

[Friends Forever]

Lizzy Lee (In-progress)

I

RETURNING HOME

Juliara Reed was sitting on her bed, listening to music and watching the rain outside her window when her roommate appeared in her doorstep. "Are you as bored as I am?" Laney Cadrove asked, her arms crossed.

"I'm sitting here watching rain drops fall. What do you think my answer is?"

"Cool. Let's do something fun."

"Like?"

"Hmm... Remember that chick in elementary and middle school you always hung out with?"

"Kina Masters?" Juliara asked, disgust in her tone.

Laney laughed. "Yeah. Let's check in on her."

"I haven't talked to her since eighth grade, and we both hate her. Why?"

"Because. Wouldn't it be fun to see if she's miserable and ugly now?"

"It's only been four years. Her looks wouldn't have changed that much. And wouldn't we be lame for stooping down as low as to stalk her?"

Laney thought about this for a long minute. "Yeah, probably."

That was enough to convince Juliara, though. "Alright." She got up and looked over her bookshelf for her spell book on gazing and seeing.

"What happened to you two, any ways? You were inseparable."

Juliara shrugged. "We fought a lot more than people realize. Every week we were fighting about something else."

"But you two always made up."

"Yeah, I guess. But when I was accepted to Ghadavi and she wasn't, we just... Stopped making up," she explained as she rummaged through the book for the right spell. She wouldn't let herself think of their last fight.

"Was it because you were accepted and she wasn't?"

"She never applied. One, she didn't have the money. And two, she didn't have the ability. The most she could do was make a tiny flame at the snap of her finger." Laney nodded. "Can you grab a bowl of water?"

"Sure."

When she returned, Juliara had found the right spell for the situation. Smiling a little deviously, she placed her hands over the water. She stopped, though. "Why don't you do this? It'd be good practice for you, since you're only a sophomore here."

Laney shook her head, shy to use magic in front of her friends. "Nah. You know her better, it'd be easier."

Juliara shrugged. "Fair enough." Closing her eyes with her hands hovering over the bowl, she recited the spell. Focusing all her energies into her hands and down to the water, she tried to

conjure a dynamic image of what Kina was doing at that exact moment. After a couple minutes, she gave up.

"What's wrong?" Laney asked, sounding worried. Juliara rarely ever failed at her spells, especially not one as simple as this. And the fact that she and Kina were so connected at one point in time should have made the spell easier for her.

"There's *nothing* to see... It's like she fell off the face of the planet."

"Could she be dead?"

"Nah, her mom would have invited me to the funeral or something. But... Something's not right."

"Like, what do you mean?"

Juliara put her book away and headed to the kitchen to dump the water down the sink and put the bowl away. She brushed the situation off with a simple, "I dunno."

Laney shrugged, accepting this. She was never close to Kina, so whatever was happening to her was none of her concern. She wasn't going to lose sleep over it. "Wanna play some Black Ops?"

Juliara laughed. "'Cause that's what all normal high schoolers do on Friday nights."

"You know it! Would it make you feel better if we invited some boys and alcohol over?"

"Take the alcohol away, and that sounds like a good idea."

"Mmm. Senior boys, Call of Duty, and my best friend equal a perfect night."

Juliara woke early the next morning, despite being up until way past midnight. She quickly dressed and grabbed the keys to her well-kept 1999 Chevy Cavalier. After slumping into the driver's seat, she pulled out her cellular. She didn't have Kina's number anymore, so she didn't know how to even contact her.

"Maybe..." she muttered aloud, wondering if the Masters still lived in the same house. After Juliara was accepted to the Ghadavi Academy, her parents moved closer to the school so she could still visit on weekends. "Let's hope I still know the way."

About two hours later, she found herself in her old hometown. The quaint village of Heart Springs, located in center of Maine. Feeling a ping of sadness, she realized that even though Laney still lived here, she hadn't been back to this town since the day she moved and said goodbye to Kina forever.

"Hey..." Kina says, answering the phone on the last ring before it goes to the answering machine. It's been a couple days since she's talked to Juliara since their most recent fight.

"I know you probably don't want to talk to me. But I thought you should know I'm moving."

There's a long pause before either girls say anything.

"So you were accepted." Kina thinks about this for a quick minute. "Cool." Her tone is as apathetic as she feels.

"Yeah."

There's another long pause, and again Kina breaks the silence.

"So this is goodbye?"

Juliara nods, though she realizes Kina is a couple houses down the street. "Yeah."

"You know I didn't mean to—" Kina tries.

"It doesn't matter."

"But—"

"It doesn't matter," Juliara repeats, holding back tears this time. "Bye." Before Kina can reply, she hangs up the phone.

She hadn't even given Kina a chance to say goodbye. Shaking her head, she turned down the street they grew up on. She passed her old house first; it hadn't changed much in the past four years. A couple houses down was Kina's. Parking her car on the side of the road, she inhaled deeply and gathered up courage to get out. *Just a quick stop-by to see if she's okay*, she told herself.

She quickly flipped through the small spell book she kept in her car for emergencies, looking for a way to disguise herself. "Aha, there." She recited the spell, and with a tiny flash of light that originated from her body, Juliara's shoulder-length blond hair turned into long black curls, her green eyes turned blue, and her pale skin tanned. After looking in the rear-view mirror, she was satisfied with her new look and exited the car.

Holding tears of both sadness and anger back, she headed up the sidewalk and knocked on the door. After waiting a couple minutes, she was about to leave when the door actually opened. "Can I help you?"

Juliara couldn't believe it. There was Kina, alive and well. The same fair skin, the same caramel-colored hair, the same crooked smile, the same quiet alto voice. Nothing had changed, but it sparked a memory for Juliara.

"Hey Jule. I've got a secret for you," a friend of both Kina and Juliara calls.

Kina glances behind her as they walk home from the bus stop, and glares at him.

"Brenon, leave Julie alone."

Juliara looks up and behind her to Brenon Layse, having been staring at the ground absently. "Yeah?" Her tone is as apathetic as her movements.

"Princess didn't run away."

This makes Juliara stop walking and her heart skip a beat. The tone of his voice tells her that what's happened to her best feline friend is worse. "What do you mean?"

"Brenon, just stop," Kina scowls, a hint of panic in her tone.

"What, Kina? Haven't you told her?"

Juliara looks at her best friend, confused. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothing, Julie. C'mon." She grabs the blonde's hand and glares at Brenon. "Shut up," she mouths.

"No, Kina. Jule deserves to know." He looks Juliara straight in the eye, sympathy filling his own. "Kina killed Princess."

Juliara doesn't react, as if it went right past her. She shakes her head. "What?" she breathes.

"Brenon, stop!" Kina tries, but he talks right over her.

"Your best friend killed your cat!"

Tears filling her eyes, Juliara swiftly turns to Kina. "Is he serious?" she mutters, completely choked now.

"Julie, I can explain."

"You... Princess..."

"It was an accident, Julie!"

"That cat was my baby girl, and you..." Juliara can't even finish the sentence. She takes off, tears falling down her cheeks. It's one thing to lose the feline with which she had such an incredible bond. But it's another thing when that animal is taken from her, by the person who was supposed to be her best friend.

"Uh, nothing. Wrong house, I think," she stuttered, turning around. The pain of that day was starting to find its way back, and Juliara didn't want to cry in front of witnesses. Especially not Kina Masters, of all people.

Kina grabbed her arm, holding her back for a minute. "Hey, do I know you from somewhere?"

Juliara shook her head, shaking off her old friend's hand. "Probably not; I'm not from around here. Sorry to bother you."

"Alright..." Kina was obviously not convinced, and she almost sounded worried about it.

Brushing it off and not worrying about it, Juliara hurried back to her car and quickly drove away. Driving above the speed limits and not stopping for anything, she was back in Kartika at the Ghadavi Academy in an hour and a half. When she got back to the apartment, her redheaded roommate was sitting on the couch, eating a late breakfast.

"Where have you—" Laney started, then glanced over her shoulder at the stranger in the kitchen. "Who the hell—"

Juliara put her hand up, realizing she's still in the disguise she created. She quickly dispelled herself, and her appearance reverted back to normal.

"What the hell have you been doing?" Laney spat out, determined to finish at least one sentence.

"Kina's alive and well. Hasn't changed a bit."

Laney laughed. "You disguised yourself and drove all the way to Heart Springs. Just to find that out? Are you for real, Julie?" The blonde answered with a simple nod. "And? What was going on with your magic then?"

Juliara thought about this for the first time since the spell failed yesterday. "I... Don't know..." she admitted. Magic was a passion of hers; she spent hours a day practicing spells and studying ancient texts. She was the most knowledgeable and skilled mage in the state of Maine, so when something like this happened, it frustrated her more than anything.

"Did she block you from seeing her or something?"

"No," she answered with a shake of her head. "She wouldn't know how to do that... And she wouldn't have the money to pay for it."

"Then... What's going on?"

The blonde shook her head again and headed for her room. "Not sure... But obviously something."

II

COULD YOU TURN YOUR BACK?

"So... I've narrowed it down to one of three things. One, she's possessed. Two, she actually did block me, though I don't know how. Or three, I'm losing my touch," Juliara explained during dinner later that Saturday night. After spending the entire day looking through her textbooks and the ancient tombs she had acquired over the years, she had a bit more knowledge about what was going on.

Laney laughed. "We both know the third isn't a possibility."

"Alright," Juliara agreed, also laughing a little. "Two things."

The redhead turned serious with her next question. "Could you tell if someone blocked you or if they're possessed?"

"You have to assess them to see if their possessed. And it's process of elimination to see if they blocked you."

"How do you assess someone?"

"The simplest way is looking into their eyes. If it looks hollow, or it's not even the right color, it's a dead give-away. Or there are magical ways of figuring it out."

Laney looked dead into her friend's eyes. "Yep, yours are still green. Mine?"

Juliara laughed at the sophomore's bubbly personality, then smiled at the fact that she could always make her laugh in any situation. "Yes, yours too."

"Okay then," Laney said, relieved that neither of them were possessed. "So what color were her eyes?"

Juliara thought for a minute. She couldn't remember; then again, she didn't really look Kina straight in the eyes. "I don't remember..."

"What color are they supposed to be?"

"Brown."

"Dark or light?"

"Dark."

"What color would they be if she was possessed?"

"Depends. They could be the color of whoever's possessing her, or if she's under someone's control, they could be any color."

"Damn..."

"Yeah. There's so many possibilities."

"Well, then you know what we gotta do?"

Juliara shook her head. "I'm not going back."

"But what if she is possessed?"

"I don't care. She deserves it."

Laney wasn't satisfied with the answer. "What happened between you two that made you hate her so much?"

The blonde shook her head, not wanting to discuss or even remember it. The memories rushed back into her mind anyway, though.

Juliara is sitting on her bed with Brenon Layse, to whom she's been getting closer since the discovery of the truth of what happened to her missing cat.

"I think you should know what she did to Princess..." Brenon says, his hand on her shoulder.

She looks up at him, scared to find out. "Will it make me cry?"

"Would you rather not know, then years from now regret not looking? The image won't be available forever, Jule."

She hates him right now, knowing he's right. He's two years older than her; of course he'll know what he's talking about. He hands her the bowl of water he had brought up to her when came over. "C'mon."

Juliara grabs the sheet of paper on which the seeing spell is written, and reads it over. She's never done such a high-level spell before, and she doesn't even know if it'll succeed.

"What if I conjure up an image that's not true?"

"You have to believe that you can do it."

"But I don't want to..."

"I think it's only fair for both of you if you knew the truth."

She knows immediately that he's not including Kina when he says both, and sighs. She reads over the spell once more before holding her hands over the bowl of water and saying it aloud. After a long moment of focusing her energy into the water and staring at it with determination, she's able to conjure up a dynamic image.

At first, Kina is laying in the grass, playing with Lucky, her rabbit. Juliara looks up at Brenon, afraid of what's going to happen, and he nods at the bowl. "Watch."

Juliara watches the scene as her cat joins Kina and Lucky. Her heart skips a beat, and she aches to hold her best feline friend once more. "Princess," she mouths, tears choking her voice. She had claimed that cat as her familiar, an animal companion that was bonded to its master through the soul. She has to force herself to continue watching the water, though it pains her more than anything. Part of her died when Princess did, and that part was heavy in Juliara's heart as she watched the black cat alive for the last time.

As Princess sulks up to the rabbit and eighth grader, she lowers her body close to the grass. Obviously, the cat sees Lucky as her next prey. Princess pounces at the rabbit, and sinks her teeth into the small creature.

Panicking, Kina grabs Princess by the neck, pulls her off the rabbit, smacks her head, and throws the feline to the side. She doesn't realize it at first, but the cat goes head-first into the tree a few feet away.

The scene follows Kina as she rushes her rabbit into the house, where her mother bandages the small wound up. After cuddling with Lucky for a while, she puts him safely in his cage. With a gasp, Kina realizes that she threw Princess into the tree and left her

there about an hour ago. She runs outside and sees the cat still lying in the dirt at the base of the tree.

Tears drip from Juliara's chin into the bowl of water, disrupting the image. She can't say anything, the sobs completely taking over her body. Brenon sets the water onto her night stand, then pulls her, as she shakes with grief, into his arms.

"Julie," Laney yelled, snapping her fingers in front of the senior's face. "You okay?"

Juliara shook her head, and looked up at her friend. "Yeah..."

"What happened between you two?"

After explaining the memory that just played through her mind, she sighed. "She didn't mean to; she was a brown belt in karate and just reacted in instinct. But the fact that she tried to hide it and let me believe that Princess would return someday killed me. And she got mad at me for not understanding her point of view."

"It sounds like neither of you understood where the other was coming from."

She simply shrugged, apathetic to the entire thing now. "I guess. It doesn't matter, though. A week later I was accepted to Ghadavi and we moved. End of story." With that said, she put her dinner dishes into the sink and hid herself away in her room.

Juliara spent the next couple hours lying on her bed, staring at the wall and thinking about what to do. On one hand, this woman took part of her heart away from her forever. She didn't even get the chance to say goodbye to her baby girl. She didn't even get to at least burry Princess. The last time she saw the cat alive was when it was killed.

On the other hand, though, that woman was her best friend. They fought every other week about stupid nonsense, but wasn't that what true sisters did? They could fight so much and still, they were best friends. Why did they let that friendship die?

Juliara was torn inside. There was a very good possibility Kina was in trouble. What if she was the only one who knew this? Would she really turn her back on her best friend now?

"Fuck," Juliara spat, slamming her pillow against the wall. She quickly shrugged a jacket on, since March nights weren't as warm as the days in northern Maine, and grabbed her car keys.

"Where are ya going?" Laney called as Juliara headed toward the front door.

"Back to Heart Springs."

"Hold on a sec." The redhead grabbed a purple and gold Ghadavi Academy hoodie and joined her friend. "I'm not letting you go alone."

"Thanks." She was more grateful than her sober tone let on, but Laney knew this.

The two hour-long drive to Heart Springs was a long one for Juliara. She spent the time thinking about the imaginative adventures she and Kina went on as children, the trouble they get themselves into, and the laws they made up. Remembering a few, she smiled to herself. Books were not weapons, decided after she randomly threw some books at Kina during a sleep over; one should always whisper while on the bus, decided after being told to be quiet while sitting in silence on the bus ride to school; five o'clock was a time for sleeping not laughing, decided after Kina spent an hour laughing when Juliara was trying to go to sleep at five in the morning; when

one of them was trying to get a bottle of soda from a vending machine the other would not press random buttons, decided after Juliara had to buy three bottles to get the one she actually wanted. The two of them were absolute best friends. It killed Juliara that she threw it all away. But the fact that Kina had killed Princess justified Juliara's decision. Right?

"I didn't think I'd be back here until summer vacation," Laney laughed as they finally drove past the sign welcoming them to Heart Springs. Both Laney and Juliara grew up here, but while the Reed family moved to Kartika when Juliara was accepted to the academy, the Cadrove family stayed.

Juliara shook her head, pushing all thoughts out of her mind. "What was that?"

Laney laughed. "I was just saying it's weird to be back already. But you can park at my house. I'll run in and tell my parents it's just your car." Juliara quickly disguised herself again, waiting for Laney to come back out. When the redhead returned, she joined her as they walked down to Kina's house. "What are you gonna do if she *is* possessed?"

Juliara just stared at the younger girl. After thinking for a moment, she shook her head and looked down. "I... Don't know."

They began walking to Kina's house, both trying to figure out what to do next. "If she was possessed, what would it take to free her?"

"Depends. If it's a weakling just messing around, we'd have to sever the connection between them by putting a shield around her mind. It could get as complicated as having to kill whoever's controlling her."

"Would you risk your life for hers?"

"No," Juliara answered instantly, but then thought about it for a moment. They were at the Masters' house at this point. "No," she repeated, sureness in her tone, as she walked back up to the front door for the second time in both four years and one day.

When Kina answered the door, she had a look of panic on her face. "You're back? Who are you?" She peeked around the blonde-in-disguise at Laney. "What's going on?"

Juliara missed every word the brunette said, though, as she stared at her eyes. They were not the dark chocolate color they should be. "Who the hell are *you*?" she demanded.

Kina took a step back, ready to slam the door shut if needed. Juliara put her foot halfway in, though, to prevent this. Laney took a few steps closer, ready to back her friend up if something happened. "You're not Kina." Juliara's voice was dark as the night around them.

"Who are you that you'd know this? I've never met you in my life," the mock-Kina explained, panic heavy in her voice.

"Kina has dark brown eyes! Who the fuck are you?" Juliara screamed, taking a step closer. Her right arm pulled back, and she inhaled deeply as she put all her weight into a strong punch right to the jaw.

Cursing, the possessed eighteen-year-old took an unwilling step back before slamming her body, elbow first, into her old friend. Though this was certainly Kina's body, whoever controlled her lacked the strength and focus the brown-belt Kina possessed.

Laney caught Juliara as she began to stumble back, but she recovered quickly. Anger drove her to move despite the pain in her abdomen. With one hand holding her stomach and the other

arm across her chest, she pushed her body into the door, forcing it fully open. Laney, with a calmness Juliara lacked at the moment, worried about someone seeing or even hearing this fight.

Kina's eyes widened as Juliara came after her with another heavy punch. Her hand holding her jaw from the first attack, she quickly muttered something in the same spell-casting language, in a tone too low to be understood. Her hand had a dark aura surrounding it as she pushed Juliara back with an inhuman force.

The blonde was thrown onto her back, and she toppled Laney on her way down. Before she could get back to her feet, the controlled Kina left with another muttered spell and a tiny flash of light.

Juliara lay on her side, an elbow propping her up, as Laney kneeled beside her, holding her steady. The two stared at the spot where Kina, the woman who had one been the inseparable best friend of Juliara, was seconds ago.

After a minute, Laney realized they needed to make themselves disappear, too, before they were caught. "C'mon," she mumbled to her pained friend as she helped her up. Once on her feet, Juliara muttered some curses as she dragged herself away. After quickly and quietly closing the Masters' front door, Laney silently followed her back to her car.

Once seated, Juliara staring at the steering wheel, the keys in the ignition. Laney sat beside her, staring out the windshield at her garage. She waited for her blonde friend, out of her black-haired disguise, to find the ambition to drive the two hours back to Kartika.

Would I risk my life for her? Juliara thought she knew the answer; of course not. She knew Kina wouldn't do the same. But still, she asked herself the question: *Could you really turn your back on her?*