

CHAPTER I
GIRL WHO CRIED WOLF

“*When the blood moon rises, beware of the pricolici.*”

— FROM THE WISDOM OF WEREWOLF
HUNTERS IN CRIȘANA-BANAT

TWENTY YEARS AGO

“It’s here, I swear,” Luca said. “Just a little further.”

With a small nod, Ileana said, “Uh-huh.”

Her companion couldn’t see that, of course. He was already charging ahead through the underbrush, so she had no choice but to follow, pulling her ratty cardigan tighter around her bony shoulders. She was all of thirteen and outgrowing her old clothes faster than she could get new hand-me-downs. Whatever survived her nightly escapades usually found its way to her younger sister, Tamara, much to the latter’s chagrin.

Luca didn’t need to worry about the cold. He wore a thick, fur-padded coat that molded perfectly to his slim body. A boy of fifteen, more nimble than strong and taller than

Ileana by a head, his hair was wheat-colored and unruly, and he had piercing blue eyes and thick brows that made him look like he was always frowning. Ileana felt a strange flutter in her stomach whenever he looked her way. She *wanted* him to look at her but also not, and she found the whole thing equal parts vexing and confusing.

Luca was already blooded, too. On a family hunting trip to the southern reaches of Oltenia, he'd found and killed a *moroi*, a risen dead who'd been walking around for so long it was more bone than corpse. Luca talked about it like he'd offed the great Impaler himself. Still, his one kill trumped Ileana's none.

Despite the full moon crossing the night sky somewhere above, the jumble of branches overhead cast a dense shroud over the sodden, uneven ground. Where Luca moved with the sure step of a journeyman hunter, Ileana had to stop and feel her way around tree stumps and blots of half-melted snow, pushing her long bangs out of her face every other step. Her hair was a dark, muddy brown in the sunlight. Here, under the canopy, it was black, and thick, and *annoying*.

"C'mon!" Luca shouted from somewhere ahead.

She walked faster, or at least as fast as her skinny legs could carry her. Where Luca was growing like a weed, Ileana was more of the short persuasion. *For now*, she'd tell herself whenever she looked in the mirror, standing on tiptoe and tilting her chin up.

A soft patch of earth gave way under her foot. With a startled yell, she fell forward, arms flailing in search of something to stop her fall. She felt a sting across the back of her right hand when she scraped it against the rough bark of a tree, but at least she'd stopped herself before she tumbled forward and scraped her knees, too. Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes, swiftly followed by shame. She sniffled and bit her lower

lip. Cradling her injured hand with her good one, she scurried ahead.

Soon, the trees dwindled away and the ground sloped gently downward towards a small pond, its ragged edges obscured by a dense thicket of cattails and pickerel weeds. With nothing to blot it out, the moon shone bright, its light tracing sparkling ripples across the water.

Pretty, Ileana thought.

And then, stealing a glance at her companion, *He's pretty, too.*

Luca was waiting for her by the water, toying with his hunting knife, his hair shimmering like threads of spun gold. He caught her eye and grinned wide, tossing the knife up in the air. He caught it by the tip, then tossed it again, catching it by the handle this time. The blade flashed in the moonlight. It looked like silver. *Good for werewolves and basilisks*, Ileana's mind supplied, a rote response. She had her own knife, which was presently stashed away in her boot, but the blade was steel, not silver. She rarely parted with it these days. Like a *real* hunter.

"Over there," Luca said, turning away from her to wave his hand towards whatever they'd come here to find.

Ileana turned to follow the line of his finger to where he was pointing. She spotted a storm drain on the other side of the pond, an old, battered thing with bits of steel poking through the crumbling concrete. She'd ventured inside a few times over the years. The way was barred by a sturdy metal grill some twenty paces in, but that hadn't stopped her from pretending she was descending deep into the another realm in search of glimmering treasure and forbidden magick. That was all make-believe, though, and she was done with it now that she was well on her way to being a grown-up. Hunters didn't waste their time with make-believe. They found it, and they killed it.

“What’s there?” she asked, turning to look back at Luca.

“It’s a wolf,” the boy said, “and I’m gonna kill it.”

A gust of wind tickled them from the side, poking through Ileana’s cardigan and the flimsy shirt underneath. She stuck her hands deep into her pockets, hissing as the wound on the back of her hand scraped against the rough fabric.

“A wolf?” she said, her eyes flicking back to the drain. “Just the one?”

“Maybe it got lost, I dunno.”

“So how do you know it’s a wolf?” Ileana pressed. “It could be just a stray dog or—”

“Because I saw it, alright? Earlier, when I was...” The boy’s face twisted in a scowl that was more comical than angry.

“When you were, what?”

“Gramma sent me looking for frogs again.” He shuffled his foot.

Ileana snorted a laugh. “So, the mighty hunter went out to whack some toads with a stick. How’d you fare on *that* perilous adventure?”

“They taste good, okay? And, and anyway, that’s not—it doesn’t *matter*. I *know* there’s a wolf in there, and I’m gonna kill it and make something from its pelt.”

“You’re going to kill the wolf with a knife?” Ileana said, her left eyebrow quirking higher than the right one. “They’re stronger than humans, y’know. Faster, too.”

“Don’t be stupid, Leana. *This* is what I’m gonna kill it with.” Speaking, Luca pulled aside his woolen coat enough to show her the revolver tucked into his waistband.

Ileana had seen that gun before, on an ornate plaque above the mantelpiece in Luca’s ancestral home on the other side of the hill. She’d asked one of her cousins to hold her up so she could look at it once, when she was smaller, and she remembered it clearly. The grip was silver with intricate bone inlays, a relic of a time when craftsmanship was still a thing. Luca’s

family could trace their lineage all the way back to Aron Vulpe —Aron the Fox—the famed hunter who’d driven the vampires of the Țepeș clan from the hillsides of Crișana-Banat and into the far reaches of the Carpathian mountains. Three hundred years later, their coffers still ran deep.

“Does your dad know you took that?” she said, a hint of unease tinging her words. She’d seen the bruises on the boy’s face and wrists more than once.

He flashed her another grin. “I’ll have it back before he knows it’s gone. And you’re *not* gonna tell on me, yeah?”

“Maybe I won’t, *if* you ask me nice.” The thought hadn’t even crossed her mind, truth be told, but Luca didn’t need to know that.

He pursed his lips. “If you’re gonna be like that, you can go home already.”

“But I already know,” Ileana said smugly.

“Then I’ll—I’ll make you something nice from its pelt, how about that?”

“I’ll kill my own,” she said, sweet as it was to think about getting a gift from him. “Or maybe I’ll kill a werewolf and take its pelt. And I won’t do it with some rusty old *gun*.”

He scoffed, looking her over. “Yeah, right. Maybe in a year or two.”

Ileana bristled at that. Every night, when her family went to sleep, she snuck out into the woods behind her home, Nightshade Lodge, and hacked and slashed until her arms grew so tired she couldn’t raise them anymore, practicing her knife throwing and fending off imaginary beasts. And she was getting good, she could tell.

That was where Luca had found her earlier tonight. *I wanna show you something*, he’d told her, and she’d let him talk her into coming along. Mostly because there was something about him that made her want to punch him in his stupidly handsome face and then kiss it all better. Not that she’d ever

kissed anyone before, but she'd read about it in a book, and it didn't sound all that bad.

The object of her secret thoughts snapped his fingers right under her nose, yanking her back into the present with a startled, "Huh?"

"I said, I'm *going*. You can stay here if you're scared."

"Pfft. I'm not *scared*. But," she said after a moment, "are you sure—"

"Good. Let's go." He started ahead without waiting to hear the rest of the objection.

They circled around the pond, squelching through the shallow mud. Cold water seeped into Ileana's right boot, which had a sizable crack snaking its way across the sole. She sniffed and stomped her foot a little harder. *You won't get the best of me, boot.*

The storm drain gaped ahead of them, gray concrete melting away into a pool of darkness that stretched well beyond where the eye could see. The ground in front of it was rocky and didn't carry any tracks, so Ileana couldn't tell what, if anything, had gone inside.

A shiver stole over her. That didn't mean there wasn't anything there.

Luca stopped a few steps away from the mouth of the drain and pulled the revolver from his waistband. She watched him open the cylinder to check that it was loaded. He nodded to himself and snapped the cylinder shut, then spun it for good measure. He looked like he knew what he was doing.

Still, Ileana asked, "Are those silver bullets?"

He gave her a genuinely puzzled look. "No, what for?"

...He *knew* what he was doing, right?

The wind picked up again, nudging them from behind this time. Ileana pushed her bangs out of her face and shivered, clenching her jaw so her teeth wouldn't chatter. She almost started to say something—*This was a bad idea, Luca. Let's go*

back.—when something stirred deep inside the concrete tunnel, and all thought of words vanished from her mind.

“What’d I tell you? There it is,” Luca whispered, pointing with his revolver.

A deep growl rumbled from the darkness, bouncing off the concrete walls.

Ileana froze, an icy terror spreading from her core into her limbs.

“Luca,” she whispered, pushing the name past the sudden dryness in her throat. “That didn’t sound like a wolf.”

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This is an excerpt from *The Rivers Will Run Red* by Keira North, coming soon.

Make sure to keep an eye on the author's website at <https://keiranorth.com> so you'll be the first to know when *The Rivers Will Run Red* hits the shelves!