth.

A door opened. Piper peered out, sleep gluing her eyes half closed. One look at his face and the smoke billowing behind him and she dashed back inside to wake the others.

*Luna.* Where was Luna? Matthew threw open her bedroom door, but she wasn't there. Her sheets spilled off her mattress and puddled on the floor. Her curtains blazed a trail of flames, mantling an open window. On the ledge sat a trio of church candles, an incense holder, and a framed picture of her at last year's Homecoming dance; all burning, wilting, fading from existence.

"Luna?" He was tempted to check the closet or under the bed. But she wasn't in the room, didn't look like she'd been in the room all night. One of her nightmares? He checked his watch. 2 am. She must already be outside.

"Fire!" Matthew called, retreating and closing her bedroom door.

Coughing into his elbow, he kept his shirt over his mouth and nose. He ran back the other way, making sure everyone was up. His eyes watered and stung as he fought his way through the thickening smoke. He attempted to push it away, but it was so dense, almost opaque, like a solid substance, and it quickly filled any gap he temporarily cleared. Scalding door handles burned his palms as he fought entry to each room.

He ran into the nursery and plucked the youngest, Nell, from her cot. She screamed in his ear, her arms and legs as stiff as rolling pins. He looked for the others, doing a count in his head: Nell, Jasmine...where was Caleb? He'd just graduated to the big boys' room, but Matthew hadn't seen him there, and sometimes he crept back here to sleep after his night walks. He gestured for Jasmine to follow. She slipped her shoes on, snatched her denim jacket from the floor, and grabbed a stick doll from her bed.

"We need to go. Where's Caleb?" Matthew raised his voice above the crackle of flames and the cries of his friends. He looked wildly around the small room, hoping Caleb would magically materialize.

"Not here." Jasmine balled her jacket under her arm and clutched the stick doll to her chest. "He hasn't been here all night."

"Outside. Now," Matthew said, pushing the eight-year-old out the door. He glanced once more inside. The windows shook with an unseen vibration. A menacing shriek from beyond the house permeated inside. The noise almost reversed his blood flow. Ulrich? But Ulrich had never made his stomach churn or his jaw clench. The window vibrated again, almost rippled, threatening to implode. They didn't have much time to get outside.

He coughed. Spluttered. It was almost impossible to draw breath. Nell was still screaming in his ear. He stuck his little finger in her mouth. She silenced almost immediately. He glimpsed her winter onesie hanging on a hook behind the door. The one with the arctic foxes chasing after snowflakes. She'd grown so much over the summer, it might not fit anymore, but he didn't have time to delve through wardrobes. He grabbed it and dashed out the door after the others.

With Nell balanced on his hip, Matthew ran down the stairs and joined a melee of terrified people scampering for the back door. He couldn't be completely sure, but it seemed everyone had made it out of the bedrooms. He'd do a head count outside. They scrambled

through the small laundry room, grabbing coats and boots and whatever they could reach. Shoving his feet into his boots, he spotted Luna's red coat hanging on a hook and tucked it under his other arm before tumbling outside.

Luna. Where was Luna?

*Take care of them, Matthew.* How long ago had she said that? Was it only three nights? Did she know this was going to happen?

Of course not, she couldn't have.

Matthew shivered as the night air wound round his limbs. Overhead, the large, round moon smiled benignly, its face beaming down at them. He drew in a deep breath of pine-scented air and coughed the smoke out of his lungs. Retching, he spat dark muck onto the ground. They huddled by the enormous oak which marked the boundary of their unfenced yard. The one with the swing that Hope spent hours in, not swinging, but drawing in her notebook. Now, the swing was empty, swaying in an unseen breeze.

Matthew passed Nell and Luna's coat to one of the others and turned back to the house. Orange flames engulfed the entire right side of their home. Curtains and wood blazing, without forgiveness. It had been a hot summer. No rain for over a month. An unprecedented heatwave. The house was going up like kindling.

"Luna?" he called, his gaze glancing over the tops of heads. But the smoke wasn't done with him. He doubled over in a coughing fit. His eyes stung and his lungs burned. A deep, searing pain ricocheted the length of his old scar. He felt for the risen ridge between his shoulder blades, almost convinced he was alight. There was no fire on his back.

"Luna?" he called again. He stumbled through the crowd, counting heads, but they were all moving about and searching for each other, and he had to keep starting over. Seventeen wasn't that big a number. If they'd just stay still, he'd be able to count them. He didn't see Luna. Where was Luna?

The moon illuminated everything in graphic detail. The kind of detail he didn't want to see. The fire was spreading. Completely swallowing the house. The only house he'd known for the last ten years crumbled before his eyes. The young ones cried. Alessandra shushed them as she used her heavy skirts to wipe the soot from their faces. Alessandra. Thank God for the older woman. Everyone was coughing. Nell began bawling again, her little arms and legs rigid. Alessandra wrestled the small child into her onesie. Her hands and feet stuck comically out of the ends.

"Luna?" Matthew called.

"I haven't seen her," Alessandra replied, glancing over her shoulder. When she looked at him, Matthew rebelled against the level of worry in her eyes.

*Luna.* She had to be okay.

Matthew turned at the sound of the familiar voice. Caleb stood at his side. The twelve-year-old wore jeans and heavy boots, with a thick goose-down jacket; the only one of them properly dressed. Daytime temperatures wouldn't drop off for another month, but the nights were always cold in the forest.

"Where have you been?" Matthew snapped.

Caleb shrugged. "I couldn't sleep." Twigs and leaves from his recent escapade decorated his brown hair. His impish ears twitched and turned red.

"Help me look for her." Matthew pointed to the far side of the house.

Caleb nodded and dashed around to the front.

"Luna!" Matthew called again. His throat burned every time he spoke.

The noise of the fire hit him. Loud and crackling, like a malevolent voice, taunting him. He could barely hear anything above the hissing and spitting wildness. Nell's crying faded to the background.

"Help me!"

Matthew swiveled toward the voice, expecting to see Luna. Too late, he realized the voice was male. A person trailing a tail of fire shot out of the remains of the house, hurtled across the deck, and ignited a path of pine needles in its wake.

“Tyler?” Matthew stood glued to position for a moment, watching Tyler turning macabre pirouettes. Kalisa, the mother of the three youngest children, ran after him, patting small flames out with her nightdress.

“Help me!” Tyler screamed again, slapping at the flames on his face with a fiery arm.

Spurred to action, Matthew dashed forward, removing his jacket. Piper rushed forward too, following his motions. Matthew pushed Tyler to the ground. “Hold still!” Tyler’s arm and hair blazed with flames. Matthew wrapped his jacket around his burning friend, patting and rolling him. After a few moments, the fire went out.

He turned to Piper. She swept her long fringe out of her eyes and turned her face into a question mark. He knew what she was trying to ask.

“I tried to help him,” Kalisa said. Her afro smoked and several burn holes pock-marked her bathrobe. “He still alive?”

Matthew stuck a hand under Tyler’s nose. A small, warm, breath tickled his finger. “He’s alive,” he said. “Just passed out. Help me move him.”

Piper, with her long, dark hair in her sleeping braids, gave him another questioning look. She wouldn’t speak, hadn’t spoken for years, but her looks were strong enough to command attention.

“You know we’re not going to be able to stay here. With Luna’s father at work. We can’t be found here,” Matthew said. “Not like this.”

Piper nodded and looked at Kalisa.

“S’okay, sweetheart.” Kalisa touched one of Piper’s braids and pushed it behind her shoulder. “We’ll stick together. I’ll take care of you.” She lifted her spiritual medallion at her

neck and kissed it. “The Goddess will keep us healthy.” She turned to Matthew, rubbed his arm with her maternal touch. “Do we call for help?”

Matthew shook his head. “We need to protect Luna, we need to...” *protect her secret.* “If the authorities find us all here, it could be bad for her.” How much could he say without freaking them all out? Luna had never answered his question the other night. On the roof, after her nightmare. He’d asked her if the others knew. But she hadn’t answered. She’d asked him to protect them.

So that’s what he must do.

Piper crouched, ready to help lift Tyler. Although she was only fifteen, she was an inch taller than Matthew.

Matthew grabbed Tyler’s legs. Piper lifted his arms. Tyler’s head lolled awkwardly to the side, but there was nothing they could do. They carried him a few yards into the tree line where he would be hidden from view.

“Find Alessandra,” Matthew said. “She’ll help you gather the herbs to treat him.”

Piper nodded, patted a canvas bag hanging from her shoulder, then dashed off to find the older woman.

Matthew retraced his steps, heading for the inferno. There wasn’t much left. The woodland cabin burned fast and hot. It would be no more than a pile of ash in minutes. He didn’t know fires could burn so quickly, so completely. If it weren’t for the heat of the fire, Matthew might have thought he was watching the first gentle snow of winter. The flakes floated around his head, drifting on the thermals, adding a magical quality to the surreal night. When his fingers went to his face, they came away covered in a thin, gray layer. But it wasn’t snow, it was ash, and there was nothing magical about this night.

“Luna!” he called again. His eyes cleared but his throat remained achingly hoarse.

Matthew shuffled backward, double checking the crowd as he headed away from them. Most of the others had gathered near Tyler. Nell was with her mother and quieting down. Alessandra looked to be counting heads, her gold bracelets jangling as she patted peoples' shoulders. Matthew faced the front and walked around the side of the house. Sirens wailed in the distance. They didn't have much time.

He found her by accident. Tripping over something, he landed badly, a stone gashing a cut across the bony part of his knee. Rough pine needles blanketing the forest floor grazed his palms. He looked back at the shape that had caused his fall. Luna. Lying next to the blackberry bush still ripe with berries. Not moving. Breathing?

**Chapter 3 - Matthew**

Matthew crawled to Luna on hands and knees, ignoring the pain that shot through the cut one. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed deeply, dreading the worse. What would they do if she was dead? *Please, don't be dead.* It would be the end of them all. He almost wept there and then.

Caleb joined him, his eyes widening as he fell to his knees. He held Luna's red coat in his arms. The one with the hood that reminded Matthew of Little Red Riding Hood. "Is she okay?"

Half by the firelight and half by the light of the moon, Matthew saw her chest rise with life's breath.

The relief shuddered out of him and his teeth chattered. "I don't know, Caleb."

He leaned closer to Luna's inert form. What was wrong with her? He swept her dark hair off her face, looking for burns. Checking her over for injuries and fire damage, he found nothing obvious, not a single hole in her blue pajamas.

"Luna?" he whispered. "Luna?"

No response. He watched her chest rise and fall for a couple of moments. Her eyelids fluttered. There was nothing else to do but to pick her up. "Come on, let's get her away from the fire."

With Caleb trailing him, Matthew carried her into the woods toward the others. It looked as though Piper had found the herbs. She mulched something together and spread it all over Tyler's face and arm.

"What's wrong with Luna?" Hope whispered, clutching her sketch pad to her chest. She wore a nightdress, one of those old-fashioned, high-necked things. Totally unsuitable for the forest. But then, most of them weren't dressed appropriately.

“You okay?” This was the first glimpse he had of Hope since the fire. Her skin was as white as the ermines that roamed the northern forests and her blonde hair hung long and wispy. And although nothing like darker-skinned Jasmine, she probably could have borrowed most of the younger girl’s wardrobe. Her eyes were sunken and her breaths came in shallow gasps, like she was on the verge of a panic attack. Her feet were bare, her shoes consisting of a thick layer of mud. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her wearing shoes.

She didn’t answer. Her trembling body gave him all the answers he needed about her state of mind.

“Remember to breathe, in and out, nice and slow. Cup your hands over your mouth and nose if you need to. Breathe *slow*.”

She nodded, and shoving her notebook under one arm, followed his instructions.

He laid Luna down at the base of a tree on a soft blanket of pine needles. Funny, how they were rough when he’d fallen, but now they served a different purpose. Caleb covered her with her red coat. Matthew rescued the scraps of his ruined jacket and helped Hope into it. The hem came down to her knees.

What’s wrong with Luna?

Hope had asked the question. He didn’t have any answers.

He swept his gaze over Luna, so peaceful, like a fairytale princess. Kneeling, he stroked her hair and her eyes fluttered open and stayed open. Her jet-black eyes focused on him, but she didn’t speak, and she didn’t acknowledge him. Despite the heat at his back, goosebumps erupted over his skin and a cold sweat pooled on the small of his back.

The others whispered. “What’s wrong with Luna? Why won’t she talk? Is she mute now like Piper?”

“*Shhh!*” he hissed at them. “Give her a chance.”

He turned back to Luna. “Luna? Are you okay?”

Her eyes widened fractionally. But she still didn't speak. Or look at him. The shiver of foreboding that raced down his spine caused goosebumps to break out all over his skin. His heart picked up tempo. Luna was different. Luna was altered. Luna needed help.

"Luna?" he said, so only she would hear. "Are you hurt? Please say something. *Please.*"

She blinked. That was all.

"Where do we go, Matthew?" Alessandra laid a hand on his shoulder. Near his scar. It made him jump. Her bracelets jangled in his ear, and the scent of her lavender perfume, mingled with the reeking smoke, swept over him. Sirens wailed in the distance. They were louder, then fainter, zig-zagging their way up the mountain road. The fire burned so brightly someone from the village at the bottom of the mountain must have seen the flames and called it in.

"The woods," Matthew replied.

"Yes." Caleb punched an arm into the air. "A real life adventure. Finally. With all of us."

"The woods?" Hope asked around her cupped hands, eyeing the dark forest. "I'm not going in there. Didn't you hear about those campers who went missing over the summer?"

Caleb rolled his eyes. "*Pah*. Just rumors. I've been in the forest countless times, and I've never gone missing."

"That you know of," Matthew muttered, then turned to Hope. "Don't worry about that now. We're all here together, that's the important thing."

Alessandra pointed to the woods with a shaky finger. "You think that's the answer?"

"The only one. But I don't know how we go with Luna like this." Matthew waved a hand in front of Luna's face, trying to make her flinch. He clicked his fingers. Nothing. "How

do we get her to move? Can she hear us? Why isn't she talking?" His voice cracked. What was wrong with her?

"We'll help each other," Alessandra said. Her gold hoop earrings caught the light of the flames. "It's what we do."

Hope backed away, dropped her hands from her mouth, edging toward the fire. Her sketchbook fell from her arms. "I don't want to go into the woods."

Matthew approached her, snagged her shoulder, and gave her a hug. "It's going to be okay. There are seventeen of us. Nothing is going to hurt seventeen of us."

Caleb puffed up his chest. "I know the forest like the back of my hand. I'll take care of you, Hope."

Hope smiled at the younger boy, then wound her thin arms around Matthew's back. "Promise? Promise it will be okay?"

"I promise." Matthew pulled away, picked up the sketchbook, and pressed it back into Hope's hands. "We need your help with Luna. Think you can manage that?"

Nodding, she swiped at her cheeks. Her tear tracks glistened in the firelight. Alessandra turned to Luna and grabbed both her hands. "On your feet now, dear."

Luna allowed herself to be pulled to a standing position. She was able to bear her own weight, but merely stared blankly into the forest. "There we go. We'll be going for a walk now, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Luna?"

"She's not a baby," Matthew said, clenching his jaw.

Alessandra gave him a sharp eyebrow. "She needs to be treated delicately. You of all people know that."

Caleb found a tiny posy of bluebells and tucked them behind Luna's ear. "There you go. All better now." He ran off at the sound of his mother's voice.

“Did you call an ambulance?” Tyler sat up, his eyes darting, his face distorted by the herbs Piper had covered him in.

“*Shhh*. It’s okay, Tyler.” Alessandra kneeled by his side, using her long skirts as protection from the ground.

Tyler clutched his arm. “It hurts.”

“Looks like a second-degree burn,” Alessandra said, turning Tyler’s face to the side. “Lucky Kalisa found you when she did. Maybe that medallion of hers actually works. Could have been a lot worse.”

“Feels a hell of a lot worse than a second-degree burn!” Tyler snapped.

“Hey!” Matthew stomped over to him. “If Alessandra says it’s a second-degree burn, then it’s a second-degree burn. You’re going to live. Hallelujah.”

Tyler’s dark eyes drilled into him. “Bet you’re glad about that.”

Alessandra spread her arms between them. “Easy, boys.”

Matthew backed off, his mind racing with the things he really wanted to say. Not that Tyler deserved to be burned, of course not, nobody did. But Matthew hoped it would take him down a peg or two. He was a guy who’d preen in front of a mirror for hours a day, flexing his biceps and performing pectoral jigs, who spent longer on his hair than any of the girls, and there was a fraction of a moment when Matthew thought he deserved it.

“Are you sure I don’t need a hospital?” Tyler muttered to Alessandra.

“It’s going to hurt, but the herbs will kick in soon.” Alessandra removed the bright red headscarf that covered her graying roots and dabbed gently at Tyler’s cheek. “You’re going to be okay.”

Matthew watched the beefier boy. All that muscle. Wasted on an arrogant personality. What did Luna ever see in him? But as he took in the heat radiating from his blistered skin,

the swelling, and the smell, guilt rushed at him. He'd promised Luna he'd look out for them. That included Tyler.

Tyler's hands roamed over his face and arm. "My face is ruined!"

Matthew bit down on the inside of his cheek. "Think of the story you'll be able to tell the girls."

Tyler's cold glare was filled with fury. "They're not going to come near me if I don't get to a hospital and get this fixed!"

"No hospitals." Matthew stepped close. "You know the rules."

"Rules? *What* rules? I can't live like this!"

Rules. Of course they had rules. To protect Luna. If they didn't protect Luna, none of them would survive. How could Tyler not be aware of that? But now wasn't the time to bring Tyler up to speed.

"You can, and you will. For Luna's sake." Matthew pointed at her. She stood motionless, robotic, waiting instructions. Someone had helped her into her red coat and pulled the hood up. A spark of color in the dark night.

"Screw Luna," Tyler said.

A stony silence swept over the group. Even the children turned to stare. First at Tyler and the curse that had slipped from his lips, and then at Luna, standing impassively, so altered from the person they knew her as.

"I don't want to hear that kind of talk," Alessandra said, walking her hands up her thighs until she was standing again. She re-tied her headscarf, but it barely managed to contain her long, dark curls.

"Just because she turned you down," Matthew added.

Tyler glowered at him.

"Let the herbs work, Tyler," Alessandra said. "You will heal."

“But not completely,” he replied.

“We all have our crosses to bear,” Alessandra said. “You know you’ll heal. Even without the herbs. You always do.”

“Matthew?” It was Kalisa, the mother of the children. Her black hair stuck up at all angles and twin moons danced on her ebony cheeks. Her pupils glistened. Nell was bundled in her arms, sound asleep. Finally quiet.

“You okay?” he asked. “We’ve got to go into the woods.”

Kalisa pulled him away from the others. Her eyes darted all over the forest, looking everywhere but at him. Her hand went to her back as if massaging a tight spot.

“Even with the Goddess’s help, I don’t move the way I used to.” She pointed to the medallion at her neck, a complicated twisted metal figure, vaguely resembling a woman with lots of triangular points. It symbolized the spiritual path she chose to follow. “I’m getting older. But I’ll be okay. If that’s where we need to go, then that’s where we need to go.” She drew in a shuddery breath as though the words had exhausted her. She coughed. Smoke inhalation. They were all suffering.

“You’re beautiful, Kalisa,” he said, and he meant it. But he was glad the others were out of earshot.

She smiled, revealing a wide gap between her front teeth. There was so much warmth in that smile, Matthew barely noticed. “Don’t let Joseph hear you talk like that.”

“I’d never...that’s not what I meant...” A warm flush flooded his neck and cheeks.

“I’m just teasing you,” Kalisa said. “Thanks for grabbing Nell.” The baby slept soundly, the lighter color of her skin framed by the dark of Kalisa’s arm.

“Of course. We’re all in this together.” Including Tyler. And Kerry, if he ever turned up again.

She glanced at Tyler. Piper was helping him to his feet. He cursed again.

Matthew shook his head. A tug of guilt pulled at his gut. “Tyler will be fine.”

Kalisa lowered her voice. “What do we do about Luna?”

It was a good question. Luna was leaning back against the trunk of the oak tree, her hands holding the rope of the swing as if she might go for a midnight ride. Her eyes were open. They moved from side to side, taking in the scene, but Matthew had a feeling she wasn’t really seeing anything. Alessandra and Ariel stood next to her, trying to get her to talk. If anyone could get her to talk, it would be those two.

*I don’t know.* He wanted to say. But he couldn’t. He always knew what to do. Either him or Alessandra. Always. Just not now. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Luna like this. No, scratch that, he could. But he’d been so young and it was such a frightening experience, he’d shoved it into some dark recess of his mind.

“Don’t worry.” He attempted a smile. Maintaining it made his cheeks ache. “She’ll be fine.” *Everyone will be fine.*

*Take care of them, Matthew.*

“We really have to go in the forest?” she asked, her worried gaze scanning the dark shadows.

“It’s safer than waiting for the authorities,” Matthew replied.

She looked at him. “I know. I’ll do my best.”

“You always do, Kalisa.” Matthew wanted to say more, to tell her he thought of her like a mother, a real one. That she was one of the best foster mothers around, but he felt time was slipping away.

Kalisa’s gaze shifted to the burning house as a large beam fell to the ground and shuddered a small earthquake toward them. It reverberated into the forest and caused a few of the others to scurry deeper inside the tree line. In the silence that followed, Matthew heard the unmistakable beat of giant wings flapping overhead. He raised his eyes to the night sky. By

the light of the moon, he could see the large, dark wings. Their undersides were veined with reflective luminescence, making him easier to spot.

“Obsidian,” Hope said, her body no longer trembling.

Caleb appeared again, punching a fist into the other palm. “Awesome, maybe he’ll finally let me ride him.”

“He’s been gone awhile.” Matthew eyed the enormous gryphon as he flew in circles overhead. *And if he’s back now, it can’t be good.*

“He never goes far though.” Hope shivered inside his jacket and wrapped it around herself more tightly. She shoved her sketchpad in one of the large pockets.

Matthew cocked his head as the sirens wailed again. He waited, breath held, the smoke tightening his chest. Then he blew it out when they faded away again. They had a few more minutes.

Matthew turned to the wings once more. The mammoth gryphon flew in low circles, just grazing the tops of the tall pines, gliding on the mountain thermals. Once in a while he flapped his powerful wings and gained a few yards of height. A couple of times Obsidian glanced down, his large yellow eyes fixed on the chaos below. Then he would squawk and turn his head to the snowy peaks.

*Please don’t blow out a breath,* Matthew pleaded. They’d had enough fire for one night.

“I really need to go to a hospital,” Tyler said. He crumpled to the ground, put his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands. “It hurts!”

Matthew had promised to look out for them, but going to a hospital with Luna like this? It would be the undoing of them all.

“We need to go,” Alessandra said. She tucked her baggy shirt into the waist of her skirts and tightened her head scarf.

“Help me with Luna.” Matthew whispered to her so the others wouldn’t hear. They bent their heads together and observed the group. Luna stared vacantly into the dark forest. Her face slack. Her arms slack. Everything about her was slack. She wouldn’t look out of place in one of those old-fashioned mental asylums where they wore tracksuits with elasticized waists and shoes with no laces. Where they drugged them with things like Thorazine until they couldn’t close their mouths to stop the drool from dribbling out. Where they ate out of plastic trays with plastic utensils, and where they formed a line every evening to down the meds and start the process all over again. Eat, get drugged, sleep, repeat. The analogy cut a little close to the bone.

“Of course.” Alessandra nodded. “She might not be talking, but she seems physically unharmed. She can walk.”

“She’s only wearing slippers.” Matthew looked at the soft fleece of her rabbit slippers. At least she had her red coat on over her pale, blue men’s pajamas.

“She’s better equipped than many of the others.” Alessandra shivered in her oversized shirt.

“We can’t be here when the fire trucks arrive.”

“I know.”

“There’s nothing left inside the house.” Matthew’s gaze fell over the burning inferno.

“What about Luna’s father?” Alessandra asked.

Matthew dug a booted toe into the ground, hesitating. Even within the unreality of the situation - the numbed trauma of a devastating experience that would only come to him later, in pieces - he recognized a defining moment. The forest might not contain the authorities, but it wasn’t without peril. Hope was right on that account. The darting shadows, the ravens...

As if on cue, a raven squawked above his head. A sliver of icy fear cut through his bones. He hated ravens. So black, so dark, so evil.

“He won’t make it back in time. Not before the fire trucks and police,” Matthew said.

“I promised him I’d take Luna to Grandmother. If there was ever a problem.”

He scanned the woods. Nothing moved. Maybe it would be okay.

“What about Luna?” Alessandra asked. “You’ve known her the longest, have you ever seen her like this?”

The question took Matthew right back to that moment. The time he’d pushed way down deep, that had just reared its ugly head again, the incident he really didn’t want to think about. It was when he’d first met Luna. Right after *it* had happened. The death of her mother. She’d been so affected, so full of trauma and nightmares with that haunted, paralyzed look in her eyes, that he felt like he’d been there with her, witnessing it all. And he didn’t want to think about that. Ever. But that was the only other time he could remember Luna being unresponsive.

“Not since...” he trailed off. He wasn’t sure if the others knew. Had Luna told them? If they did know, they didn’t talk about it. Not once.

“That’s what I thought,” Alessandra said.

“She needs help. And there’s only one place we can get it.”

“Grandmother’s house.” Alessandra bit her lower lip. “But the forest...”

Matthew didn’t want to go in the woods either, but they didn’t have a choice. “She’ll know what to do. She helped her the last time, when the hospitals couldn’t.”

Alessandra nodded. “Tyler’s not going to like it.”

Matthew shrugged. “We’ll do what we can for him.”

Obsidian’s wings sent a gust of hot air billowing into the trees. The fire’s stray sparks heated Matthew’s cheeks as the gryphon flew by. Obsidian ascended, straight up, like a helicopter, then flew further away, until all Matthew could make out was the feathers of his inky black tail. He was deserting them. Where was he going? His presence had unnerved

Matthew, but now that he was leaving, Matthew felt more anxious. He seemed to be heading toward the coast. At least it was the right direction for Grandmother's house, if that's where they were going. There was nowhere else.

"Do you remember the way?" Alessandra asked.

"I know it," Caleb piped up.

Matthew gave the twelve-year-old boy a once over. The pockets of the boy's coats contained a penknife and string and all sorts of other odds and sods, but could he have really made it to Grandmother's house before on his own?

"I sincerely hope you never tell your mother that," Matthew said, and was rewarded with a cheeky grin. "I'm going to need your help, buddy."

"You got it." Caleb threw him a salute and dashed off again.

Alessandra touched his arm gently. "We can't rely on Caleb."

"I know," Matthew replied. "But it will keep him busy. Keep his mind off Luna, the fire..."

"Good idea." Alessandra smiled, then scanned the woods. "Ulrich knows the way."

"Have you seen him?" He was the one member of the group Matthew wasn't worried about. Ulrich always slept outside, usually behind the woodshed or near the log pile, even when there was a foot of snow on the ground.

"I saw him scampering into the woods when I first got out. He'll be around somewhere," Alessandra said.

As they walked back to the others, a robin fluttered nearby and disappeared inside a hole in a gnarly tree. It was better than a raven. He listened to the sounds of the robin's gentle whistles before it fell silent. As silent as Luna. She stood there and stared, barely blinking. Tyler's whines reduced to low murmuring. The others looked at him and Alessandra, knowing they would have instructions.

Alessandra put two fingers in her mouth and let rip a piercing whistle.

The others turned to scan the tree line.

A bark erupted from deep in the woods. Its abrasive sound pierced Matthew's bones and made him shiver, despite the heat of the fire only a few yards away and the thickness of his sweatshirt. But there was something else in the quality of that bark. Something he hadn't heard before, something that made him question whether fleeing into the woods was the right idea.

"It's Ulrich," Jasmine whispered, her lips lifting into a toothless smile. She'd just lost her two front teeth last week.

Matthew noticed the two glowing eyes first. Then the forelegs and the twitching ears. He waved his hand to beckon him over. The fox padded through the crowd, earning himself a pat from Jasmine. He shrugged off her touch, shaking his torso as if emerging from a lake. He walked slowly, never in a hurry, despite the sirens rising in volume. Arriving at Matthew's feet, he sat on his haunches.

"We need to talk," Matthew said.

The red fox just sat there. His haunches tilted to one side, his fluffy tail wrapped around his flank, his narrow nose sniffing at the air and his glinting eyes watching Luna.

"Seriously, Ulrich, we need to talk. We don't have much time."

The fox chuffed and whined. Then his fur began to shimmer, a sign that the fox was ready to use its telepathy. Ulrich gave him a nod with his fox snout.

"There's been a fire," Matthew said,

Ulrich shifted his gaze to the cracking flames. "*I can see that. And smell it. Is everyone okay?*"

Matthew nodded. "Physically."

"Speak for yourself," Tyler said.

Alessandra stepped up to Ulrich and placed a hand on his flank. “Something’s wrong with Luna. We need to take her to Grandmother’s house. Can you lead the way?”

“*Why can’t we just stay here? If everyone’s okay?*” Ulrich asked, his voice penetrating their heads.

“Yes, why can’t we just stay here?” Tyler whined.

“We don’t have time for this!” Matthew ran his fingers through his hair, gripping the ends tightly. Did no one know about Luna? “We can’t be found here. Trust me. We need to leave. Now.”

“*Grandmother can help?*” Ulrich asked.

Matthew nodded.

Ulrich dipped his snout, and his whiskers twitched. “*Okay then.*”

The fox jogged over to Luna. She didn’t look at him, even when he gently took her hand in his mouth and tugged. Matthew frowned. He’d never seen Luna not respond to Ulrich before. She loved him even more than Jasmine did.

Ulrich lowered his head and dashed a few paces into the woods.

“It’s time to go,” Matthew called. “To Grandmother’s house.” He waved them all into the woods.

“I need a hospital!” Tyler said from his position on the ground.

“Suit yourself.” Matthew turned on him. “Come with us or stay here. It’s up to you.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Tyler snarled, cradling his blistered arm.

“If you’re coming with us, keep your distance,” Matthew snapped back. “I don’t care for the stench of burnt meat.”

“Oh, you *little...*”

“Come on now, we can’t argue amongst ourselves,” Alessandra said. “We need to get Luna the help she needs.”

Tyler pushed himself to his feet. “It’s all about Luna, isn’t it?”

Alessandra turned on her heel, her long skirts swishing. “Would you rather it be about you?”

Tyler didn’t reply. He frowned so hard it split his brow in two. But he stumbled after them, his face angrier than the fiery inferno at their backs. Matthew watched him go. The herbs should have been more effective. He should be halfway healed by now. Luna. It was because of Luna. She, and she alone held the power of healing at her fingertips. Merely by willing it. But with her in her current state...

“Is everyone accounted for?” Matthew asked Alessandra as they approached Luna.

“Everyone except Kerry, but that’s not unusual. I can’t remember the last time he came around,” she replied.

“Makes Tyler seem like a saint.”

“Don’t start.”

Matthew held his hands up. “Kidding.”

He took Luna’s hand and gave it a small tug. She took a couple steps, tripped, her blue fleece slippers digging into the dry dirt and a couple inches of brown pine needles. Matthew tucked her arm in his and guided her through the moonlit woods. At least the sky was clear. They’d be able to use the moonlight for a while, until the trees thickened.

Alessandra flanked her other side. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance. And a raven. Matthew wished he had a slingshot. He’d take that raven out before it could follow them, before it could cause any damage.

Crickets chirped at their feet, falling silent when they walked by. He couldn’t smell much beyond the smoke, until they walked a little way. Then the scent of pine needles wound around him, urging him on. And the faintest whiff of Alessandra’s lavender perfume. And his own stale sweat.

“This way!” Faith called, twirling through the trees on pointed feet. “I can see Ulrich ahead.”

“Hey! I’m in charge!” Caleb called from somewhere ahead.

“Do we know where Kerry was when the fire started?” Matthew asked.

Alessandra paused. She stepped over a bulbous root and helped Matthew to guide Luna over it. “No. No, we don’t.”

