

———— B.L. BRUNNEMER ————
THE DARKEST WHISPER SERIES

The background of the cover features a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair, seen from the chest up in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top. The setting is a rooftop at night, with a city skyline in the background. The Space Needle is prominent on the left side of the skyline. A large, bright, full moon is in the upper right portion of the sky. The overall color palette is dark, with blues, greys, and the warm tones of the woman's hair and the moon's light.

HUNGER PAINS

HUNGER PAINS

OceanofPDF.com

B. L. BRUNNEMER

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peak](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

This one is for my readers. You guys are the best. It's been a long road and we have a little farther to go. Thanks for sticking with me!

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

OceanofPDF.com

SUNDAY MORNING- SPRING MOUNTAIN, MONTANA

All summer I had avoided thinking about saying goodbye to Rory. I'd spent as much time as possible outside the house with the guys. I'd trained my ass off with Uma to the point where even she was satisfied with my control and manipulation of energy. But near the end of August, the day finally came to leave the first real home I'd known since my father died.

We were standing on the tarmac at the airport. Miles, being Miles, had arranged everything, from flight to the private terminal where we waited during preflight checks. Zeke was saying goodbye to a beaming Sylvia, Miles was talking to the crew, as Maria gushed over the twins, lamenting the fact that her boys were finally all grown up.

"Well, this is it, kid." Rory's voice had me turning back to him.

I looked up at my uncle and smiled. The man was getting older, that was clear. His vibrant red hair was white at the temples, but that did nothing to take away from the warmth in his eyes, let alone how much he'd come to mean to me. "Well, you'll finally be rid of me."

He gave a wry grin. "It wasn't that big of a chore having you."

I shot him a look. "Even when the world was ending? Didn't you ever think, damn I should never have let her in the house?"

His eyes narrowed on mine as his grin faded. "Not once."

My heart warmed; my eyes filled as I fought to keep control. "Thank you, Rory. For everything."

His eyes grew glassy as he looked everywhere but at me. "Don't talk like you aren't coming back, kid. Thanksgiving isn't that far away."

I gave him a warm smile but kept quiet.

He turned back to me and met my gaze. "I'm proud of ya, kid."

It was my turn to squirm. "I'll see you at Thanksgiving," I muttered before turning away. I stopped. Come on, Lexie, you can do better than this. I turned back and hugged him tightly. The scent of clean laundry filled my nose as his arms slid around me and held just as tight. His heart beat under my ear as tears leaked out of the corner of my eyes. I took a shaky breath before letting him go and stepping away. I kept my eyes on the pavement as I hurried to the plane and climbed the steps.

Wiping my cheeks, I sat down in the third window seat and took several deep, slow breaths. It wasn't really goodbye. It was 'I'll see you later.' Rory wasn't going to just disappear out of my life. I blinked several more times before I wiped my cheeks again.

It wasn't long before Zeke made his way onto the jet. With his large six-foot five frame, he ducked his head as he made his way through the aisle. His hair was cut short, but still long enough to be a little messy when he ran his hands through it. His wide square jaw was covered in black scruff. His sharp blue eyes were unfocused as he moved through the cabin. Genetics had made Zeke scary looking as hell. But the truth was I never felt safer than when I was with him. That mountain of muscle sat down beside me, his shoulder pushing against mine. Tension practically radiated off him in waves.

"You good?" I asked softly.

"About as good as I thought I'd be," he muttered in that deep, gravelly voice of his, "it's just a whole lot of new coming our way."

I reached over and intertwined our fingers then rested my cheek on his thick arm. "And you don't do well with new."

His fingers squeezed mine gently. "No, I don't."

"And you're leaving Sylvie," I added.

"Yeah."

"And living in a dorm with a bunch of people you don't know."

He took a deep calming breath as his body grew even more rigid. "Uh-huh."

I bit back a grin. "And you really do hate flying."

He scowled down at me. A scowl that sent most people running for their lives. It only made me want to smile. "Not helping."

I grinned up at him to let him know I was teasing while I squeezed his hand and stroked the back of his thumb with mine. "It's going to be okay, tough guy. We're all together. Everyone is safe, healthy, and happy. We all might not all be in the same college, but we're all in the same city."

He took another deep cleansing breath. "Yeah. That's what matters."

I relaxed against his shoulder and took a deep breath of leather and engine grease. Until the plane touched down, I wasn't going anywhere. He needed me.

Out the window, I watched as the twins hugged their mom tight.

Isaac's black hair was cut short and dyed multiple shades of blue. His clothing of choice today was khaki cargo pants, a simple lime green t-shirt and sneakers. He was probably going to try to hit a skate park he found online before the end of the day. I smiled to myself. There was something about Isaac that just... made you smile.

Ethan, however, wore all black. A black t-shirt, black cargo pants and combat boots. His straight black hair that usually reached his jaw was a little longer now and tied back. The five silver loop earrings that ran up his ear lobe glinted in the sun as he smiled softly to his mom, she wiped under her eyes for the third time since I started watching them. Maria waved them off tearfully.

Isaac said something. Maria chuckled while the twins grinned before heading toward the plane.

Her chocolate eyes met mine. My heart ached. Maria hadn't really spoken to me since learning that Ethan was no longer human. Or what had happened to Isaac. Once they had explained what happened, she had asked me to leave her house. I haven't been back since. Maria frowned, then gave me a small nod.

I understood exactly what she meant. She wanted me to take care of her boys. I nodded back and hoped that one day she'd speak to me again.

Rory moved to Maria's side and wrapped his arm around her. Maria took several deep, shaky breaths before she put on a brave face, the two of them moved to catch Miles before he boarded the plane.

"That was rough," Ethan said, his smokey voice drawing my attention. He swiveled the recliner seat in front of Zeke and I around to face us and plopped down across from me.

"Rough? It was brutal," Isaac corrected as he dropped into the seat opposite Zeke. He angled his feet around Zeke's long legs and into the aisle.

“She brought up Boulder.”

I winced. Isaac had been possessed by a demon, a couple summers ago. To get help, we had to go to a specific church in Boulder Colorado to find the Templars. We sort of lied to Maria about what was going on. When she found out last year, well, the twins had been lucky to see daylight for a month.

“She made me promise to tell her if I ever hear voices again,” Isaac muttered as he picked imaginary lint off his pants.

“Well, you got her to laugh before you got on the plane at least,” I reminded him.

Ethan snorted. “Yeah, he told her that if she’s going to miss us so much, we could ship her our dirty laundry every week.”

I smiled and shook my head. “And I’m betting she didn’t take you up on that.”

Ethan grinned and shook his head.

Isaac smirked at Zeke. “Freaking out about flying yet?”

Zeke growled deep in his chest.

Isaac chuckled.

Smiling a little, I turned to look out the window again, watching as Miles pushed his rimless glasses up his nose while he spoke with Maria and Rory. Miles... With his high cheek bones, angled jaw and rimless glasses... He was cute. At least until he smiled, then you saw how handsome he really was. His wavy chestnut hair was a bit messy as usual. He had lost some shoulder muscle from his already lean frame in the last few months. When the last competitive swimming season ended, so had Miles’ swimming career and the intense training.

Miles nodded to them one more time before Maria pulled him into a big hug. He hugged her back tightly. My heart ached for him. Miles’ mom still hadn’t come back from the research trip she’d gone on after his dad’s funeral. She had sent a heartfelt letter for his graduation, though. That was something, I guess.

Miles turned and headed toward the plane with his gaze on the ground.

“Where’s Asher?” Isaac asked.

“He’s late,” Ethan pointed out.

“No shit,” Isaac countered. “I thought he was invisible.”

“He had to take Jessica to her flight at the airport in Missoula,” I said as Miles climbed into the plane with his head down.

“He also needed to make sure he got everything important from his father’s house,” Miles added as he moved to the seat across the aisle from Isaac, facing the back of the plane. He sat down and stared out the window. “Birth certificate, social security card, photos. Things like that.”

“Yeah, that fucker’s not going to let him back in after today,” Zeke said.

“What an asshole,” I muttered under my breath. Once Asher refused to play football after becoming a werewolf—which, of course, his dad didn’t know about—the asshole had all but disowned Asher.

Isaac shook his head. “It’s not like Asher became a werewolf on purpose.”

“His father doesn’t know any of it,” Miles said as he finally turned toward us. “All it took to upset him was Asher refusing to play football.”

“And not taking his dad’s bullshit anymore,” Ethan added as he settled himself more comfortably in the chair.

Which reminded me... I turned to Zeke. “What did you do with your motorcycle?”

Zeke sighed. “I finally gave in and let Miles arrange to have it shipped to his new place in Seattle.” He turned to me. “What did you do with the Blazer?”

My chest ached as I looked out the window again. “I sold it to a junkyard for parts three weeks ago.”

“Why?” Zeke’s voice was sharp.

I turned back to him. “Because it was smashed and blown apart when Miles’ house blew up.”

His brow drew down. “It was your dad’s.”

“Not helping,” I said softly.

He gave me a small nod then gently squeezed my hand.

“I have more than enough room at the house for both if you want to get it back and have it brought to Seattle,” Miles reminded us again. Zeke and I shared a look. Miles had always been generous. Generous to a fault. Hell, it was his private jet we were on.

“We know, Miles.” I smiled at him. “But you know us.”

Miles gave me a soft, warm smile. “Yes. I do.”

I looked back out the window and watched as a beat-up blue car pulled up. “Asher’s here.”

Asher spoke to one of his old football teammates, then got out of the car and went to the trunk.

“Mom’s going to hug him to death,” Isaac pointed out as he looked up at the ceiling.

I grinned while watching Maria hurry over to do just that. After she let him go, he straightened to his full six-foot three height. His sandy blonde hair was short but mussed like he just woke up. He began rubbing the back of his neck as Maria and Rory began talking to him. Asher was the boy next door, only at model level of handsome. I bit back a smile as Maria pulled him back down and squished his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. He spoke to her while gently trying to pry her hands off his face.

“I don’t blame her.” I turned back to the others. “She’s known all of you your entire lives. She practically raised you all.”

The guys nodded in agreement.

Isaac ran his hand through his hair. “I hope she’s going to be okay on her own.”

Ethan bit back a grin. “Oh, I’ll think she’ll be fine.”

Isaac turned to his brother. “Why do you think that?”

Ethan’s grin went full Cheshire cat. “Just trust me.”

Isaac and I shared a look but we let it go.

“You might want to go say goodbye,” Ethan suggested.

I looked out the window and shook my head. “I’m still the reason you aren’t human anymore. She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Give her time,” Ethan said. “She’ll come around.”

I gave him a reassuring grin.

Isaac turned to Zeke. “How did you avoid being hugged to death?”

“I got on the plane before she finished with you two,” Zeke said, his voice deadpan.

I shot Zeke a look. “Seriously?”

Ethan and Isaac chuckled.

“That’s not gonna work, man,” Ethan warned.

“Ezekiel Ahanu Blackthorn!” Maria shouted from the hangar. “You get your butt back out here and give us a proper goodbye!”

Ethan grinned. “Oooh...”

“She middle-named you.” Isaac cringed. “If you don’t go out there, she’s coming in.”

“Ahanu?” I turned to Zeke, stunned. “That’s your middle name?”

Zeke growled under his breath as he unhooked his belt and got to his feet. “Almost nineteen years and she says it right before we leave.”

The twins burst out laughing.

Once outside, Maria stopped herself before hugging Zeke. She held her arms out and let him come to her. Zeke’s cheeks tinted pink as he hugged the much smaller woman. I smiled. Maria had always made a point to be respectful of Zeke’s personal space and it made me love her even more.

Asher climbed into the plane and made his way to the seat across the aisle from Zeke, facing Miles.

“How’d it go with Jess?” I asked.

“It went okay, it just wasn’t easy.” He sighed. “She cried before she went through security.”

I winced. Yeah, that would have been like ripping out Asher’s heart. “It’s just until Thanksgiving break.”

Asher shook his head. “She said she’s not coming back to Spring Mountain ever again.” That got everyone’s attention, but it wasn’t that surprising.

“Then she’ll have to come spend the holidays in Seattle with us,” Miles said while pulling out his laptop and getting ready for the flight.

Asher faced Miles. “Are you sure?”

Miles nodded as he sat back in his seat. “Of course. I wasn’t planning on coming back unless I had to. Not much to come back to.”

I cringed internally. After all, I was the one who’d blown up Miles’ house, after all.

“Yeah, I’m kinda sick of this town,” Ethan said.

“And the people,” Isaac added.

“What about you, Ally?” Asher asked, drawing my attention. “Are you coming back for the holidays?”

I leaned my head back against the seat and finally admitted the truth to myself. After all the things that had gone wrong here—all the death, the ghosts I’d helped, all the souls that were destroyed along the way—a large part of me was at peace. Settled. Done with Spring Mountain. “I don’t think I’ll ever really have a *need* to come back. Except for Rory, I mean.”

“It wasn’t the greatest time for you after all,” Isaac pointed out.

I smiled softly. “Rory took me in when I had nowhere else to go. I found you guys here. And all of you accepted me the way I was, necromancy and all. This is where I learned what a family should be. This

is where I found my family, but this is also where the world almost ended. I almost lost all of you. Was almost murdered several times. It honestly just feels like a chapter closing. I'm ready for the next one."

The guys nodded in the soft silence.

"Son of a bitch," Zeke growled as he got back on the plane.

The other guys chuckled as he took his seat again.

"How the hell is she so strong?" Zeke rubbed his left side. "I thought she was going to crack a rib."

The twins continued snickering as the flight attendant closed the plane door. The plane began moving out towards the runway almost immediately.

When Zeke was buckled in and settled next to me, I looked up at him. "Ahanu?"

Zeke gritted his teeth as his cheeks tinted pink. "It's a Blackfoot name."

I simply squeezed his hand, letting it go.

"Do you think we should have told them about all of us dating Lexie?" Isaac asked.

My attention tore away from the window as we taxied onto the runway. "Why?"

Isaac shrugged. "I don't know. I'm feeling kind of guilty that they don't know our situation."

Hell, now that he mentioned it, I felt a little guilty myself. For the last year I had been dating each of the guys. All six of us knew what was going on, everyone had consented, and we always kept communication open, but in Spring Mountain we were still mostly a secret. A badly kept secret. The only people who officially knew were Jake, Riley and Jess, but rumors had still spread.

"I don't think it would have helped them to feel any better about us moving out of state," Miles said carefully, his fingers drumming a staccato rhythm on the foldout table. "In fact, I'm certain it would have made it worse."

The engines roared to a high pitch. Asher pulled out a pair of earplugs and popped them in while Zeke took my hand again. Zeke and I were pushed back into our seats, the others were pushed forward as we barreled down the runway. It wasn't long before we were in the air and flying towards Seattle.

"How do you know it would have made it worse?" Isaac asked.

I smirked. "Your mom is Catholic, Cookie Monster."

Isaac's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "Oh, yeah. That would have been bad."

Miles took his glasses off and cleaning them on the hem of his dark green t-shirt. "On the flight I suggest we each think about if we want to be out as a polyandry group in Seattle or not. We should discuss it at dinner tonight."

Everyone agreed.

As the plane leveled out Ethan put on his headphones and listened to music. Miles typed away on his computer. Isaac pulled a book up on his phone. Asher pulled out a sack lunch for his second breakfast while Zeke held onto my hand for dear life.

Weariness washed over me. I shifted and rested my head on Zeke's shoulder, then sighed.

"You okay?" Zeke asked.

"I didn't sleep so well last night," I muttered as I got comfortable enough that my eyelids began to feel heavy.

"Bad dreams?" Isaac asked, lowering his phone.

"Bad dream. It's the same one from the last few months." I shrugged. "I'll get past it, I always do."

Isaac gave me a small understanding smile before going back to his book.

I let my eyes close and floated, half aware. It was a new chapter. A new beginning. For the first time that realization sent a small, sharp pain of fear icing its way through my veins. I pushed the feeling aside. Everything was going to be okay. Nothing ahead could be as hard as what we had already been through. Right?

I

OceanofPDF.com

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, SEATTLE WASHINGTON

My stomach knotted as I made my way through the crowded hallway of my residence hall. College. I was in college. It was still weird to think, let alone say out loud. I skirted around a pair of parents saying a tearful goodbye to their red-faced son in the middle of the crowded hallway.

Thankfully, all of the guys' dorms and Miles' house had been ghost free. The twins were on campus with me, not too far from my residence hall. Miles had his own house off campus, while Asher and Zeke were at their college dorms.

A chill ran down the back of my neck. Oh, for fuck's sake. I kept moving as I discreetly searched the crowd for the source. *'This is a time for the living,'* the guys had said. Don't worry about the dead. I knew it was total bullshit.

"You freaking sheep!" a girl shouted from the side of the hallway near the elevator. She wore an oversized pastel yellow sweater and a knee-length acid wash denim skirt. She raised her arms and waved them in the air, multiple plastic bracelets clinking together as she continued to scream at the oblivious crowd. "You need to leave!"

The light in the elevator blinked on and off as her rage grew. A girl in a purple shirt that read Resident Advisor went to the elevators and shooed everyone off. Once it was empty she pulled a lever inside, then stepped out and put a sign on the doors. Elevator out of use.

Yep. That was the ghost. I made a point to act as if I didn't see her as I made my way down the hall. I was not dealing with the dead right now.

Nope. Not today. No way, no how. I finally spotted my room. 314.

I stopped, suitcase in hand, and took a deep breath. This was it. New life, new city, new future, and new people who didn't already think I was a freak.

I knocked twice and opened the door only to be hit with the scent of sage and vanilla and a hard rock drum solo pounding through a speaker. I followed the music and chatter through a tiny foyer and past several wardrobes into the main part of the dorm room. Three other teenage girls turned toward me.

I put on a friendly smile. "Hi, I'm Lexie, your fourth dormmate."

The blonde and brunette smiled as the raven-haired girl turned down the volume.

The blonde set down the still smoldering sage stick into an abalone shell. "Yes! We were wondering when you were going to arrive!" She hurried over to me with her hand out and a huge friendly smile. "I'm Gemma."

I shook her hand as relief coursed through me. "Nice to finally meet you." Gemma's was pretty. Her wavy golden hair reaching well past her shoulders. Her blue eyes were warm and open. Friendliness seemed to pour from her as she let go of my hand.

The brunette stepped forward. Her long, straight caramel hair was held back off her sweet oval face. Her brown eyes contrasted with the loose green overalls and white t-shirt she wore. A small gold cross on a thin chain around her neck glinted in the light. "I'm Elena."

I took my gaze from her necklace and shook her hand with a forced smile. "Lexie."

She smiled sweetly as she held up the small cross. "Don't worry, I'm not preachy, and I was raised to respect everyone else's beliefs."

My smile turned genuine. Please let that be true.

Gemma chuckled as she turned back to me. "Yeah, she's cool. I totally expected a hissy fit when I started smudging, but she didn't care a bit."

Elena shrugged, her ears turning pink. "I highly doubt any religion has it right. To be honest, it's more likely that we all have pieces that are right and pieces that are wrong."

"That's probably truer than most realize," the other girl said. Her raven hair sat in tight coils that fell to her shoulders. She must spend a fortune in conditioner to keep the frizz at bay. Barefoot in a pair of ripped, faded black

jeans and a vintage Rolling Stones shirt, she was currently eyeing me with her dark velvet eyes. Her diamond face featured cheekbones plenty would kill for. "I'm Nova."

I stepped forward and offered her my hand. "Lexie. Nice to meet you."

She didn't take my hand, but she gave me a head nod. "We gave you the bed closest to the door, that okay with you?"

Okay, not too friendly. I could deal. I dropped my hand, turned, and found my empty bed against the wall that was part of the bathroom. It wasn't the best spot, but oh well. "No problem." I lifted my suitcase and went to put it on the twin bed.

"Is that all you brought?" Nova asked.

As I turned and opened my mouth to answer.

The door swung open; something crashed to the floor. I winced.

"Son of a bitch!" Isaac snapped.

The girls' eyebrows went up.

"That would be the guys with the rest of my stuff," I said as I hurried to the small entry.

Isaac was down on his knee in the open door, my books scattered next to a box with a ripped bottom.

He looked up at me from the floor as he shook his head. "Did you bring your entire library?"

I snorted. "Only the essentials. Besides, why have muscles if you never use them?"

He started picking up my books and passing them to me. "Are you complaining?"

I quickly started to put the loose books onto my bare mattress as I repressed a grin. "Not one bit."

His eyes met mine as he handed me the last book. "Did you see—"

"Yep," I answered before he let out my big secret. In Boulder, after dealing with the demon that possessed Isaac, all of the guys had been tattooed with a sigil that gave them the Sight. Ever since then they had been able to see what I could see.

Ethan stepped into the doorway and playfully kicked Isaac in the butt with a combat boot. "Move it. The others are on their way up."

Isaac grumbled as he got to his feet and moved to the side so Ethan could slide by. He set his box on the bed and turned to the other girls in the

room. He smiled a big smile. "Hello, ladies. I'm Ethan, aka the handsome twin. That one's Isaac." Ethan gestured over to Isaac as I rolled my eyes.

"Are you ever going to not introduce yourself that way?" Isaac grumbled as he came further into the room.

Ethan smirked. "Only when it stops being true."

"Why is the elevator out?" Asher asked as he brought in my last suitcase.

"Because of the issue in the hall," I said as he squeezed past Isaac so he could hand-off my suitcase to me.

Asher met my gaze. "Yeah, I saw that. Is it going to be a problem?"

I shook my head before turning and introducing the girls. "Guys, this is Elena, Gemma and Nova."

Ethan's eyebrows shot up. "Nova? Cool name."

Nova half shrugged, as if she heard that all the time.

"At least I know it's the right room," Miles' voice came from the small hall outside the bathroom.

"Girls, this is Asher, Ethan, and Isaac. Miles is apparently next to the bathroom door." I went to my toes. "Where's Zeke?"

"I think he had plans for the lock on your door," Ethan said with a grin.

A mechanical whirring sound ran through the room.

"Zeke!" I squeezed between Ethan and Asher, trying to make my way to the door.

"Is that a record player?" Ethan asked Nova while pointing at the machine on her desk.

Nova raised an eyebrow. "Yeah. I collect vinyl."

"Do you know where the good record stores in Seattle are?" Ethan asked immediately as I squeezed past Isaac and Miles.

"Depends on what you're looking for," Nova said, her voice warming.

Zeke was kneeling in the hallway, pulling screws out of the door where it latched closed.

"What are you doing?" I asked, a bit irritated.

"Putting in better screws so the door will hold longer if someone tries to force their way in," Zeke muttered around a couple of screws in his mouth.

"Then I'll be putting on a door chain for a little more peace of mind."

"Are you going to be insistent on this?" I asked dryly.

"Yeah." Zeke took a screw out of his mouth and began screwing the lockbolt back in place. "I've also got locks for your windows."

“We’re on the third floor, Zeke,” I shot back.

“And?” He continued working.

“You didn’t make the guys do this.”

“They didn’t want it,” he countered before looking up and meeting my eyes. “If you can tell me you’ll sleep fine without a little extra between you and the hallway, I’ll put the original screws in and leave it alone.”

My shoulders tightened as I thought about it. People would be walking up and down the hall all day, and probably a good chunk of the night. People I didn’t know. That old icy tendril of fear that Clay created slipped through me. Could I ignore it or deal with it enough to not have a better lock? Shit. “I hate when you’re right.”

The corner of his lips raised a little. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t happen often.” He went back to work.

Miles came to the door. “Lexie, do you want your bed as a loft? Or would you like to leave it as is?”

I didn’t even have to ask why he was asking. Isaac, Ethan, and Asher’s voices carried into the hall. “As it is, please. I hate having to climb up into bed.”

Miles turned back and took charge of the others. They began moving furniture around the room. Gemma, Nova, and Elena made their way into the small hall by the bathroom just to get out of the way.

“Are they always like this?” Gemma asked as she watched the guys work and bicker.

Zeke got to his feet and began measuring for the door chain.

“Are they unpacking for me?” I sighed, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah,” Elena said, her brow furrowed. “Right now, they’re arguing about where to put your electric kettle.”

“Then yeah, they’re always like that.” I gestured to Zeke, who was marking a spot in pencil on the wall beside the door. “This is Zeke.”

Zeke, of course, ignored them for the most part.

Elena looked up and up. Hell, she even took a step away from him.

“Uh, what is he doing?” Nova asked.

I twisted my fingers together while turning completely to face them. “He’s replaced the crappy screws on the door and the lock plate with better ones, and now he’s putting in a door chain.”

“Hold on.” Nova put up her hand. “You can’t just come in and start making changes without talking to us. We all have a deposit on this room.”

Shit... “I’m sorry, I would have asked first, but I didn’t even know it was happening, to be honest.” I braced myself to explain while Zeke began working on attaching the door chain. I really hadn’t wanted to tell anyone about this, but... “Look, a little over a year ago—”

“It’s my fault. I’m not giving her much of a choice here. I’m a bit over-protective,” Zeke finished gruffly, stopping me before I had to reveal more than I was ready to. He turned to face us. “Basically, what I’m doing is what everyone should do to be a little safer. Better screws on the door, lockbolt and lock plate, a door chain with deep screws, and locks for your windows. That’s it. Are the three of you okay with that?”

The three of them shared a look then turned back to us.

“Yeah, I guess, go ahead,” Gemma said.

Elena fiddled with a small ring on her pinkie finger. “My dad will feel better about me being in the dorms at least.”

Zeke turned back around and started working on the door. “I also got you guys a security bar.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Ally, everything but your clothes and girl stuff is unpacked,” Asher called from inside the room. The girls let me through as Zeke began screwing in more screws.

I came around the corner and smiled. My bed was freshly made, my desk was directly next to my bed with my laptop and little electric kettle already set up. My research books were in different metal lock boxes in the corner under my desk. “Thanks, guys.” I gave each of them a hug. The girls peeked around the corner.

“Wow,” Elena said. “I wish my brothers were half this helpful.”

Tense silence fell as the twins pretended to straighten my bedding while Miles and Asher avoided looking at my dormmates.

“Oh, they’re not my brothers,” I said. “We’re all from the same town, but we’re not related.”

“Speak for yourself,” the twins chimed in unison.

I snorted.

Elena eyed me a little, as if I were an oddity.

The mechanical whirring stopped.

“Out of the room, guys. I need to put those locks on the windows and show them how to use the security bar,” Zeke ordered.

The guys shuffled out into the hallway and the room immediately felt larger. Nova's shoulders relaxed. Elena stopped fiddling with her fingers while Gemma grinned as she watched the guys walk out.

Zeke quickly ran through the locks on the windows and how to unlock them so they could open them. After he demonstrated setting up the security bar he had Isaac try to lightly force his way into the room. We could hear him bitching about his shoulder through the door when it didn't budge.

Then each of us took a turn putting the security bar in place to make sure we had it. He was working himself up to have us do it a second time when Miles stuck his head into the room. "I hate to interrupt, but if Lexie and Asher are going to those meetings we need to get dinner rather soon."

That had us hurrying out into the hall. I waved to the girls before shutting the door behind me and passing the still yelling ghost in the hall. My ears rang this time from the volume.

It wasn't until we were seated at the diner near the campus that it hit me. "We should have invited my roommates."

Zeke settled into the space at the end of the booth across from me while Miles picked up his menu. "We have private issues we need to discuss first."

Okay, yeah. He was right. But it still seemed rude.

"Maybe you can do something with them tonight after your meetings," Ethan said into his menu. "A girls' night bonding thing."

It was a good idea. "Maybe."

"Hey, guys, they have all-day breakfast here," Isaac pointed out.

"Yeah, we know, we can read," Zeke said dryly as he settled his large frame against the back. "Not everyone is as excited as you to have pancakes for dinner."

"Pancakes rule," Isaac stated.

"Waffles are better," Zeke countered.

"Don't start on the pancake versus waffle shit again," Ethan warned them over his menu.

It wasn't long before the waitress came and took our enormous order.

"So, what did you guys think about my roommates?" I asked as soon as she was gone.

Asher and Ethan shared a look across the table.

"What's with the look?" The vinyl squeaked under me as I leaned back in the booth.

“Nova’s cool,” Ethan said. “A bit guarded, but she had some great records and knows music.”

“Gemma seems to be wiccan,” Asher said. “I saw the books on her desk.”

“Yeah, she was smudging when I walked in.” I grinned. “Elena seemed to be cool with it, so putting up protection wards won’t be awkward as hell.”

“Elena’s going to have a lot of problems adjusting this semester,” Isaac warned as the waitress came back with our drinks.

We thanked her. I waited until she was out of earshot to ask, “What do you mean?”

Isaac lowered his voice. “Her aura. It was wide open and just very easy to see.”

“I thought it was always easy for you to see now?” Asher asked before taking a sip of iced tea.

Isaac shook his head. “Sometimes, but this, I could practically see hers without any effort at all.”

“So, what does that mean?” I asked, turning my glass on the table.

“It was like... nothing bad has happened to her in her entire life.” Isaac’s eyes unfocused on the table. “I think it means that she has lived a very sheltered life. And is naive.”

“I agree,” Miles chimed in. “I was only talking to her and she was blushing and stammering enough that even I noticed.”

“Damn,” Ethan said. Miles’ obliviousness towards strangers was notorious back home.

Isaac’s eyes refocused and met mine. “I think it’d be very easy for her to get into a bad situation and not realize it.”

I got what he was saying. “We’re going to have to keep an eye out for her.”

Isaac nodded. “Especially around parties and booze.”

I tucked that bit of info away for later. “That’s not so bad. I think the girls and I can manage that.”

“And Gemma thinks Asher’s cute,” Isaac announced.

My eyebrows shot up. “What?”

Asher sent Isaac a scathing look. “You’re an ass.”

“Yep,” Isaac agreed without a smidge of guilt.

Asher turned back to me as he raised one shoulder. “We were just talking.”

“Dude, she was eyeing you like a shark eyeing chum,” Ethan countered before sipping his soda.

“Which actually brings up the major topic for discussion tonight,” Miles said.

The waitress came back with huge tray, followed by another with even more food. Packed plates were passed around and everyone made sure they got what they ordered.

Once the waitresses left, Miles looked to his left to make sure Asher and Zeke were listening, then to his right, giving me and the twins a look and checking that he had the whole table’s attention. “Are we coming out of the polyandry closet?”

Everyone but Miles took a bite out of their food so we didn’t have to go first. Silverware clinked on plates. Conversations carried on around us as we all refused to go first. I slowly chewed my salad as I waited the others out.

“Alright, I’ll go first,” Miles sighed as he began tapping out a staccato rhythm on the table. “I’m on the fence about it. On one hand it would be less to hide, which I know everyone is already annoyed with. On the other, it could open us up to prejudice and harassment.”

I finished my bite before answering. “Miles, this isn’t high school. We’re not stuck with the same people in every class, every day.”

Miles met my eyes. “Do you remember how bad it was at the end of senior year?”

My heart sank a little. It had been bad. All the guys had problems. Zeke had to be pulled away from several situations by Asher. Ethan had been using all his influence in the girls’ gossip line to keep them off my back. It was sweet, but it didn’t always work. Asher ended up growling enough at school that his reputation began to change into someone not quite on his rocker. Isaac ended up walking away from several fights while Miles... well... Miles had the worst time of it. He got into so many fights that he ended up not being able to walk at graduation. That didn’t really bother him in the end, but it also cost him his title of Valedictorian.

“Isn’t everyone just focused on their own lives now?” Isaac asked. “It’s like Red said, our classes aren’t with the same people every day. We’re not all trapped together with nothing much going on in their lives.”

Ethan nodded. "Yeah, everyone is going to be busy as hell dealing with their own problems. I vote we go public."

"Same," Isaac chimed before taking a bite of syrup covered pancake.

Miles looked between Asher and Zeke.

Asher took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Right now, I think I have enough to keep secret. It would be a relief to get one thing off that list. I vote public."

Miles narrowed his eyes at Zeke.

Zeke looked down at the center of the table while he spoke carefully. "I don't give a shit what other people think about us. I also don't think hiding it is going to work." Zeke met my gaze. "You're pretty open with your feelings."

I gave him a warm smile and waited for him to continue.

"So, the only thing I'm basing my decision on is what will make everyone's life easier." Zeke turned to the others. "Also, Lexie is beautiful. Inside and out. We're not the only ones who notice it."

Isaac groaned as he leaned back. "Shit. The guys."

"Not to mention the girls," Ethan added.

"Hold up. So, you want to go public because it'll chase away anyone interested in me?" I asked with a slight edge to my voice.

The others were suddenly paying much more attention to their food.

"Yeah." Zeke met my eyes without an ounce of shame.

"What do you think is going to happen if some guy flirts with me?" I asked. "That I'm going to run off with him or add him to our little group?"

Zeke's eyes didn't leave mine. It hit me. That's exactly what he thought would happen. Fuck. Zeke had been the hardest to convince to try this dating set up. It was clear he still didn't trust it to work.

"Yeah, cause five dicks isn't enough for me," I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice. "I need all the dicks."

A little old lady passing our table stopped and looked down at me in horror.

I shut my mouth as she harrumphed before moving on.

As soon as she was out the diner door the twins erupted into hysterical laughter. The rest of us followed as my face burned.

"That was awkward," I chuckled.

Ethan sobered first. "Listen, other people flirting with Beautiful is just something we're going to have to deal with, just like she's going to have to

deal with other people flirting with us.”

I suddenly wasn't smiling so much anymore. Yeah, I didn't like that idea. “I'm not flirted with as often as you seem to think, Zeke.”

Ethan shook his head. “It'll still be tons of fish.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Fish?”

Ethan smirked. “Remember that guy, Doug something, that asked you to prom last year?”

“Yeah, we all decided on skipping the prom for movie night,” I said, dreading where this was going.

Isaac exaggerated a wince. “We kind of, maybe, hid a bunch of fish in his car.”

“In the panels of the doors and storage area to be exact,” Ethan added.

My jaw dropped. “Why the hell would you guys do that?”

“He was a pretty boy.” Ethan speared some of his turkey dinner with more force than . “He annoyed the hell out of me.”

“You guys seriously can't do this shit,” I said in a firm voice.

“Zeke lent us the tools,” Isaac admitted, his voice matter of fact.

“And told us how to get into the panels,” Ethan added.

Isaac smirked. “And how to break into the car.”

My gaze shot to Zeke who simply raised one massive shoulder in a half shrug. I shook my head. Yeah, Zeke had no remorse.

I sighed.

“It was that or Asher was going to claw his tires,” Miles added.

My eyes shot to Asher's. “Why?”

A thin vein of silver began to thread its way through Asher's ocean eyes. He half shrugged. “It's a territory thing. My wolf wouldn't settle down. The fish seemed to be the lesser evil.”

Stunned, my mind went blank. Asher had been letting his wolf have his say a bit more than I expected lately, but I wasn't a werewolf, so I probably wasn't the best judge of it. Slowly shaking my head, I turned back to the others. “To be honest, I'm sick of hiding that I'm in a relationship. It would be a lot easier if I could just tell someone I have a boyfriend. It would be a lot more fun to tell them I have five.”

The twins snorted with their mouths full, sending bits of half-chewed food flying as they tried to keep from choking. People in a booth several tables down started talking loudly. Asher winced and plugged that ear until they quieted down.

“Telling them you aren’t interested doesn’t work?” Miles asked, his brow furrowed as he wiped the food bits from his arm.

A short laugh escaped as I shook my head.

“Some guys won’t back off unless they’re told another guy is in the picture,” Ethan said while he dunked a fry into ketchup. “Assholes are like that.”

Miles looked back to me for confirmation.

I nodded. “So, my vote is yes. Out of the polyandry closet.”

Miles nodded, his shoulders relaxing a bit. “Then we’re out of the closet.”

“Yay!” Isaac cheered before sliding his arm around my shoulders. “Now I can do this.”

“Not in front of us,” Asher reminded him. “It doesn’t change our rules.”

Isaac dropped his arm and sighed. “Then what’s the point of being out of the closet?”

“You know my wolf is still struggling with that,” Asher said. “And Miles has been, too.”

Miles turned to Asher. “Actually, over the last few months I’ve been able to relax about the entire situation.”

A bus boy came to clean the table to our right.

Asher turned to Miles. “Really?”

Miles nodded. “It took time, but it helped that it was just us.”

Asher sighed. “I don’t know when, or if, my wolf will get there.”

“One step at a time, Superman,” I reminded him gently. “Gotta crawl before you can run.”

Asher nodded that he heard me before looking over Zeke’s shoulder. The bus boy had stopped working and eyed us like we were insane. He quickly rushed through cleaning the table. Dishes clattered in the tub as he hurried away.

“There’s a freshman mixer at the Husky Union building tonight,” Ethan said, bringing our attention back to the table. “You guys want to go?”

Zeke all but rolled his eyes.

“Zeke and I can’t, we don’t go to the university,” Asher reminded him. Zeke and Asher had decided to go to a community college in town, Asher for their culinary program and Zeke because there was no way he was going to take out such large student loans.

“I doubt they’ll be checking IDs at the door,” I countered.

“Not interested,” Zeke muttered. The loud table down the way cheered. A waitress went to their table.

“Same here,” Asher said. “I’ll bring you back after our meetings then head back to my dorm to finish unpacking.”

“Did everyone get their ORCA cards?” Zeke asked the table.

Everyone but Miles nodded. The loud group down the way got out of their booths and went up to pay for their meals. All of them were red-faced and a bit unsteady.

“Miles?” Zeke asked.

“By the time I get back to the house my new car should have been delivered and I won’t need a transit card,” Miles said, “but I’ll come back for the event if Lexie wants to go.”

“What did you end up getting anyway?” Zeke asked.

“The Jeep Wagoneer,” Miles answered. “It had the most leg room in the back I could find.”

Zeke frowned. “That’s a full-size SUV.”

Miles nodded. “I wanted to make sure I had enough room for everyone.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and checked the time. “Shit. We gotta go.”

Zeke’s eyes met mine as he got out of the booth. “Are you sure we shouldn’t be there?”

“It’s just a meet and greet with the leader and whoever is going to be teaching me magic,” I reminded him. “There’s no reason for them to have a grudge against me.”

“Doesn’t mean they won’t treat you badly for being a necromancer,” Zeke countered in a hushed voice.

I sighed. He was right. Witches tended to look down on my ability to raise the dead. It might have a little to do with the fact that most necromancers ended up becoming obsessed with death and had to be put down when they became too dangerous. At least that’s what I’d been told. It also didn’t help that I’d been growing outside of my necro skills. Something about that made them very nervous. I was supposed to work with the dead, not be able to do half the things I was able to. At least that’s what Uma said. What I could do was abnormal.

“I’ll be there with her,” Asher reminded Zeke as he got to his feet. “Any hint of trouble and I’ll run her out of there faster than they can cast.”

“We’ll be fine, Zeke,” I said. “Uma suggested these people. They’re under the Witch’s Council supervision—”

“Yeah, the people who tried to kill you last year.” Zeke’s voice was gruff.

“That wasn’t them, and you know it. Jadis was just saying they were part of the Council to try and give themselves some legitimacy,” I reminded him. “Uma already felt them out. They have a good reputation, no complaints have ever been raised against them—”

“Oh good, no complaints, that’s nice,” Zeke muttered.

I stepped closer to Zeke, not easy to do in a crowded diner, and placed my hand on his chest. “Tough Guy, I know you’re worried about us not being at the same school as you. You’re worried about the werewolves with Asher and now the witches with me. But you need to pull it back a little.”

Zeke’s big hand moved to cover mine. His heartbeat thumped under my fingers. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then he nodded.

Zeke met Asher’s gaze. “Make sure she gets home.”

“I’ll walk her right up to her room,” Asher promised.

I turned to the others. “What are your guys’ plans for tonight?”

“We’re going to the house to unpack,” Miles said. “Maybe run an experiment.”

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet.

“I’ve got it, Lexie,” Miles said immediately.

I smiled and pulled out enough to cover my meal plus tip then set it on the table. The others were doing the same when Asher set his portion on top of mine.

“We can pay for our meals, Miles,” Asher reminded him. Before Miles could protest again we hurried out the door, grinning.

It wasn't until after we found standing spots on the train that we broke our silence.

"Zeke's going to have a hard time with this," Asher said at last.

"I know. So does he." I shrugged. "But he didn't want to go to the university, so he'll have to learn how to deal with not being so overbearing."

Asher reached over and brushed his thumb over my jaw. "Is that even possible?"

"God, I hope so," I said emphatically.

He chuckled.

I looked up at him and met those ocean eyes. "How are you going to hold up? Going to a different school than most of us?"

He grinned down at me. "As long as we keep our date night and phone calls, I think we'll be okay."

My heart warmed as he moved his hand to my hip and squeezed.

"So, after the witches we're meeting your alphas?" I asked in a low voice.

He stepped closer. "Yeah."

I bit down on the corner of my bottom lip.

His eyes followed the motion. "They just want to meet you and tell us how they can help us keep our relationship safe."

"Yeah, I know. But... are they going to make me take a psych test, too?" I asked, worry eating at me.

He shook his head. "No, that was just to help them decide if I should join their pack. You shouldn't have to do one."

I nodded. "What happens if they don't like me? Could they make you leave me?"

His brow drew down. "No, they don't work that way. They'd only step in if there's a dangerous situation."

I nodded again. "Well, that's good at least."

He tucked a stray copper curl behind my ear. "Don't worry. We'll be fine."

"I hope so," I muttered. "I'd hate to have your alphas hate me. I already didn't have time to meet them during orientation last month."

"I met with them, they're good people," he promised. "And I sent your apology."

Asher's hand moved to hold my chin, his thumb brushing the corner of my bottom lip stopping me from chewing on it.

"You didn't even have time to meet with the Coven during orientation," he reminded me. "They know that."

I nodded. He was right. I didn't have anything to feel guilty about.

A male voice announced our stop. Asher used his size to make room for us to get to the door and out onto the street.

It wasn't long before we were at another diner. This one was fifties style and full of chrome and memorabilia. Elvis's voice drifted from the jukebox in the corner.

We hadn't stepped more than two feet into the diner when a heavy weight seemed to press in at me. Asher sneezed.

Heads turned, and I could swear people glared at Asher as he sneezed again. And again. His eyes watered as he shook his head and headed right back outside.

I was only a step behind him. "What's going on?"

He shook his head again and wiped his nose. "I can't go inside. There's too much power in there."

"Power?"

"Magic." He met my eyes. "There's too many spells or witches in there for me to go inside and not sneeze."

I looked back over my shoulder at the diner and caught several people watching us through the windows. "Well, shit."

“You’re going to have to go in alone.” He sniffed as his eyes grew bloodshot.

I turned back to him. “Do me a favor and don’t tell Zeke.”

He scoffed. “I’d be the one he’d kill first.”

“I’ll be back soon.” I turned and left him outside.

It wasn’t long before I was seated in a booth with a glass of water in front of me. At least I had a view of Asher as he paced the tiny parking lot.

As time went on, I couldn’t help but notice the glances shot my way from the waitstaff. The whispers between them were starting to get on my nerves, but not as much as the customers glancing outside at Asher. I began to tap my fingers on the table. So what if I was meeting the head of the Seattle Coven? The Coven that had decided to teach me for the next couple of years without even meeting me. It wasn’t as if they’d change their mind. Okay, I had reason to be nervous.

The door to the diner opened. A plump older woman with a friendly face walked into the diner. Her gray hair was back in a ponytail, her worn denim bib overalls were spotted with dirt here and there. Her gaze went straight to my table and met mine. She smiled a warm smile that lit up her hazel eyes.

She strolled across the diner to my table. “You must be Lexie. I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Mrs. Roberts?” I asked.

“Oh, call me Abby, dear.” She settled herself into the booth across from me then took a good look at me. “So, you’re the one that mess in Montana was all about.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. Not like I could hide it.

Her eyes ran over my face. “A lot of people died there.”

Something inside me went still. “I’m aware.”

She gave me a friendly face. “Well, that’s the past. We’re here to talk about your future in Seattle.” She set her forearms on the table and folded her hands together. A brown stripe of dirt was stuck under her fingernails and smudges caked into her callouses. “I understand you start college tomorrow. Have you picked a major?”

“Art,” I said as silverware clinked around us. “I’m hoping to be a tattoo artist someday.”

“Well, that’s exciting.” She leaned forward a little. “Will you be staying in Seattle once you graduate?”

“Um, I haven’t thought that far ahead yet,” I admitted as I watched a waitress bring one table their food. Something here was off... “It’ll depend on if I get an apprenticeship or not.”

“Hmm, alright.” She nodded. “Now, how often do you raise the dead?”

My eyebrows shot up, my attention completely back on her. Wow, she just jumped right in. “Well, I... not often. Maybe once every two weeks before I start raising mice and bats in my sleep, though that hasn’t happened in months. I made a point to do it yesterday before I left home to buy some time here.”

Abby nodded again. “Yes, that’s what Uma told me. That your ability is rather incredible.”

My face warmed. “I do alright.”

She tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. “From what I understand, you’ve done better than alright. Some necromancers struggle for years before being able to fully control their abilities. Let alone what you managed in Montana.”

The vinyl squeaked as I shifted in my seat. “Uma told you about that?” When the witches attacked, I had managed to raise an army of dead to buy us time to get the wounded out of their reach. It had saved a lot of lives.

“Do you have any relationships here?” Abby asked.

I watched as the same waitress brought a tray of food to another table. Sitting right next to the one from before. “Yeah, I have attachments here.”

“Any family?”

“No.” This was starting to feel less like a meet and greet and more like an interrogation by the minute.

“Where is your family?” Abby asked with open, friendly eyes.

“Elsewhere,” I answered carefully. That waitress had brought food to the last three tables that sat next to each other. As if they had all arrived at the same time... The looks outside at Asher... The power in the diner... Son of a bitch.

She nodded, accepting the vague answer.

“Are you sexually active?”

“How the hell is that any of your business?” I snapped to test my theory. Everyone in the diner turned towards our table. Energy thrummed through the air. My attention moved to them. Each had a hand poised in the air ready to cast. Every single one.

Abby made a small gesture with her fingers.

Everyone dropped their hands and went back to their meals. They were all witches, and they were here to guard their leader. I turned my focus back to Abby.

She met my gaze and continued as if nothing had happened. "I'm trying to determine exactly how much danger I've put my city in by allowing you to come here. If you want to stay in this city, then answer my questions."

I shook my head. Just going to gloss over the fact you had this diner filled with witches ready to take me out? Okay, I could play along. "Yes."

"Tell me about Spring Mountain." Abby's tone let me know it wasn't a request.

Since the entire diner was full of witches, I didn't bother to lower my voice. "A crazy witch decided I was too big of a threat to live. She had her people try to kill me. When that didn't work, she let herself and other witches become possessed and tried to kill me herself. She lost. End of story."

Abby had her sweet grandmother face back on. "Yes, but what about the part where you summoned an army of the dead?"

"Of dead animals," I countered. It wasn't like I had raised a cemetery of people! I glanced out the window to check on Asher. He was leaning against the wall of the next building, his eyes on me. He nodded to let me know that he heard every word. Good.

"It was to stall them. To give the injured time to get out," I explained, turning back to Abby.

"And in the time you were controlling them, did anyone die as a result?" The question was like a dagger to my chest.

I looked down at my lap as I took a breath. "Probably. I'm not sure."

"Not sure? Or do you not want to know?"

I swallowed hard then raised my head to meet her eyes. "I don't want to know."

Her eyes softened. Her voice grew warmer. "How does that make you feel?"

"What's with the interrogation? Uma probably gave you all the information you needed to know," I asked.

She gave me a gentle smile. "Because I need to know if you enjoyed it."

I sat back in the booth, stunned. "What?"

"Necromancers have a history of abusing their powers and abilities. I need to know what you've done in the past. How you felt about it." She

leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Do you enjoy raising the dead?"

I scowled at her, my temper sparked. "No."

She tilted her head to the side and eyed me. "Uma told me about the endorphin rush you have after a raising. So, be honest with me."

I scoffed. "Did she tell you about the next part where I feel disgusting for having it?"

Abby nodded slowly. "She did."

"Then you already know I hate the rush," I eyed her. "Why the questions?"

Her brow drew down, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Because if we are going to teach you, we need to know your state of mind. Your outlook. How you feel when you use those abilities. How you feel towards those abilities."

I fell silent. The usual sounds of people eating in a diner were gone. Everyone was eavesdropping and not hiding it at this point.

"I've learned to accept that death will always be a part of my life. But that it doesn't have to rule it," I said carefully. "Is that the answer you're looking for?"

Abby leaned back and eyed me carefully again, as if trying to decide if I was lying or not. Eventually she nodded. "Very good. Very wise. If it's true."

I waited for the next question as I looked around the diner, meeting several witches' gazes.

"Now, about your other gifts."

I turned back to Abby.

"How do you feel about them?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"You mean the energy manipulation?" I asked, just to be sure.

She nodded.

"I think it's more useful than necromancy." I leaned back against the booth and tried to at least look relaxed.

"Indeed, it is in most cases," she said as a waitress put a hot mug of tea down in front of her and walked away without a word.

I raised an eyebrow. "Come here a lot?"

Abby chuckled as she reached over to the side of the table, picked up the little amber bear and began to add honey to her tea. "It's my diner, so I'm here quite often."

I looked at the waitresses whispering in the corner while watching us. “Why did you fill the place with witches?”

“Hmm.” Abby stirred honey into her tea. “Did Uma explain why she wanted you to get more instruction?”

“She didn’t. I did.”

Her eyes narrowed on mine. “You asked to be taught more magic?”

I nodded.

“Why? What are you hoping to achieve?” She lifted her mug of tea and took a sip, still watching me over the rim.

My gaze went straight to Asher, but I wasn’t only thinking of him as I answered. “I want to be able to protect what’s mine without relying on the dead.”

Surprise lit her face for a heartbeat before she schooled her expression. “What a curious reason you have, my dear.”

I turned back to her. “Why?”

Abby finished her sip of tea and set down her mug. “Most people come to magic wanting power. But not you. You want safety.”

I held her gaze and gave her complete honesty. “People have already tried to kill me simply because I had access to something they thought I shouldn’t. Power attracts trouble.”

She nodded slowly. “Power does also have the ability to save.”

I grew still inside again but kept my face carefully blank.

“Uma already told me that you have access to the Veil’s energy,” she explained as she idly fiddled with her teabag. “How much power do you really need access to?”

I met her eyes. “I don’t plan to ever use that power.”

She leaned forward, placing her elbows onto the table. “You aren’t ever going to use that power?”

“It’s not mine to use,” I pointed out. “If I could give up access to it, I would have already.”

Abby smiled. “Interesting.”

The door to the diner jerked open, the bells on the door jingled. A woman strode in wearing an expensive black suit and perfectly styled dark hair. Her heels clicked across the linoleum as she came towards us, sparkling brown eyes spotted us out of a sour face. She stopped at the end of our table. “What’s with the animal outside?”

“Animal?” I looked out the window but only saw Asher.

“The werewolf,” the woman all but spat.

My temper sparked. “That guy is my boyfriend.”

The woman huffed. “They should all be destroyed.

“Camille, this isn’t the time,” Abby warned, her voice firm.

Camille took a chair from a nearby table and set it at the end of ours. She sat down and crossed her legs. “It’s just an opinion.”

Abby turned back to me. “Lexie, this is Camille, my apprentice of sorts. She’ll be your teacher for now.”

I turned to the irritating woman and wanted to growl. She had to be kidding, she’d just called my boyfriend an animal.

Camille didn’t even bother looking at me. She turned to Abby. “So, we’re going to teach the Necromancer? I thought you were joking.”

“Yes,” Abby said, her eyes sharp, “and you’ll do well to remember yourself.”

Camille scowled but then schooled her expression. She took a deep breath then turned to me. “We’ll start Tuesdays at six o’clock. Show up here, don’t be late, and leave that thing at home.” Camille then turned her attention back to Abby. “Better?”

Abby pressed her lips into a tight line.

I’d had enough of this place, and frankly, more than enough of them. I got to my feet. “I’ll be here.” I stepped around Camille and strode out the door, tired already. Hell, we still had to meet the alphas.

I was still cursing under my breath as we boarded the bus and took our seats. I jerked out my phone and shot a text off to Uma.

Lexie: What the hell, Uma? I just got out of an interrogation!

Not expecting a response immediately, I tucked the phone back into my pocket.

“I heard everything,” Asher assured me.

I sighed. “They had the diner filled with witches posing as customers.”

Asher shook his head.

“They were ready to act when I raised my voice.” I turned and looked up at him.

“Not exactly a welcome party,” Asher agreed.

I huffed. “Not the kind anyone would like.”

“Do you really need to take these lessons?” Asher asked softly.

I looked out the window to avoid his eyes. Smoke and fire filled my memory. The night I took out Jadis and her cronies, I had killed the guys

too. I couldn't be in that position again. I needed more options. I only had one afterlife to barter, and that was gone. "Yeah. I really do."

Asher reached over and took my hand in his. He squeezed gently. "Okay."

We spent the rest of the bus ride just listening to the chatter around us while I calmed down.



Isaac

"FUCKING ROOMMATES," I MUTTERED UNDER MY BREATH AS I STEPPED ONTO Miles' new block. My new dormmate had finally moved in while I was at the diner. The smaller guy had turned white and muttered something about homework before grabbing his laptop and hustling out of the room. I sighed. I'd never had someone be afraid of me immediately like that. If this was what happened to Zeke all the time, no wonder he was a grumpy shit.

Shaking my head, I opened the stained wooden gate and looked up at the house. The three-story craftsman was pretty nice. Big windows, an enclosed front porch, and it even had a fire pit in the backyard. By all the lights on in the house, it looked like Ethan and Miles were still unpacking. I opened the porch door then let myself in the front door.

"I'm here!" I shouted as I moved into the foyer.

"In here," Miles' voice came from the right. I headed into the dining room and pulled up short. Bottles of liquor covered the table, some empty, some not. But what pulled me up short was Ethan. He was chugging a bottle of Jack Daniels like it was water.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I moved around the table and jerked the practically empty bottle out of Ethan's hand.

"An experiment," Miles answered as he picked up a small gadget and held it out to Ethan. "Take another reading."

I scowled as Ethan took the gadget, hit a button and exhaled into a tube.

When it beeped Ethan took it out of his mouth and looked at the screen. "Still zero."

Miles checked his phone for the time then typed something into his laptop.

“What the hell are you trying to do?” I asked, setting the empty bottle on the table.

“It seems Ethan has had a major metabolic change since the explosion at the house,” Miles said while he examined the information on the screen.

Ethan looked up at me. “I can’t get drunk. I noticed it at that graduation bash at the beginning of the summer.”

I scowled. “So, what? Now you’re trying to figure out what it would take?”

“Pretty much,” Ethan admitted, reaching for a bottle of Ever clear. “Let’s try this next.”

Anger boiling in my gut, I jerked the bottle out of his hand. “Did either of you even think about the fact our father is an alcoholic? That this could be a bad idea?”

“Not really,” Ethan said as he reached for a different bottle.

I snagged that one too.

Miles looked up from his computer. “Let’s wait a couple minutes. We’ll do another breathalyzer test and if it still reads nothing we’ll go up in proof.”

“Miles!” I snapped.

Miles met my gaze.

“This is over,” I told him. “You are not going to play with my brother’s sobriety.”

“Relax, brother.” Ethan sighed. “I have no intention of becoming an alcoholic.”

“No one ever sets out to become one,” I reminded him. “Dad just wanted to have a good time.”

He opened his mouth to argue but when he met my eyes he paused. It was a moment before he sighed again. “Fine. We’ll stop.”

The tension in my shoulders eased. I set the bottle down on the table and looked at the mass of empty bottles. “How long were you guys doing this?”

“Since the diner,” Miles answered as he saved his document.

My heart dropped. “You drank this much in an hour and a half?”

Ethan smirked. “And I still don’t feel a thing.”

I shook my head. That was... disturbing. “What else has changed?”

Miles pushed up his glasses. “Increased appetite, not sleeping well from too much energy, occasional sore throat, odd heartburn, increased sex drive

—”

“Man!” Ethan turned to him and slapped his hand down on the top of the laptop, shutting it with a hard snap. “Ever hear of confidentiality?”

Miles turned to Ethan and shook his head. “Doesn’t apply, I’m not a doctor.”

I snorted. “Why didn’t you tell us? We’ve been having family meetings every week.”

Ethan shrugged. “I thought it was just me being paranoid until that graduation party. That’s when I first realized something was different.”

I shook my head and started picking up the empties to take out to the recycling bin. “No more experiments like this.”

Ethan shrugged. “Fine.”

The casual way he said that wasn’t right. “Promise me.”

Ethan scowled at me. “I already said no more experiments.”

“Promise me,” I repeated, my voice harder.

“Fine, I promise,” Ethan finally said before getting to his feet and started to pick up the empty bottles. Ethan was a good liar, but he was my twin and I knew his tells. He wasn’t looking at me while he cleaned. Oh yeah, he was lying big time. Somehow, I needed to get through to him...



Lexie

“YOU’RE NERVOUS,” ASHER SAID FROM BESIDE ME.

“Yeah. Maybe.” I continued to drum my fingers on the table. “I’ve been on edge for a couple days, and the witches didn’t help any.”

We were in coffee shop near the tourist section of town. It was your average coffee shop, except that almost everyone inside was a werewolf. Of course, I wouldn’t have had a clue if Asher hadn’t filled me in.

Asher reached over and took my hand in his and took it. I gave him a squeeze of thanks.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about,” Asher whispered, “they just want to talk to us.”

“Yeah, about our relationship,” I whispered back. “And about our sex life.”

“In a pack there isn’t a lot of privacy, Ally,” he reminded me. “It’s a lot like a poly.”

I nodded. Okay, he had a point.

“And I’d rather give up our privacy than hurt you,” he said quietly.

“I know.” I looked up and met his shadowed eyes. “You’re right, we need to talk about it, it’s just that they’re strangers.” I shrugged. “I’ll manage it.”

He gave me a warm smile. “You’re cute when you blush.”

My face warmed even more as I sent him a chiding look.

He chuckled softly.

“Not cool, Ash,” I muttered.

The bell over the door rang. I glanced in that direction and went still.

A tall, lithe, woman, with hair so blonde it was platinum, walked across the cafe with a grace I envied. Stunning bright blue eyes met mine. A smile moved over her pouty lips. She walked in wearing a pair of paint-stained jeans and t-shirt, but by the way the workers in the shop reacted, she might as well have been wearing a crown.

Several employees lowered their heads toward the woman before getting back to work. Holy crap. The woman could be a model. Were all werewolves this beautiful?

Asher got to his feet as an older man followed her inside. His square jaw made his face was more striking than handsome, his warm brown hair and hazel eyes found us in the crowd. From the gray in his stubble and the smile lines around his eyes I took a guess that he was in his forties, at least. But his body sure didn’t look like it. This was not a man who sat behind a desk. His hand rested on the woman’s lower back as they reached our table.

I popped up next to Asher.

Both of their smiles radiated a sense of warmth and welcoming, something about them put me at ease.

Asher bowed his head from the neck.

“Good to see you, Asher.” The man turned to me. “You must be Lexie.”

“That’s me,” I chirped. God, I sounded like an idiot.

The woman’s smile softened. “Let’s sit down.”

Asher and I took our seats in the half booth while the gorgeous pair took the chairs across from us.

“As you’ve probably guessed, we’re the alpha pair for the Seattle pack,” the man said. “I’m Brendon Moore, and the alpha male.”

“And I’m Matilda Moore, but everyone calls me Tilly.” The woman shifted in her seat, crossing her legs under the table.

“She’s the alpha female of our pack.” Brendon turned to smile down at her. “Though you’d never know it since she never says it.”

Tilly’s cheeks tinted pink as she smiled patiently up at Brendon. “I don’t feel the need to, honey.”

Brendon smiled back.

It sounded like a conversation they’d had before.

Brendon turned back to me. “So, Asher tells us you’re an art major at the University of Washington?”

I nodded. “Yeah, though I’m hoping to get an apprenticeship with a tattoo artist soon.”

Brendon’s eyebrows went up. “Oh, that’s interesting.”

“So, are you settled in at the dorms?” Tilly asked, her attention on Asher. “Is everything going alright?”

Asher sighed. “My roommate believes showers are for once a week, I think.”

“I warned you that might be a problem,” Brendon said as he leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

Asher sighed. “I know. I’ll deal with it.”

Tilly turned to me. “How are your roommates?”

I shrugged. “So far, normal and nice, which makes me think I’m the weird one in the room.”

Brendon chuckled. “I know that feeling.”

Tilly shook her head. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“I’m dating a shifter, not to mention four other guys, and I raise the dead,” I said, my voice dry.

Her eyes lit up as she fought back a laugh. “I can see how you’d feel that way.”

Asher’s hand covered mine on my thigh. “Ally’s a little worried about how you’re going to react to a human girlfriend.”

I twisted my hand around to hold his.

“There’s nothing to be worried about.” Tilly leaned forward. “We just want to make sure you understand the rules of dating a shifter that will keep everyone safe.”

“Okay, like what?” I squeezed Asher’s hand. He squeezed back.

“Direct.” The alpha male smiled. “Good. That’ll make this easier.”

Tilly turned toward me fully. “How sexually active have you two been?”

My face instantly caught fire. “Oh... um...” I looked up at Asher, whose cheeks had turned pink, before turning back to Tilly. “Oral sex? We’ve had oral sex.”

Tilly folded her hands on the table. “It’s good that you haven’t tried to go further.”

Brendon looked to Asher. “And how is your control over yourself during these activities?”

Oh God. I was highly aware that every shifter in the building could hear this conversation. But Asher said there wasn’t much privacy in a pack, so maybe they wouldn’t care or gossip about it? Oh, who the hell was I kidding, the pack was going to get an earful today. Might as well roll with it.

Ash looked down at the tabletop. “We’ve taken to holding onto the headboard to prevent any strength or distraction issues for me. And Ally can’t really touch me during.”

Brendon nodded. “Good idea, as long as it works.”

“And how long has that been going on?” The alpha female’s voice was thankfully clinical.

“For a few months?” Asher’s brow drew down.

“Since last fall,” I answered. I will not be embarrassed by this. I am an adult woman having an important discussion about my relationship with Asher. I will not be embarrassed by this.

Tilly nodded, respect lighting in her eyes. “I also understand you’re in a polyamorous relationship?”

Asher and I shared a look. Were they going to say we had to end it?

I turned back to Tilly and held my head up. “Polyandry. I’m dating five guys and they’re each only dating me.”

Brendon watched Asher. “How is that going, as a wolf? Any jealousy issues?”

Asher shook his head. “My wolf seems okay with it most days, but to be honest, I struggle with it sometimes.”

I looked up and met Asher’s eyes. “You haven’t mentioned it.”

He gave my hand a squeeze. “Because I know you’d feel bad about it.”

“But if you’re struggling you need to tell me.” I lowered my voice. “I can help.”

“Ally, there’s nothing you can do about me hearing you getting physical with Isaac or Ethan,” Asher stated. “I was in the next house, for crying out loud. That’s far enough for human ears.”

I frowned. “We could have put up sound proofing.”

“And explain that to Maria, how?” Asher asked, his voice flat.

“Okay, you have a point,” I muttered.

“What kind of issues are you discovering? How are you handling them?” Brendon asked, reminding us that we weren’t alone.

Asher looked down at the tablet again. “After she spends the night with one of the guys she smells like one of the others. That tends to put my wolf in a bad mood. Hearing her having sex with one of the others, means I need to go for a run. Sometimes, I have to fight the urge to scent mark her.”

My eyebrows went up. “That isn’t urinating on me, right?” That’s when it hit me. We had never really talked about this stuff...

Asher snorted and turned to me. “No, it’s just touching my skin to yours.”

“Just checkin’,” I chimed.

“And the urge to bite her?” Brendon asked. “Has that eased?”

Asher glanced at me then turned back to Brendon. “No.”

I lifted a finger into the air. “Wait, what now?”

Asher sighed deeply. “I’ve been having the urge to mark you as my mate for months now.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Why haven’t you mentioned it?”

Asher’s face turned scarlet. “It would mean I’d bite you, and the scar would be your mate mark. I really didn’t want to worry you about it.”

“And you’re having to fight the urge to do that? Wouldn’t that turn me into a werewolf?” I looked at Brendon and Tilly.

“A mate mark bite is different than a normal bite, it’s to claim not convert. Since Asher is a bitten wolf, not born, he can’t pass it along to any children he’d have in case you were wondering,” Brendon explained.

I turned back to Asher. “Then go ahead if it’s bugging you that much.”

Asher’s gaze was warm as he met my eyes. “It’s marriage, Ally.”

My heart dropped. “Marriage?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’ve been wanting to marry me?”

Asher shifted in his seat and took a deep breath. “My wolf does, yeah.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Asher turned back to me. "I'm not going to bite you anytime soon, Ally."

"Okay." If he was willing to deal with the urge, so could I.

We turned back to find Tilly smiling. Brendon was frowning.

"You two do rather well talking things out," Tilly said.

I shrugged. "It's communicate or perish in a poly relationship. We do *a lot* of communicating."

"That makes sense," Brendon nodded, "however, you might not get to choose when you bite her."

My heart dropped. "What do you mean?"

Brendon kept his gaze on Asher. "Your wolf may take advantage of any instance of inattention while being intimate. You have to be on guard, Asher. At all times."

Asher nodded, his face solemn.

"We were going to explain how the pack has couples therapy to help communication, but that seems moot." Tilly's face softened. "Now, the big issue."

Oh, goody.

"As a werewolf, Asher's first intercourse needs to be supervised by other werewolves," Tilly explained, "especially since you're human."

"If he loses control he can crush your pelvis, claw you, bite you. Hell, he could even tear your throat out," Brendon added. "It's for your safety that this rule is in place."

I fought not to squirm under their eyes. "How supervised are we talking about?"

"We'd need to be in the room," Brendon replied.

My stomach dropped. "In the *dark* room?"

Brendon and Tilly shared a look.

"Since we see in the dark, yes." Brendon turned back to me. "You could have the lights off."

My stomach knotted even more. "Could there be a partition?"

"No, I'm sorry," Tilly answered with an understanding look. "If something does go wrong, we only have seconds to save your life. Anything between us and you would slow our reaction time."

I nodded. That made sense. Okay... "Could we be under covers?"

"We'll find ways to give you as much privacy as we can," Brendon promised, "but we won't compromise on your safety."

I nodded again. Fuck... Having sex in front of people I barely knew... For the first time with Asher... I really thought about it. Having sex. With Asher for the first time, In front of people. "How many people are we talking about here?"

"Three," Tilly answered. "One to grab Asher, one to help you, and our doctor."

"You'll have a doctor on standby?" Holy shit. They weren't just saying I could get hurt, they were planning for it.

"There is an alternative," Brendon said, drawing my attention. "Asher could have sex with a female werewolf before you."

I answered without thinking. "Fuck no."

"No way," Asher said at the same time.

Brendon nodded, as if he expected that response.

Tilly gave Brendon a chiding glance before turning back to us. "Then there is only one option for you."

"It'll take some time to get used to this idea," I admitted.

"Of course it will." Tilly's eyes were kind and full of understanding. "And you'll be able to decide who is in the room, besides the doctor."

I nodded again.

"Well, you certainly gave us a lot to think about." Asher got to his feet. I quickly followed. "We'll get back to you when we're ready."

"It was nice meeting you," I muttered as we passed them on our way out the door.

On the ride back to my campus I couldn't stop thinking about it. They were planning for Asher to hurt me. Would he? I glanced up at Asher as he shifted his leg out of the aisle to let someone pass. I went back to staring at the seat in front of me. Asher was sweet, loving. He'd never hurt me on purpose. But it wouldn't be on purpose. His wolf might make him do it. And his wolf didn't know me... Maybe I needed to meet him? Would that make it worse? Was it getting warm in here? I sighed as I looked out the window. Asher was a good guy. A good person. That wasn't what worried me. It was the possibly having my throat ripped out during sex... Yeah. That was the big one. My heart clenched as fear knotted my stomach. Asher could kill me without meaning to. Suddenly the bus was too crowded. Too hot. I needed to talk to Asher. "Let's get off at this stop."

Asher turned to ask why but stopped when he saw my face. He got to his feet and started making his way to the doors in the middle of the bus.

When the bus pulled up to the stop. I followed him onto the street. The fresh air cooled my face and calmed me down.

“Are you okay?” Asher asked as we started walking towards the university.

I opened my mouth to say that I was fine, but... I didn't say anything. Was I fine? My hands were clenched at my sides as we walked away from the bus station.

“You don't have to do it, Ally,” Asher whispered.

That icy knot in my gut tightened. “I don't know what to do.”

He sighed. “Me neither.”

I glanced around at the small number of people on the street. It wasn't likely we'd be overheard, but I moved closer to Asher's side anyway. “I guess I didn't really understand how dangerous this really was.”

“I know.” Asher lowered his voice too. “And I didn't really want to tell you, to be honest.”

I wrung my fingers as we crossed the street at the sidewalk. The university came into view. “I get that.”

“We can continue on the way we have been,” he said softly. “We're not in a rush.”

The ache in my chest doubled as we walked on to campus in silence as my mind raced. It wasn't just sex that was dangerous. He could kill me during oral, too. My femoral artery was right there. Fuck.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as my residence hall came into view. Reality sank in. I stopped and looked up at him. “You're going to have to hold back with me all the time, aren't you?”

Asher's eyes were shadowed as he moved closer, forcing me to tilt my head back. “Yeah.”

My heart broke a little. “Asher, do you really want to do that? Do you really want to be with someone who... who you have to be that careful with all the time?”

His hand cupped my cheek gently. “I want you, Ally.”

“I want you too,” I whispered, “but I want you to be happy more.”

He lowered his forehead to mine.

I closed my eyes and breathed in cinnamon and vanilla.

“I am happy. With you,” he whispered.

I pulled back and met his eyes. “Ash, I don't know if I'll ever be able to do this.”

His face grew tense as he took a deep breath. “Then we’ll keep going like we have been.”

I looked down at his chest and fought for control. I wanted Asher. I loved him. Hell, I had sold my afterlife to bring the guys back from the dead—and I’d do it again in a heartbeat—but that shouldn’t tie the guys to me for the rest of their lives. I swallowed hard. “Asher, maybe it’d be better for you if—” I couldn’t even say it. How did you tell a guy you loved that you might not be what’s best for him?

His eyes narrowed on mine. “If what?”

I swallowed hard. “If... if you were with someone you didn’t have to hold yourself back with. Just for a while?”

He frowned at me. “You’re kidding, right?”

My eyes burned as I shook my head.

His jaw clenched and unclenched. His eyes were rough as they met mine. “Ally, don’t do this.”

“Asher—”

“Don’t even say it,” he growled deep in his chest.

“I might not be the girlfriend you need right now.” There. I’d said it.

Asher looked down at the cement between us. He took several deep breaths and let them out slowly.

“I love you, Ash,” I whispered through a tightening throat.

He lifted his head, his ocean eyes glowing. “That’s exactly why we’re not having this discussion.”

“Ash.”

“No!” he all but snapped at me. “We’re not going to break up because the alphas scared you.”

My eyebrows shot up. “That’s not it.”

“Bullshit,” he bit out. “They scared you. And now you’re questioning whether you can trust me or not.”

“That’s not it,” I tried again.

His eyes met mine. “Yeah, it is.”

We were getting looks from people passing by. We both looked away from each other.

Asher shook his head. “I love you, but I’m too angry to talk to you right now.” He gestured towards the doors. “Go on inside so I can keep my promise to Zeke.”

Silently, I walked into the lobby of the dorms. By the time I turned around to close the door behind me, he was gone.

I stood there for... I don't know how long, staring at the empty path. It was a while before I could even form a thought. What the hell just happened? We had been talking about one thing and then, boom! It was like a bomb went off and shrapnel flew everywhere.

Was he right? Was I just being scared? The talk with the alphas hadn't eased my nerves one bit. In fact, it had made them worse. Hell, it had brought up fears I didn't even know I had. Now I was home alone, a pissed-off Asher riding back to his campus. Were we still together? Did we just break up? My chest grew tight. Did I just fuck up my relationship with Asher? I didn't know...

I pulled out my phone and texted him.

Lexie: Did we just break up?

It wasn't long before he answered.

Ash: No. It was just a fight.

Relief filled me, letting me breathe freely again. Okay, we were still together. For now.

I walked up the residence hall stairs with a heart heavy.

When I opened the door, I found all three of my roommates in varying stages of dress. Nova was applying a dark red lipstick in a makeup mirror on her desk. Elena was brushing her hair while Gemma slipped on sandals.

“Well, look who it is,” Nova said, watching me from her reflection in her makeup mirror. “You’re just in time.”

I stopped in the middle of the room. “For what?”

Elena all but bounced as she put away her brush. “We’re going to a party!”

Gemma grinned as she got to her feet. “Want to come?”

“What kind of party?” I asked. “And where?”

“One of the frats on campus.” Nova closed her lipstick and turned around. “Apparently, they love to invite sweet, innocent freshman girls to get hammered and taken advantage of.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Then why are you going?”

She smirked. “Free booze for freshman girls, and I enjoy turning down jackasses. Plus, I want to be back up for Elena.”

I dropped onto my bed on my back. “I don’t know, I just had a big fight with Asher.”

Gemma got to her feet. “All the more reason to go out with us.”

“Are you sure?” Elena asked. “It might cheer you up.”

I... guess it wouldn’t be the worst idea to get out of my own head for a little while. “You know what, you guys are right.”

Gemma grinned. "Then get changed."

I pulled my phone out to text the guys. "Oh no, I'm not changing."

Lexie: Heads up, I'm going to a party with the girls.

I tucked my phone back in my pocket and ignored the vibrating on my butt. "Let's go."

"So, Elena, what's your party history?" I asked as we started down the stairs.

"Well, most of the parties and dances I went to were at church," Elena explained as we turned at the bend in the stairs.

Oh dear. "Okay, let's talk safety at a drinking party."

"If you put your drink down and walk away, throw it out when you get back and get another one," Nova said.

Elena nodded, her fingers wringing together.

"Don't accept any open drinks," I added as we reached the first floor.

"Also, don't accept a drink you didn't mix yourself."

"Okay," Elena replied, her voice getting quieter.

Gemma moved ahead and pushed through the outside door. "Also, we arrive together, we leave together. Oh, and don't go anywhere alone with a guy you just met."

"If anyone gets a bad vibe, tell the rest of us and we'll bail," Nova said as we started toward Greek Row.

Elena stopped walking about five feet away from the door. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

We stopped and turned to her as another group of excited girls walked out of the dorms past us.

"I mean, it's starting not to sound fun at all." Elena crossed her arms over her chest.

"It's just some basic rules to keep yourself safe." Gemma half shrugged. "Most of the time at a party there's no problem."

"What about the rest of the time?" Elena asked, warily eyeing the people around the walkway.

"That's where the rules come in." I swatted at a mosquito on my forearm. "If someone tries something that violates one of those rules, that tells you something sketchy is going on."

"Find us and we get out," Nova added. "It's just basic safety stuff."

"Most of the people I hung around with were part of the church congregation." Elena looked at each of us, frowning. "Does every woman

have to worry about this stuff at college parties?”

I blinked, surprised. How sheltered had she been?

Nova turned to Elena. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“That’s sad,” Elena said as she watched another group leave the dorms.

Gemma, Nova and I all shared looks. It was one of those clarifying moments that showed just how fucked up things were in the world. How none of us but Elena thought it was weird to have to take those precautions.

Gemma’s face softened as she turned back to Elena. “I actually know of a quiet, laid-back party happening a couple blocks over.”

“Where?” Nova asked as she swatted a mosquito.

“One of the off-campus apartment buildings. I know a couple of them from high school. Mostly peace and love types. Lots of acoustic music, some artisan beer and talking to people.”

“That would give Elena a chance to practice the rules in a less hectic environment,” I said.

“Let’s do it.” Nova turned to Gemma. “Lead the way.”

Elena smiled thankfully as we went off campus and headed west a couple of blocks.

Gemma led us to the roof of the apartment building. People were lounging around a pool in groups. Music was playing at a reasonable volume where people could still talk over it. There was a group in the corner passing around an acoustic guitar. Hell, someone had even pulled out a grill and was making burgers. The vibe around the roof was warm and inviting enough that the tension in my shoulders eased.

“Yeah, I think this was a good call,” I said as we headed for the ice chests.

“So do I.” Gemma pulled out a beer bottle then turned to us. “First, who’s going to be sober gal?”

“I’ll do it,” Nova said. “I don’t drink much anyway.”

Gemma pulled a water out of the cooler and handed it to Nova, who was bobbing her head to the music.

“Elena, do you want some water or a beer?” Gemma asked.

“Um, beer, please.” Elena wrung her hands together. “I’m at a party, so I might as well try it.”

Gemma nodded. “Now, when someone hands you a closed beer, or even a soda, make sure when you open it that it does this.” Gemma held the bottle near Elena’s ear and twisted the top. There was a short hiss.

“That’s the carbonation,” Gemma continued. “If you don’t hear it, that means it’s been opened before.”

I bent down to get myself a beer as the girls continued.

“You toss it and get a new one,” Nova added as she opened her own. “If they get indignant, tell them to fuck off.”

Elena nodded before she opened hers. After hers hissed, she smiled. “Okay, that’s not so hard.”

Gemma wrapped her arm around Elena’s shoulders and began leading us to an empty corner of the roof. “The rules aren’t hard to follow, and they don’t have to ruin your good time, you just have to keep them in the back of your mind.”

Everyone plopped onto soft, overstuffed beanbags and took a drink. Elena coughed a little. I bit back a grin as I looked out over several buildings. A gentle cool breeze brought the scent of the ocean and citronella candles to us. The sun was down and the stars peeked out here and there.

“Man, today has been busy as hell.” Gemma wiggled a little, settling herself more comfortably in her spot.

“Yeah,” Elena said as she took cautious another sip. “And we start our first year of college tomorrow.”

“College,” Nova said it slowly as a breeze fluttered the candle on the table between us. “Nah, still seems weird.”

“We’re legally adults now,” Gemma added. “Adults. It sure as hell doesn’t feel like I thought it would.”

“What were you expecting?” Elena tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

Gemma shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe some mass awakening of what the hell to do and the knowledge of how to do it.”

“Oh, that would be nice.” I sighed wistfully.

Nova nodded. “Yeah, being able to download data into our brains would be awesome. Think of how much studying that would save.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Nah, I’m afraid we’re all just going to have to wing it.” I grinned.

Gemma smiled. “Let’s play a game to get to know each other.”

“What game?” Nova took a swig as the music in the background changed to an acoustic melody.

“Uh...” Gemma apparently went blank.

“We could play Truth,” I suggested. “I played it once with the guys. It’s Truth or Dare without dare. And if you don’t want to answer you can drink

your whole beer instead.”

“Won’t we be hung over for class tomorrow?” Elena asked.

“Yeah, but my older sister told me that most first classes are going over the syllabus and being assigned reading, so you don’t really need your head the first class.” Nova slouched down in the beanbag looking super comfy.

Elena thought about it. “Okay, I’m in.”

“Besides, Elena needs to understand how much she can drink and still be coherent,” Gemma added. “Better to do that with us than at a frat.”

Nova and I nodded in agreement.

“You want me to get drunk?” Elena squeaked.

“Yes and no,” Nova said. “You’ve never had alcohol before, and we kind of want you to understand how it affects you. If you don’t want to that’s perfectly fine.”

“Let’s play it by ear. See how you feel after one beer.” Gemma turned to me. “Who’s going first?”

I shot my finger to my nose. “Not it.”

The girls chuckled.

Gemma was smiling as she turned to Nova. “Alright. Nova, where are you from?”

“Right here in Seattle,” Nova said. “My family has been here for several generations.”

“Do you have a big family?” Elena asked.

Nova turned to Elena and nodded. “Pretty big, two older sisters and an annoying little brother.”

Elena chuckled.

“Then I have several aunts and uncles,” Nova continued. “Lots of family, basically.”

“That sounds nice,” Gemma said. “It’s just my mom and me.”

“Really? Just you two?” Elena asked. “I honestly can’t imagine not having a big family to see on the holidays.”

Gemma shrugged. “Dad was a booty call that didn’t think he was fit to be a father, and my grandparents died way before I was born.”

Elena frowned. “That sounds lonely.”

Gemma smirked. “I have never had to share my bedroom, never had to babysit a sibling and rarely had to wait to use the bathroom.”

Elena chuckled, her cheeks tinting pink. “Okay, now I’m jealous.”

Everyone chuckled as the breeze moved over the rooftop.

“What about you, Lexie?” Nova asked.

“I lived with my uncle and cousin in Montana for the last couple of years,” I said carefully. “And my dad died when I was young.”

Nova’s eyes narrowed. “What about your mom?”

“She’s somewhere in California, I think,” I said, a little colder than necessary.

Nova nodded in understanding.

Gemma looked across the group. “Elena, what made you decide to come to Seattle for school?”

“Well, I grew up in Spokane, and Seattle was the farthest my father was willing to send me for school.” She shrugged.

I smiled. “You were getting out of there as fast as possible.”

Elena’s cheeks turned red. “I love my family but having them around all the time isn’t always the easiest thing.”

“No judgement here,” I said. “I get it. My cousin is in New York at the moment. We went to opposite sides of the country.”

“That’s why I’m in a dorm this year,” Nova said with a smirk. “I want some independence.”

Gemma raised her beer bottle. “Hear, hear! To independence!”

Everyone chuckled as we clinked bottles and took a drink.

“Okay,” I pointed around the group. “Group question. What are your guys’ hobbies?”

Gemma thought about it and shrugged. “I guess researching Wicca is my hobby. It takes up a lot of time.”

I nodded. It sure as hell did.

“Music,” Nova answered after taking a drink. “I want to produce music.”

I nodded. “Nice.”

“I read a lot,” Elena admitted.

“Same here,” I said. “My dream house has the library from Beauty and the Beast.”

Elena chuckled. “Same.”

The guy behind the grill came over. “Hey, Gemma, you or your friends want anything off the grill before I shut it down?”

Gemma grinned up at the brunette. “Do you have any burgers left?”

He chuckled. “Let me guess, with cheese and everything but the kitchen sink?”

Gemma winked up at him. "You know it." She turned to the rest of us. "Girls, this is John, he's been my friend-with-benefits since sophomore year."

I raised an eyebrow before turning to look at John. He was cute, I suppose, but his eyes sparkled when they rested on Gemma. "I'm Lexie."

He gave me a polite nod then turned to Nova and Elena. The girls introduced themselves and asked about the burgers. I watched him as his gaze kept sliding back to Gemma. She might think they were friends with benefits, but Johnny sure didn't. Hmm. I covertly watched Gemma as the others asked for food. She wasn't paying attention to him, but more to the rest of us.

"Lexie, would you like anything?" John asked, his eyes once again darting to a distracted Gemma.

"No, thank you." I gave him a warm smile.

He nodded then headed back to the grill.

We turned back to each other.

"That boy is in love with you," Nova stated before I could.

Gemma's head snapped up, the blood draining from her face. "What?"

I shook my head. "Are you saying you can't tell?"

Gemma blinked several times before looking towards John at the barbeque. He caught her gaze and gave her a wave before putting several burgers on the grill. Gemma turned back to us, her mouth open. "No he's not."

"Oh, yeah he is." I leaned forward and lowered my voice. "He kept looking at you even when talking to the rest of us. And he came over to see if you were hungry."

Gemma scowled and waved my comment away. "That's just John, he's polite and thoughtful."

"He doesn't even know us and he's making us food," Nova countered, "because we're here with you."

Gemma paled further.

"Hon, his eyes practically sparkled when he looked at you," I added.

"Oh shit." Gemma's eyes grew wide, her mouth even more. "Oh, shit."

"Do you like him too?" Elena asked, smiling.

Gemma, mouth still hanging open, shook her head. "He's just my friend. I mean, yeah, we have great sex but it's just having a good time."

"I don't think it is to him." I glanced over my shoulder and caught John staring at Gemma. When I turned back, Gemma was shaking her head.

"No. I'm not dealing with this tonight." She shook her head again. "Tomorrow. I'll ask him tomorrow, to see if you guys are right cause if he does feel that way..."

"Then what?" Elena leaned forward, her gold cross catching the faint light.

"Then I've got to end it." Gemma turned to Elena. "Keeping a guy on the hook like that, even on accident, is fucked up."

"Dealing with it tomorrow is a good idea." Nova took a sip. "Don't want salty burgers."

Gemma snorted then eyed us. "Okay, now that we know that my virtue is long gone, what about you guys?"

I snorted, barely stopping the beer from coming out of my nose.

Nova chuckled.

Elena turned beet red.

I reached over and took Gemma's beer from her hand. "No more for you."

"Aw, come on," she whined. "We're going to be sharing the same room for the entire year. We need to get to the dirty details on what to expect."

I chuckled as I handed it back to her. "I guess that's true." Hell, my private life was out with Asher's pack, why not these girls?

Nova bent one long leg and leaned back in her chair. "I'm active, but I'm not planning on bringing a guy to crash in our room with four girls."

Gemma nodded. "I'm with Nova on this. I'm sexually... adventurous, but I'm not into voyeurism."

I raised an eyebrow at her wording. "Adventurous?"

Gemma shrugged. "I'm bi."

"Ah, I thought you meant BDSM," I admitted.

"I didn't *not* say that." She grinned before she turned to Elena. "Is that going to be a problem for you?"

Elena's eyes were rounded, her eyebrows up in her hairline. "Um, no, not really. My church is against it, but there are same sex pairings in nature, so... it's got to have been built into God's plan, right?"

Not a bad answer.

Gemma smiled, her shoulders relaxing. "Good."

“What about you, Lexie?” Nova asked while Elena recovered from surprise.

Gemma turned to me, grinning like the Cheshire cat. “Yeah, which one of those guys today was your honey. And may I borrow one for a night that isn’t?”

I chuckled as my stomach knotted. Well, this was it. I took a drink for courage and looked at each of them. “Actually, I’m dating all of them.”

Silence dropped like an anvil. Everyone had varying looks of confusion on their faces.

“All of them?” Gemma asked slowly.

I swallowed hard as I nodded. “Yep. All five. I have been for about a year now.”

Nova narrowed her eyes at me. “Wait... what? As in...”

“I am dating each of them,” I explained carefully. “I am their girlfriend, and they are my boyfriends.”

Elena opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. This might have been too much too soon for her.

“Do they know?” Gemma asked, stunned.

I took another drink. “Yep. They all know the situation and they’ve all consented to be a part of it.”

Gemma’s brow drew down, her face scrunched. “How does that even work?”

I sighed wearily. “With lots of work and lots and *lots* of communication.”

Nova chuckled.

“No, I mean—” Gemma made a smushing motion with her hands. “Are some of the guys bi? Or what?”

“Ohhh.” I got what she was asking. “It’s not like that. I have a separate relationship with each of the guys, so that’s just like any romantic relationship, but we make decisions together that affect all of us, like the dating schedule, where to go to college. That stuff. If anyone has any problems they bring them up to the group and we work it out.”

“And that works?” Nova asked, her eyebrows raised.

“So far, knock on wood. It’s not easy but...” I shrugged. “I love those guys. Each of them, deeply.”

“How can you be in love with more than one person?” Elena asked, her frown still clear on her face.

I thought about how to make her understand, then it hit me. “Okay, do you love your parents? Siblings?”

“Yeah. Of course.” Elena shifted forward in her seat. “But that’s different.”

“How is that different?” I asked. “The heart has an amazing capacity for love. If you can love more than one person platonically, then why can’t you romantically?”

“Because you’re not supposed to,” Elena countered.

I held up a finger. “Who says?”

Elena scowled at me. “Everyone.”

“So, public opinion?” I said. “Hundreds of years ago, public opinion believed that the world was flat. Since then we’ve learned it’s not. Couldn’t this be the same?”

Elena frowned as she thought about it. I decided not to push her further. “Anyone need another?”

“Yeah.” Gemma grinned. “But yours isn’t even half empty.”

“I want water,” I admitted before moving to my feet.

“I’ll take another,” Nova chimed in.

“I’m good,” Elena said softly.

I took my time going over to the ice chest and picking up two waters and a beer to give them time to get over their shock. Elena was whispering to the others when I got back.

I handed the drinks out, sat back down, then looked at each of them. “Does anyone have a problem with my dating situation? Any questions?”

Elena didn’t hesitate. “You’re okay with being passed around?”

My temper snapped tight like a fishing line, but I kept it in check and kept my voice calm, my face pleasant. “That’s not what’s happening. I choose who I’m with. We stay respectful of each other, the guys try not to step on each other’s toes, and well, we have rules that we all follow to keep everything fair and prevent problems.”

Gemma nodded as she absorbed everything. “That is some next level adulating and maturity.”

I snorted. “Not so much. I just found out they put a lot of fish in some guy’s car at the end of school last year. He had asked me to senior prom and the guys weren’t happy about it.”

Everyone chuckled. Elena’s posture grew less rigid.

“Okay, but are you sleeping with all of them?” Nova asked.

“Sleeping, yes. Sex, no.” I shrugged. “Every relationship goes its own pace and some of them just aren’t there yet. Most of us have been taking it slow due to the situation.”

“I say good for you.” Gemma grinned.

Nova nodded in agreement. “If you guys can make it work, and you’re all happy, sweet.”

I chuckled. “So, if you wake up and find me gone in the morning, don’t be surprised.”

Gemma finished her sip, frowning. “Okay, so who’d you have a fight with tonight?”

“Asher.” I looked down at my water bottle, hoping she’d drop it.

“What about?” Elena asked.

I thought about how to say it. “We found out some stuff tonight that... well, Asher could hurt me on accident. And I may have said he needs a different girlfriend.”

Nova’s brow drew down. “Wow. Okay, no details.”

“Sorry, it’s really private and not all my story.” I cringed.

“No worries.” Gemma waved her hand at me. “So, when did you stop trusting him?”

I went still. That’s what Asher had said. “I trust Asher.”

Her eyebrows went up to her hair line. “You basically just said you didn’t trust him not to hurt you.”

I went over it again in my head. Did I trust Asher not to hurt me? I thought it over carefully. I trusted Asher completely, it was his wolf I didn’t trust. “Ah, shit.” I pushed myself to my feet. “I’ve got to go fix this.”

Nova chuckled. “Nothing puts a fire under your ass like realizing you’re the one who messed up in a fight.”

Gemma snorted.

“Wait, isn’t she breaking a rule?” Elena said, getting everyone’s attention. I pulled out my phone and checked bus locations around the block.

I turned back to her. “I’ve had half a beer, I’m even sober enough to drive if I needed to. And there’s a bus stop on the corner of this block. It’s not far.”

“And she’s letting us know she’s leaving,” Gemma explained. “There’s some give in that rule, but she should check in with us when she gets back to the dorm.”

“I’ll text if I’m not coming back tonight,” I promised before heading for the elevator.

Nova snickered. “I’m glad I don’t have five boyfriends.”



Asher

I EXHALED AS I PUSHED UP THE WEIGHT BAR THEN BROUGHT IT BACK DOWN, a growl slipping free. It wasn’t working!

“Shit!” I lifted the bar again and set it in the cradle then climbed out from under it to sit on the bench. The weight room at the college wasn’t doing it. All they had was a human gym with human weights. I needed more to work this energy off. Restless, I wiped the sweat off my face and got to my feet.

“You good, man?” some guy asked from the squat rack two stations down from me.

I sighed. “Yeah, just frustrated,” I muttered as I passed him and headed towards the doors. Ally’s words kept running through my head. Another girlfriend. I scoffed as I left through the double doors and headed for the locker room. As if I would even want a different girl! Ally was all I wanted in a partner. She wasn’t replaceable. She was one of a kind.

I walked into the locker room and slammed open my locker. Even if she didn’t trust me.

“What crawled up your ass?” Zeke’s voice came from another aisle.

“When did you get here?” I asked, looking up at the ceiling.

Heavy footsteps came around the line of lockers. Zeke frowned while he eyed me. “You didn’t hear me?”

Fuck. I sighed and looked down at the floor. I should have heard him. I’d let my guard down. “I’m distracted.”

“By what?” Zeke crossed his arms across his chest.

I sighed. “Ally.”

His frown disappeared. “She’s good at that.”

I shook my head. “How do you deal with it?”

Zeke shook his head. “Usually, I ignore her until she comes and yells at me, telling me to stop being a dumbass.”

I snorted. "I don't think that's going to work for me."

Zeke dropped his arms, looking at the floor before he ran his hand through his hair. "What happened?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You *want* to know?"

He growled, dropping his hand and lifting his head to meet my eyes. "I'm trying to help, asshole."

That was... different. Zeke never wanted to talk about our poly. Most of the time he seemed to ignore that we were in a polyandry situation at all. Sighing, I sat down on the bench and glared at my open locker. "She doesn't trust me."

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Nothing," I muttered. "She just— It was that meeting with the alphas tonight. They told her a bunch of stuff and it scared her into not trusting me."

"Okay, this is the only time I'll ever ask," Zeke grumbled. "What did they tell you, exactly?"

I kept my eyes on the locker. "If Lexie and I are ever going to have sex, the first time will have to be in front of three werewolves. One of them will be a doctor, in case—" I shook my head. "In case I lose control and hurt her."

"Fuck," he muttered. He moved to sit beside me on the bench, facing the other way. "I knew I shouldn't have asked."

"You can walk away," I reminded him.

He shook his head. "So, they'll demand to watch to stop you from hurting her but have a doctor there anyway in case you do?"

"Yeah."

"During sex?" Zeke's voice was oddly blank.

"Yep." I shook my head. "Now she's scared of being in a relationship with me."

There was a long silence with only the dripping of a leaky shower echoing through the room.

"Tough fucking shit," Zeke stated.

Surprised, I turned to meet his gaze.

"Lexie is human. You are not. You're over a hundred times stronger and faster than her. You could kill her before she knew something was wrong." He scowled at me. "She has every reason to be scared of being in a relationship with you."

My mind went blank. I didn't know what to say.

But Zeke did. "I get that you'd never want to hurt her, but you're not always the one in the driver's seat."

Okay, good point. "She should trust me to know when I'm dangerous."

"Did she dump your ass?" Zeke asked.

"No."

"Then she does fucking trust you," Zeke countered. "You have to let her work through her fear and come to you. You can't push her when she's not ready."

I blinked at him. I had forgotten that Zeke and Ally went through a similar thing after Ordin's attack on her. "How did you manage to wait?"

Zeke looked at me like I was an idiot. "It's Lexie." He didn't need to say more than that. Ally was special to all of us, a force to be reckoned with. I was in love with her, and for her to look at me with trust in her eyes? I'd wait an eternity.

I nodded. "Thanks, Zeke."

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled as he got to his feet and headed for the weight room.

LEXIE

It was getting late by the time I got to Asher's dorm. I followed a group in while the door was still open and hurried up to his floor.

Some people were still in the halls as I found 418. The door opened as I raised my hand to knock.

Asher looked down at me, his face serious. His hair was wet, water glistening in beads on his chiseled naked chest, a white towel wrapped around his waist. Clearly I had interrupted his shower.

"Shifter hearing?" I asked as I tried not to stare at him slack-jawed.

He nodded then opened the door further so I could slip by him into the empty room.

"Your roommate isn't here?" I asked as I moved to stand next to the desk by Asher's bed.

"He went out to get dinner before I jumped in the shower." He closed the door and turned to me. "What's going on?"

I leaned my butt on his desk, met those ocean eyes and tried to say something, but nothing came out.

His face softened as he moved to stand in front of me.

"You were right. Your alphas scared me," I admitted with a shrug. "The fact that they weren't just warning me but planning how to intervene *when* you hurt me, not if, well it kind of threw me."

"It scared me too." He sighed as he sat down on the bed and looked at the floor. "I went out to the student gym here, trying to burn off my energy when Zeke came in for his nightly workout. We had a talk." He met my gaze again. "He pointed out that you have every right to be scared of me."

I'm bigger than you, faster, stronger. I'm a werewolf and you're human. I mean, I've gotten the hang of it, but all it would take is one millisecond of inattention and you could be hurt. You have every reason not to trust me right now."

A weight lifted from my shoulders. I pushed off the desk and moved to stand between his knees. "That's just it. I do trust you. It's your wolf I don't trust. He is the one that scares me." I shrugged. "I don't know him. I haven't met him, and I don't know how much he knows about me."

Asher's hands wrapped around the back of my legs, his fingers tracing the back of my thighs up to just under my butt. "He knows of—approves of—you, your scent, your voice. But he still hasn't met you. Maybe we need to change that?"

I nodded, my fingers tracing the lines of his shoulder. "Not before the full moon."

He shook his head. "No way. He's too edgy until then, but the day after he's pretty mellow."

I nodded. "That works. Think your alphas can be there?"

"We wouldn't be able to without them there," he said, his face softening as his eyes lingered over my lips. "Do you have to go back right away?"

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip as warmth washed through me. "No."

He gave a wolfish grin. "Good." He picked me up, turned and laid me on his bed. He held himself over me while his hands began slipping my clothes off. His mouth following in their wake. I groaned at how good his hands and lips felt on me. It wasn't long before my spaghetti strapped top was bunched around my waist and my bra was on the floor. He moved lower over me and settled his upper stomach between my legs. His weight pinned me to the bed as his hands covered and caressed my breasts. I had to catch my breath as energy sizzled along my skin. He began kissing and tasting the skin just above my heart as his hands massaged. My fingers buried in his hair as his firm touch sent need coursing through me. I arched my back, pressing harder against his hands and mouth. My heart raced as his hands went to my shorts and unbuttoned them. His mouth took the tip of one breast into his mouth as he shoved my shorts and panties down to my knees.

"Roommate," I barely managed as his fingers moved between my legs. Fire shot down my nerves when his fingers found my clit immediately.

“We won’t need that long,” he said, his voice hungry.

My core clenched at the confidence in his voice. Over the last few months Asher had spent a lot of time learning my body every way he could. What I liked, what I didn’t, and most importantly, what got me going the most. Now he used that knowledge to turn me into a needy, mostly naked mess. He leaned over me while he stroked my clit with his fingers. Lights danced across my vision as I reached up to run my fingers down his chest. His eyes changed. A streak of silver threaded through the ocean waves of his eyes. His hands left me to take my wrists and pinned them to the bed. His eyes told me to keep them there. With him straddling my hips, heat poured through me as he shoved the towel off his hips.

I gripped the edge of the mattress to keep from touching him as he moved over me, holding his weight on one hand while holding his cock with the other. He pressed his cock between my labia, the tip against my clit. Electricity shot down every nerve and I whimpered with need. He pushed further, sliding between my wet folds. His entire length moved over my clit with the deep motion of his hips.

“Oh, fuck.” My head dropped back, my toes curled as his cock ran over me again while he pulled his hips back.

Asher leaned over me, his lips brushing mine. “You’re always so damn wet for me, Ally.”

I moaned deep in my throat while my body tightened, a surge of desire burning through me. He worked his hips even more, moving him against me. I burned as I tried to meet him. He growled as his palms pinned my hips to the bed. Another wave of heat threatened to drown me. My body coiled tighter and tighter as he moved. My fingers dug into the edge of the mattress above my head as the edge came closer.

He lowered his upper body over me a little, his lips leaving kisses up my neck to my ear. “How does that feel?”

I groaned, desperate for relief as I kept climbing towards that edge, my body coiling tighter and tighter. “I’m fucking close.”

His hips slowed. “You can’t come until you look at me.”

I opened my eyes and found his desire-filled gaze only inches away. “Don’t slow down.” I was on fire and he was slowing down!

“Say my name.” His voice was deeper than before. It sent hot shivers down my spine. “Ask to come.”

My core clenched at his demand and the need in his voice. “Ash, please, let me come?”

A wolfish grin crossed his face. His tempo picked up and it wasn't long before a wave of ecstasy crashed over me and blew me apart. I cried out, arching my back, digging my fingernails into the mattress. My hips tried to lift under him but his weight kept me in place as my entire body shuddered until the last wave washed through me.

I barely noticed that Asher had stopped moving. I opened my eyes. He was watching me with an intensity I'd never seen before.

He brushed his nose over mine while he pressed against me. Still shaking, I met his gaze to find a large silver vein running through his ocean eyes. Something about that wasn't right... His hands moved on me, his weight shifted. Suddenly, I was on my stomach with his chest pressed to my back. I grabbed onto the top of the mattress as he pulled my hips up a little and ran his cock along my slit.

I groaned deep in my chest as he nudged my clit. Ah, fuck yes. “Ash...” I barely breathed with electricity shooting down my still sensitive nerves as he rubbed over me again. My toes curled as I pushed back against him. “Fuck. Ash?”

“My wolf needs this,” he managed between clenched teeth against the back of my shoulder. “My scent with yours, right here.” He moved his hips, brushing over the entrance to my core.

I ached, empty, wanting. “We're not supposed—” His tip rubbed my clit again, scattering the thought. “Oh fuck, Ash!”

“Ally, I need you,” he whispered, his lips brushing over my shoulder. Deep need crashed through me, rocking me to my core.

Oh, fuck it. The alphas were probably exaggerating. “Yes.”

His hands tightened on my hips. Chills ran down my spine as he thrust through my folds again. “Say it again.”

More, I definitely needed more. “Please...” Desperate need sang through my aching body.

He stopped moving over me. His body shook a little as his weight pinned me to the bed. “Put me inside you.” His lips brushed my ear, his deeper voice sending heat curling through me. Need pulsed. I moved my hand between me and the bed, pressing the tip of his cock further back. Then I tilted my hips until he was at my entrance.

He drove into me in one hard thrust, making me cry out as I clenched around him. My body throbbed as he growled deep in his chest a heartbeat before his hand tightened on my hip. I moaned as he pulled almost all the way out then slammed back into me with enough force to drive the breath from me. Need burned through me. He kept moving, his body surging into mine. The sound of skin slapping skin and my small gasps filled the room with each thrust. Cinnamon and vanilla surrounded me. Higher and higher the heat surged through me, everything burning in such a fucking good way. His weight on my back was right, his cock inside me. Sweat dropped onto my back as he pinned me to the bed with each thrust, his growl spilling over me. His hand left my hip to dig into the mattress. The sound of fabric being shredded barely even registered. His mouth found the back of my neck, teeth pressing into the skin, bringing that edge up again fast. Suddenly, energy surged up my spine. His hips slammed faster and harder. I cried out as waves and waves of pleasure tore through me. Heat, pleasure, pain all melded together into a breath-stopping wave of ecstasy that tore away everything I was and left me mindless.

His body stiffened against mine, his growl vibrating down my spine and causing my body to clench around his again as he thrust as far as he could inside me one last time.

I floated in a world of warmth, skin, and ultimate satisfaction, the only sound our hard breathing. I don't know how long I was there, but eventually the warmth and fuzziness pulled back. My heartbeat stopped pounding in my ears. Something wet and warm ran over my shoulder. The scent of iron tickled my nose.

The bed moved as Asher lifted his head off my back. "Shit, Ally, you're bleeding."

I didn't really care, but the urgency in his voice brought me to the surface.

Asher's hand clamped down on the back of my neck as he moved off me. He pulled my shorts and panties off the rest of the way then helped me get to my feet.

"No, no, no," he kept repeating as he steered me into the bathroom. "Bend over the sink."

"Huh, what?" I was still fuzzy from that orgasm, but the blood that rolled down my neck to drip onto the porcelain basin threw a surge of adrenaline through me, waking me up. "Son of a bitch!"

He gently pushed my hair away from my neck. "Fuck."

Shit! The back of my neck and down both my shoulders began to throb as blood continued to drop. "Did you bite me?"

His voice was hard as he jerked open the medicine cabinet over my head. "Yeah. I fucking bit you."

I let out a string of inventive cursing. "What happened?"

"I-I-I don't know," he admitted. "This is going to hurt."

I gritted my teeth a heartbeat before Asher poured peroxide over the wound. I cursed through clenched teeth as my eyes watered. Eventually the sting faded.

Asher picked up some gauze off the counter and pressed it against the wound on the back of my neck. "Shit, shit, shit."

I lifted my head a little and met his wide eyes in the mirror. "Fuck, Asher."

"I'm so sorry, Ally." His face was pale enough that I wondered if he was going to be sick.

I took a deep breath and let it out. He hadn't meant to, I knew that. It wouldn't do any good yelling at him now. "I know."

Asher went back to taping the gauze to my neck. "I need to call the alphas, tell them what happened."

My whole neck throbbed in time with my pulse as I straightened and met his gaze in the mirror again. "They just warned us today."

Asher rubbed the back of his neck fiercely. "I know!" He stopped himself, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

While he got himself back together, I lifted my hair off my neck and turned to see it in the mirror. Nestled in nape of my neck, just below my hairline, was the bandage. Directly over my spine. Shit. If his wolf hadn't liked me... Nope, no, nada, not thinking about that.

"Ally..." he breathed, his gaze no longer on my neck but my body. His fingers brushed my right hip. "I hurt you."

I looked down to where his fingers were and saw what he was talking about. Four light bruises were appearing on the curve of both of my hips. They were clearly light finger marks. Asher had grabbed me too hard. "Not that big of deal right now." I turned and looked up at him. "I might become a shifter, Ash."

He took a couple steps back from me, his eyes wide.

“The full moon is only in a few days!” I all but yelled. I held onto control by a small thread.

Asher took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “There’s a chance that, instead, I might have marked you as my mate.”

“Mate? As in...” My heart dropped. Married. “Oh, fuck.”

Asher nodded, his face strained.

We stood there in heavy silence as it what just happened sank in. Fuck. One way or another, life had just changed in a huge way. I took several long, slow breaths to stay calm. Oddly, it was then that I realized that something wet was slowly making its way down my inner thighs. I looked down and realized that gravity was doing its job.

Asher followed my eyes. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Asher grabbed a washcloth and wet it with warm water before handing it to me. “We had sex. Didn’t we?”

I took the washcloth. “You don’t remember?”

“It’s fuzzy.”

I started cleaning myself as I answered and tried not to be irritated. “Yeah, we did.” I began to ache between my legs. I made a point not to wince, but he noticed anyway.

“You’re hurting.” It wasn’t really a question. “I’m taking you to the pack doctor.”

“I’m fine, Ash.” I bundled up the washcloth and was about to toss it into the laundry basket when he reached out and stopped me.

He took a couple sniffs of the air before taking the cloth from me. He opened it and cursed. There was a small streak of blood on the white cloth. When his eyes met mine, they were his wolf eyes. “Ally, we need to be sure you’re okay. I could have cracked bones, I could have...”

I wanted to argue, but my endorphins were starting to wear off and I ached in ways I shouldn’t have. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“Thank you.” He opened his mouth to say something else but stopped. Instead, he reached past me and closed the bathroom door a heartbeat before the dorm room door opened.

He cursed under his breath as the outer door shut.

“Perfect fucking timing,” I muttered as I began cleaning up the mess we’d made in the bathroom.

“Stay in here, I’ll get your shorts and underwear.” He opened the door just enough to slip through and close it behind him.

I reached down and pulled my tank top straps back onto my arms, covering myself.

“Uh, hey, man. Why are you naked?” a male voice asked awkwardly.

“My girlfriend is in the bathroom,” Asher said. There was the rustling of fabric as Asher looked for our clothes.

“Oh, I can go kill time in the common room,” his roommate offered.

At least he was nice about the whole thing.

“Um, no, we’re... we’re just gonna get dressed and I’ll take her home.” Asher’s voice came closer.

“Whatever you say, man.”

The door opened.

Asher passed my clothes and sandals through the door to me. “Get dressed and meet me outside at the parking lot.”

“Where are you going?” I pulled my clothes against my chest.

“I’m getting Miles’ car. It should only take me eight minutes, tops.”

I nodded. He closed the door behind him. It wasn’t long before the outer door opened and closed.

I sighed. We were going to see the pack doctor. That would mean werewolves with wolf senses. My hasty clean up job wasn’t going to cut it, so I took a guess at which towel was Asher’s.

WE DROVE OUT TO THE ALPHA HOUSE IN TENSE SILENCE. DURING MY improvised birdbath I’d discovered a few more aches and pains that I hadn’t noticed before, so going to the pack doctor really wasn’t a bad idea. We were both deep in thought as we drove out of the city.

It was a while later, on a dark road, when one of us finally broke the silence.

“We didn’t use a condom,” he said into the quiet of the SUV.

“Nope.” I kept my eyes on the road. “But I’ve been on the pill since everyone’s tests came back negative this summer. We’re good on that front.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw his shoulders relax a little.

“What do you remember?” I asked softly.

He pressed his lips together. “All I remember was sliding into you, and how amazing you felt wrapped around me.”

My face warmed as my sore core clenched. I turned towards him to watch his face. "You... you were okay with sex, right? Or did your wolf take over?"

His eyes snapped to my face. "Yeah. I was right there with you, honey."

He had consented. I let out the breath I'd been holding. "Thank god."

He reached over the fancy console and took my hand as he turned back to look at the road. "It was about there that things get fuzzy."

I looked back out the window again, watching the trees go by. "Where is this doctor anyway?"

"Well, there's a clinic I could have taken you to in the city," he said, "but since I don't think you broke a bone, you aren't bleeding and you're breathing okay, the doctor said he'd meet us at the main wolf clinic at the alpha house." He shook his head. "I still can't fucking believe I bit you. I'm so fucking sorry, Ally."

"It's not completely your fault," I reminded him. "You didn't do this alone."

Asher shook his head.

"We both fucked up here, Superman," I said softly.

Silence filled the space between us again.

"I was rough with you, Ally," he stated, his voice filled with anger. "I... I've never... that's not me."

"Well, you didn't hurt me, Asher," I said as I kept my eyes on the road. "Besides, I sometimes like it rough anyway."

He swallowed hard enough that I could hear it. "Did... did you get to finish at least?"

Warmth crept across my chest as I made a point not to look at him. "Ooh yeah."

He sighed deeply before he pulled off the road onto a gravel driveway.

After a mile or so, a house and several other smaller buildings emerged from the trees, sitting in a rather large clearing. One looked like a large two-story cabin, obviously the alpha house. Another was a pole building that was clearly a garage. All were dark except for a rather odd, out of place cinderblock building to the left of the parking area. Light glowed through the high rectangular windows.

Asher pulled up and parked in front of the only building with lights on. I opened my door and slid out of the SUV, trying not to show how much my

hips had started to ache. Asher was there in seconds, his arm around me, guiding me through the door.

It looked exactly like any other clinic, except the waiting room was much smaller.

“Doctor Carsen?” Asher called out as he closed the door behind us.

Footsteps moved down the hall next to the counter towards us. A man who was maybe in his late forties appeared in the doorway carrying a large first aid kit. There was nothing that stood out about him other than his blue scrubs. Brown hair was cropped short, close to his head. His hazel eyes moved over me quickly and his shoulders relaxed. “Come on back. We’re all set to check you out.” He ducked back down the hall.

We followed him into the first room on the left which turned out to be their emergency room. There were four stations with gurneys, each with state-of-the-art equipment. Frankly, it could have been any emergency room. Once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. This one was clean and bright and well-funded.

Asher steered me towards the bed closest to the door. I pulled away and slid up onto the gurney. The doctor came back with several instruments that he set on the bed beside me before turning to face me. “I’m Dr. Carsen, and you are?”

“Lexie.” I gave him a small grin.

“The necromancer, right.” He nodded. “Now, understand that everything you tell me is *not* private. This is a pack hospital and the alphas will need to be informed of your injuries in order to know what happened. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Good. Now, Asher said that you two got carried away tonight and had unsupervised sex.” Dr. Carsen looked at Asher, his lips pressed into a thin line. “And that you haven’t gotten clearance yet.”

“Yeah,” I answered.

He didn’t take his eyes off Asher. “Was it consensual?”

Asher bristled. He stood up straight, his brow drawing down as he growled at the doctor.

“Yes,” I said immediately.

The doctor’s entire demeanor changed, and his face was friendly again when he turned back to me. “Was there any contraception?”

“I’m on the pill,” I answered.

The doc nodded. "What hurts besides the bite?"

"I'm a little achy everywhere, including my groin, and I've got light bruises on my hips."

The doc nodded. "Let's see this bite."

I shifted on the gurney and pulled up my hair.

His hands were gentle as he pulled the tape off and lifted the bandage. "Nice job cleaning the wound."

"It was the first thing we did when I realized what happened." Asher shoved his hands in his pockets.

Doc nodded then pointed out something on my neck. "Do you see the shape of the bite, here and here?"

Asher stepped closer and looked over the doc's shoulder. "Yeah."

"You partially shifted when you bit her." Carsen's voice had an edge to it.

Asher cursed as he moved to the end of the gurney, his arms crossing over his chest.

"What does that mean?" I asked as he covered the bite again.

"It means you have a wolf bite as opposed to a human bite," Carsen said.

I dropped my hair and shifted back around on the gurney. "Is that bad?"

His face was neutral as he met my gaze. "For you, no. It just means you're less likely to get an infection. Human bites are disgusting."

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean *for me*?"

Carsen picked up the blood pressure cuff. "Anything else I should know?"

"There was blood when we were cleaning up," Asher stated, shifting from foot to foot.

"How much?" Carsen asked as he put the cuff on me.

"Just a small streak," I answered. "Not even the size of my last pinkie joint."

Carsen shook his head. "Probably nothing too bad, but we will need to do a pelvic exam just to check. Shock can hide a lot of damage. Hopefully not an internal if we don't have to."

My stomach knotted. "Seriously?"

Carsen's eyes were understanding as he nodded. "And we'll do some X-rays of your hips and spine just to be sure your bones are alright."

Asher cursed under his breath.

The doc met my gaze. "Any numbness anywhere?"

"Nope."

He looked down at my feet. "Wiggle your toes for me."

I did as he asked.

We ran through a few more nerve tests before he was satisfied that there wasn't an issue from the bite on my neck. He did all the usual things they do at the doctors' office; blood pressure, temp, pulse.

Dr. Carsen turned to one of the cabinets and pulled out a hospital gown. "I need you to change into this for the X-rays and pelvic."

I grumbled as he walked away and pulled the curtain closed. "Stupid pelvic exam."

Asher's face was pale as he turned back to me. "I'm so sorry, Ally."

I shook my head as I slipped off my sandals and pulled off my top. "I'm just grumbling, Ash. If a pelvic exam is the worst thing that happens from this, that's fine by me."

His shoulders relaxed a little as he nodded in agreement. I finished changing.

AFTER MY X-RAY DETERMINED THAT MY SPINE, HIPS AND PELVIS WERE FINE, we moved on to the pelvic. During the exam, Dr. Carsen kept up a cheerful story about a couple of wolf pups getting into mischief with Brendon by spraying silly string. Apparently Brendon had also been armed with a can himself and it became a war. At the end, I was smiling and barely felt his exam.

I took my feet out of the stirrups and sat up on the gurney.

"It looks like you probably just have a couple of superficial tissue tears around the entrance to your vagina." Dr. Carsen took off his gloves and dropped them into the biohazard can.

"That's what I figured." I fixed the paper sheet that was covering my lap.

Asher moved to my side from the head of the gurney. "Does she need stitches?"

I bit back a smile. "Nope, they're tiny. I'll be fine in a couple days."

"They aren't something to worry about. Happens from rough sex all the time," Carsen said. When he finished washing his hands in the small sink,

he turned to Asher and let out a deep breath. "You have no idea how amazingly lucky you two are."

My heart sank.

Dr. Carsen met my gaze. "The last time this happened, the human had a broken pelvis and several shattered vertebrae. That's not even mentioning the damage from bites and blood loss."

The blood drained from my face. "Did she survive?"

"*He* was DOA." He turned to Asher. "She couldn't live with the guilt. She killed herself with a silver bullet to the brain the day after."

"Shit," I breathed.

"We have these rules for a reason," Carsen stated, still looking at Asher. "It's not just to protect your partner."

"Maybe I had more control than they did," Asher said uncertainly.

Carsen's eyes flashed amber as he growled. "No. You didn't. Your jaw and teeth shifted all the way to wolf when you bit her. That is not control. I'm quite frankly astonished that your hands didn't shift too."

Asher began rubbing the back of his neck. "They did. I tore into the mattress."

My heart dropped. Holy... He hadn't said anything about that.

Carsen shook his head. "That is barely avoiding disaster."

It began to sink in, exactly how stupid we had been. How close we came to me being seriously hurt or even dead. For some reason the world started getting a little fuzzy around the edges.

Carsen sighed. "If you love her, you'll never risk her again, not until the alphas say you have enough control."

Asher swallowed hard then nodded.

Both Asher and Carsen jerked, as if they'd touched a live wire. They turned toward the door.

"The alphas." Carsen moved from the end of the gurney, past Asher, to my side. "I'd advise that you be submissive before they even get in here."

Asher swallowed hard and moved to stand at the end of the gurney.

The clinic door opened with a loud bang that made me jump.

Dr. Carsen put a steadying hand on my shoulder. "No matter what you see or hear, you are completely safe."

I nodded then turned back to find Asher on his knees on the cement floor. He took a deep breath.

The door to the clinic opened again and slammed shut but with much less force.

Brendon stepped into the emergency room in an immaculate tux, but this wasn't the Brendon from earlier today. This was the Alpha. Power seemed to cling to his skin as he strode in. His eyes were golden amber as they went to Asher on the floor.

Asher tilted his head to the side, showing his neck.

Brendon stood over Asher, his face hard, his hands clenched. He all but vibrated energy. "How hurt is she?"

"It was consensual," Carsen answered. "She's got a wolf bite and some bruises on her hips that will be gone by morning. Nothing more."

Some of the tension eased from Brendon's shoulders.

"Thank goodness." Tilly came through the doorway wearing an elegant navy silk gown. Her hair was up in an elegant chignon at the nape of her neck. She moved to my side and took my hand. "When Carsen called we expected the worst."

My heart pounded; I couldn't tear my gaze from Brendon as he glared down at Asher on his knees.

"Explain, in detail, what happened." Brendon's voice made it clear it was an order.

Asher kept his eyes on the floor as he began to talk. "Earlier tonight, Ally and I argued after leaving the coffee shop. We went our separate ways so both of us could cool off. Later, she came over and we talked it out. Then we started getting physical."

"That was your first mistake," Tilly stated. "Never get intimate with a human if you've been highly emotional."

Asher nodded. Apparently, he knew this rule.

"Brendon, she doesn't need to be here for this," Tilly pointed out.

Brendon kept his eyes on Asher. "She's been bitten, love. Either way, she's going to become part of this pack. She needs to see how we work."

Tilly sighed, met my gaze, and gave me an apologetic smile.

"Continue," Brendon ordered.

Asher's shoulders tightened. "We began with foreplay as usual, then moved on to closed missionary without penetration."

"How was your control at that point?" Brendon asked.

Asher hesitated but then pushed on. "My wolf was more present than usual but under control."

“You should have known then that something was wrong,” Brendon bit out between his teeth. “You’ve been a werewolf for a year now. You are *not* a newborn. You know the signs.”

Asher nodded, his shoulders sagging under his alpha’s words.

“Continue,” Tilly said, her voice more neutral as her arm moved around my shoulders.

“Ally had just climaxed with outercourse when I was hit with this need,” Asher continued, his cheeks turning red. “Next thing I knew, I had her on her stomach, her hips in my hands and running myself through her —”

“Labia.” My voice was soft as I helped him out. “We were still outercoursing at that point.”

“That was your second mistake,” Brendon stated. “When you can’t recall how you even moved, that’s your control slipping. How was your control from then on?”

Asher swallowed hard before he answered. “All I could think about was leaving my scent... with hers. So everyone would know she was mine.”

I grew still. My stomach knotted.

“You wanted to claim her,” Tilly supplied.

Asher nodded.

Son of a bitch.

“Third mistake,” Brendon pointed out.

Asher nodded.

“When did you lose even more control?” he demanded.

Asher frowned, shaking his head.

“Around that time, we both lost our heads,” I supplied. If Asher was going to own up to his mistake, I could too. “I-I initiated.”

“And your thought process after you were having sex?” Brendon asked Asher directly.

“Mostly, I just vaguely remember concentrating on keeping my hands soft and my movements as gentle as I could. The rest...” Asher glanced at me then back down at the floor. “I... it wasn’t conscious thought. It was all instinct.”

“Which was?” Brendon asked.

Asher looked at me then up to Brendon.

“She needs to know what happened,” Brendon snapped. “To understand you and how you work.”

Asher sighed as he dropped his gaze to the floor again. "My wolf wanted to make her want only me. Make her mine. Make everyone else stay away from her. When my claws came out, I was barely aware enough to tear into the mattress in time."

My heart clenched. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"It's fuzzy, but I remember tasting blood and climaxing," Asher finished.

Brendon took a deep breath and sighed before turning towards me. "If you had fought against his hold, even a little, he would have snapped your neck and not on purpose. If you realized what was happening and got scared, he could have seen you not as his partner anymore but as food and torn you apart."

Bile rose in the back of my throat. We really were that close to disaster.

Brendon's wolf eyes met mine. "We, at our heart, are predators. When we're injured, we're dangerous. When we're angry, we're dangerous. When we're hungry, we're dangerous. You, as a human, *cannot* afford to forget that."

I nodded that I understood.

"What you two did tonight was outrageously foolish," Brendon snapped, his face furious as he turned back to Asher. "We have rules for a reason, and it's always, *always* to keep the loss of life to a minimum."

The tension in the room practically shimmered in the air as Asher and I processed exactly how close we came. How little control Asher actually had tonight. I took slow, deep breaths and fought back the panic eating at me.

Brendon ran a hand down his face, the anger pulling back from the surface. "Now we need to talk about the repercussions."

Repercussions? My pulse picked up a little.

Tilly squeezed my shoulder gently.

"Asher, your control is nowhere near where I thought it was," Brendon stated, his voice almost growling. "No intimate contact until you've shown me otherwise."

What exactly did he mean by intimate? "Umm..."

"No sexual contact," Tilly whispered to me. "No making out, no sex. Hugs and cuddling are fine, just nothing more."

I nodded, my eyes still on Brendon and Asher.

Asher nodded that he understood.

"Get up," Brendon ordered.

Asher got to his feet in one swift motion with an ease that reminded me he was a werewolf.

Brendon came to the end of the gurney and met my gaze. "Now your repercussions."

Asher moved to my side and took my other hand. His hand was clammy and cold. He had been scared as hell of Brendon.

"You've been bitten," Tilly said. She let me go to move to her mate's side and met my gaze. "That means one of two things; either you will become a werewolf, or Asher potentially marked you as his mate."

If it was possible, I could be converted. I swallowed hard. "I'm a necro, can I even become a wolf?"

Tilly tilted her head to the side. "That's a good question."

"Since necros are so rare," Brendon said, anger still edging his voice, "there isn't much known about them becoming other species."

"There is someone we could ask," Tilly said.

Brendon's head snapped around. "No."

"It's a question we need an answer to," Tilly countered.

"We'll have the answer in seventy-two hours," he shot back.

Tilly shook her head. "We'll only know if she got lucky."

"That's all we need to know," Brendon all but growled.

"Not if they're going to continue to be together." Tilly turned to glare up at her husband.

The alphas stared each other down.

"What are you two talking about?" I asked, completely lost. "Who would you ask?"

Tilly turned to me. "Cerberus."

Asher frowned. "The three headed dog that guards the underworld?"

"No, not the Cerberus of myth," Brendon said. "He's a man, a sorcerer, who runs the paranormal market. No one knows his name, so people have called him Cerberus for over a century now."

"Sorcerer?" I frowned. "Don't you mean witch?"

Brendon met my gaze and shook his head. "No, I don't."

"Sorcerers are a different breed altogether," Tilly said, looking up at her mate. "It's a simple question."

Brendon turned back to her. "He'll want payment."

"It shouldn't be much. For him, it would be a simple research question," Tilly countered.

Brendon's eyes narrowed. "You know he'll want some of our wolves to fight in that damn ring of his again."

Tilly shook her head. "It costs us nothing to ask his price."

Brendon considered what she said. "Fine. I'll call," he grumbled before he left the room.

Tilly sighed as the tension in the room eased. "Well, that's better."

I turned to Tilly. "There are sorcerers?"

Tilly nodded. "Thankfully, there's only one known sorcerer left in the world."

Stunned, I took a deep, steadying breath.

"Listen," Tilly said as she watched me carefully. "The difference between a conversion and a mate mark is that a mate mark scars within seventy-two hours. Now, you two will need to watch yourselves carefully over those hours."

Asher nodded.

"Pay attention for spontaneous urges," Tilly said gently. "The full moon is in only a few days."

"If I did infect her, does that mean she'll shift this moon?" Asher asked, his hand rubbing his neck hard enough to turn the skin red.

"It's possible, but not likely," Tilly said. "It might, however, speed up her conversion. Look out for severe mood swings, appetite changes and increased sex drive."

"And if she is going to shift on this moon, she'll start having a fever," Brendon said as he came back into the room, tucking his cell phone away. "If her temperature spikes bring her here immediately."

My heart dropped. "Why?"

"If you convert quickly," Tilly said, bringing my attention back to her, "it'll be painful. Extremely painful. You'll need our help to get through it with your mind intact."

Fuck. I nodded. My mouth was drier than a desert.

"That's all we can tell you until we hear back from Cerberus," Brendon stated. "If that bite scars in the next few days, you're mates."

Asher grew pale. "I... I might have marked her without her permission."

Tilly shifted, drawing our attention. "Marking her was your wolf claiming a mate. She still has to decide if she'll accept or reject you."

Asher's head snapped up. "What?"

Tilly glanced at Brendon then met my gaze. "If she doesn't want to be your mate she can reject you, but there are serious repercussions."

Asher swallowed hard. "Tell me."

"Your wolf will basically be injured for the rest of your life. You won't heal quickly or have your normal strength ever again," Brendon stated. "You'll also never be able to mark a mate again."

"Wait." I looked up at Brendon. "It was, like, a one-shot deal? The mate mark?"

Brendon nodded. "Werewolves take consent seriously."

"What happens if I don't reject him?" I asked.

"You'll move forward with a mate bond and come into the pack. Basically, you'll be married into it," Tilly said, moving back to Brendon's side. "Other than rejection or death, it can't be undone. Ever."

Brendon turned to Tilly. "Some of the wolves aren't going to like it if she's not converted."

"Why's that?" I asked.

Tilly shook her head while Brendon explained. "Cross-species mating isn't really accepted by the majority of werewolves. Not to mention, it's just difficult to adapt the way a pack works to be fair for a human. It causes problems."

"Which we'll deal with if it comes to it," Tilly said, an edge of warning to her voice.

Brendon nodded to her then turned to Asher. "Shift. We're going for a run. You're not going home tonight, and you'll be damned lucky if you get to go back tomorrow."

Asher nodded before he dug the keys to the SUV out of his pocket and handed them to me. "I'll try to talk to you tomorrow."

I nodded as I took the keys.

Asher hurried out the door with Brendon right on his heels.

I sat, stunned, looking down at the keys in my hand. My life really had just changed, one way or another. Fuck. How the hell were the guys going to deal with this? My chest burned. I might be a werewolf. Or married. That wouldn't sit well with some of them. My stomach rolled a little.

Everything just... fuck.

Tilly's hand went to my shoulder and she ducked to meet my eyes. "Let's get you dressed and some tea and sugar in you before you head home."

With things a bit fuzzy, I nodded before moving the paper blanket and sliding off the gurney. My hands seemed to be a bit clumsy as I got dressed. It took me two tries to button my shorts. I had just put on my last sandal when someone stopped on the other side of the curtain.

“Everyone decent?” Dr. Carsen asked.

“Yes, Carsen,” Tilly answered for me as I put my foot back down on the cement floor.

Dr. Carsen opened the curtain and made his way to me, a small white bag in his hand. “Alright, Lexie, I have some regular over the counter pain meds for you. I suggest taking them right before you go to bed tonight.”

I huffed. “Like I’m going to sleep.”

“That’s what the sleeping pill in the other bottle is for.” He gave me a charming smile. “You need sleep to heal, especially if you’re converted.” He handed me the bag and I took it without comment.

Carsen glanced at Tilly then back to me. “I’m going to leave you in Tilly’s capable hands.”

Carsen was already out the door when I remembered. “He didn’t ask about my billing information.”

“Pack hospital. We’ll take care of the expense,” Tilly said. “Come on, let’s go into the house and have those cookies and tea.”

Still fuzzy, I followed Tilly out of the clinic and across the large gravel parking area to the cabin. The large space was dark but there was a family area with a fireplace and television above it. A kitchen that was practically commercial grade took up the corner of the downstairs. Everything was clean and tidy. Homey.

Tilly moved around the large counter. “Have a seat, Lexie.”

I took a stool at the island, wincing a little as I sat down, while she puttered around the kitchen. I was fascinated by the pattern in the granite counter.

Eventually, Tilly set a mug of steaming tea in front of me, making me look up.

Tilly gave me an understanding smile. “Drink. It’ll warm you up.”

Without thinking, I took a sip of tea.

Tilly pushed a plate of chocolate choc-chip cookies toward me. “Eat.”

Again, I did what she said without thinking. It wasn’t long after I finished my cookie that the fuzziness started to pull back a little and let me think. I met her gaze. “I thought canines couldn’t have chocolate?”

She grinned. “That’s why I’m thankful I’m a werewolf and not just a wolf.”

I nodded. That made sense. I took another sip of tea, the warmth filling my belly.

“Lexie, how much education did Astrid give you about dating a werewolf as a human?” Tilly asked gently.

I put down my mug and wrapped my hands around it, absorbing its heat. “She gave me a list of things not to do and told me to listen to what he says he needs.”

Her eyebrows went up. “That’s it?”

I nodded.

She thought about it for a minute or so, then shrugged. “Okay, I can’t blame Astrid. She was born a werewolf.”

“You weren’t?” I asked in a quiet voice.

Tilly gave me a sad smile and shook her head. “We were camping at a lake, not too far from Seattle. It was a beautiful spot. Unfortunately, the old alpha of Seattle and the pack were chasing a rogue wolf through the area.”

“What Astrid probably didn’t tell you about werewolves is that they are big. Much bigger than normal wolves. Longer, too.” Tilly’s eyes unfocused. “My sisters and I were at the lake when this enormous wolf came out of the tree line. It went for my youngest sisters, but I got between them. Most of them ran to our parents to get help, but one sister ran to help me. The younger ones came out the incident fine. Reagan and I didn’t.” Her eyes refocused on mine. “The pack was only a couple minutes behind the rogue. They killed him, then made sure we were taken care of.”

“A rogue?”

She shifted on her stool. “A werewolf that has allowed their wolf to consume them. There’s no human consciousness left anymore. They are usually violent, aggressive, and need to be put down to prevent a blood bath.”

“I’m sorry.” I took a sip of my tea.

“I’m not. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” Tilly grinned. “But this isn’t about me, it’s about you and Asher.”

I set my mug down, ready to listen.

“If you are not converted now”—she hesitated a heartbeat—“the chance that you will be bitten again or converted is all but one hundred percent. Do you understand?”

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “You’re saying that I’ll become a werewolf, now or later.”

She nodded. “Historically, yes. That or death has been the outcome for every human mated to a werewolf, in the history of the U.S. at least.”

My heart thumped hard in my chest. “But I might not be able to become a shifter.”

Tilly nodded. “That’s true.” She took a breath. “But if that is a mate bite, then you should know the odds that you’ll stay human. You should seriously consider rejecting Asher’s mark if you don’t think this life is for you.”

My chest ached deeply. “But you guys said that will cripple his wolf permanently.”

Her eyes filled with sympathy. “Yes, but it’ll do him no good later if you are converted and you can’t deal with it. Those wolves, they aren’t that mentally stable. They don’t last long.”

Shit, shit, shit. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as panic licked at my heart. I swallowed hard and focused on something I had been wondering for a while. “How is Asher doing? With his wolf, I mean?”

Tilly finished her sip of tea and met my gaze. “Not that great.”

I was afraid of that. “He hasn’t had any big issues since... for months now.”

She shook her head. “It’s not just about that. Asher hasn’t fully accepted he’s a werewolf.”

“What do you mean?” He was doing everything he was supposed to. Avoiding fights, eating more protein. All of it.

“It’s something I noticed about the way Asher spoke about his wolf while you guys were out here for orientation,” she said carefully. “Asher still seems to think of his wolf as separate from himself, a different entity that shares his body.”

“It’s not?”

She shook her head. “It has some urges and reactions that he wouldn’t have had before he was bitten, but at the heart of that wolf is Asher. The same issues, the same hurts, stressors, all of it.”

“Huh?” I wasn’t getting it.

“A werewolf’s instincts are a part of us.” She paused then tried again to explain. “Okay, I’m taking a guess at what happened tonight so take it with a grain of salt.”

I grabbed another cookie as I nodded.

“Let’s say Asher, the human part of him, is having issues or struggling with the polyandry situation you have going on. Say he wants his girlfriend all to himself,” Tilly explained gently. “The way he feels about it will affect what he does as a wolf. It could have made him want to mark you as his mate.”

My heart sank. “Oh, fuck.” I pinched the bridge of my nose then dropped my hand. “Okay, so they’re subconsciously connected?”

She shook her head. “Not quite. Asher is trying to rein in his wolf side by keeping control of it, as if he’s riding a horse. He’s basically wrestling him into submission or trying not to rouse him at all by not thinking about things that make him angry, avoiding things that might bring out that side of him, like avoiding a butcher shop so he won’t feel the urge to eat raw meat. He’s bottling up all these emotions so he doesn’t feel them, so he doesn’t have to deal with that side of himself.”

Fuck. “Oh. Okay, I know what you’re talking about. He’s avoiding dealing with that side at all, and in doing that he’s not learning control?”

“Precisely.” Tilly nodded. “That’s not how werewolves keep control. Not for long. We must feel those emotions. We have to deal with our problems and issues or our wolf will.”

Understanding dawned. “So the wolf is just a different version of Asher?”

Tilly grinned. “Actually, yeah. Imagine an Asher that has no inhibitions, doesn’t care about societal norms, and only has a fuzzy impression of who is a friend or an enemy in his human life. Then add in a wolf’s killer instincts and needs. That is a werewolf in wolf form.”

I thought about it and, to be honest, it was unsettling. “Son of a bitch. So, with the example you gave, say human Asher is struggling with this dating situation and not dealing with it, hasn’t dealt with the emotional stuff, when he shifts his wolf will take action to get the outcome he truly wants. Like marking me as his mate.”

Tilly nodded. “Exactly. Now, don’t get me wrong, there is some wrestling for control involved in the day to day, like dealing with that annoying person at work, but that’s focusing on trying not to get irritated or angry. On not letting the environment affect you or manipulating the environment to avoid triggers you can’t handle yet.”

“That’s all he’s been doing,” I muttered. “Avoiding bad situations, trying not to get angry, going for runs because he’s restless, upset or jealous.”

Tilly shook her head, her face grim. “That works day to day. But not for the long haul. And if he doesn’t fully accept that his wolf *is* him, then Asher in wolf form will become even more dangerous.”

“Is that why newborn werewolves are so dangerous?” I asked.

“Yes. They haven’t dealt with their issues or learned how to properly deal with their new emotions yet.” Tilly took another sip. “They’re still riding the horse because they haven’t realized they are the horse.”

“Well, shit.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “It’s one of the reasons he still doesn’t remember what happens when he shifts.”

I shook my head. I had no idea Asher wasn’t really controlling himself. “Does Asher know all of this? That’s he’s not really accepting his wolf?”

“We thought so, but it’s possible it wasn’t explained to him or it just didn’t stick.” She reached over and set her hand on mine. “How long did he stay with Astrid after his first shift?”

“A month.”

She nodded. “A month is standard, but... well, in our pack we usually have them stay with us for few months while we work through their issues and make sure they’re ready to go back to the human world.”

My temples began to ache. Asher was the wolf. The wolf was Asher, just without a conscience. Fuck.

Tilly saw the weariness before she got to her feet. “Let me get you a bag of cookies to send you home with.”

I stared down at my tea for a while, absorbing everything. “Is Asher going to have to come live here?”

Tilly continued slipping the cookies in the plastic bag. “It’s possible. Brendon is running him through exercises right now to determine how much acceptance and control he really has.”

I sighed. It would probably be a good thing for him.

“I want to set up a lunch between you and one of our converted wolves. They’ll have the answers you really need if that’s a mate mark.” Tilly handed me the bag of cookies with a warm smile. “Now, go home. Take the meds Carsen gave you and go to sleep. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

I nodded as I took the cookie bag. “Thanks.”

“If you have any questions, call anytime,” Tilly said, her tone telling me it wasn’t a request.

Still a bit numb, I nodded as I got to my feet, took my cookies, and headed out to Miles’ SUV.

OceanofPDF.com

5

OceanofPDF.com

MONDAY

Lexie

Something pulled me to the surface. A noise... there. I opened my eyes and rolled to my side. The dorm room was still. Only the dim glow from the bathroom light filled the room. The scent of burnt sugar tickled my nose. What the...

A small, soft whimper drew my attention to the left corner near the window. Elena shifted in bed, her face pinched. I propped myself up on my elbow and watched as Elena rolled over and whimpered again before settling back down. Probably just a bad dream. I snuggled back down under my blanket and started to slip back to sleep. Just before going under, motion at the corner of my eye caught my attention. Nova also laid back down and rolled to her side, giving her back to the room. Sleep soon pulled me under.

MY NECK AND SHOULDERS WERE STILL AT A DULL ACHE WHEN I SAT DOWN with my roommates at a table in Denny's Café on campus for breakfast. Though the pain wasn't as bad as last night.

"Where's your food?" Gemma asked before taking a bite of her bagel.

My mind still on last night, I held up my to-go coffee. "Coffee is the breakfast of champions."

“When did you get in last night?” Nova asked. “I don’t even remember the door opening.”

I scratched an itch behind my right ear. “It was pretty late. I’m just glad I didn’t wake anyone up. Sorry I forgot to call.”

Nova’s eyes narrowed on me. “What’s with the bandage?”

My heart dropped as my hand automatically went to the gauze on the back of my neck. “Covering a hickey,” I lied. “I thought my hair would hide it.”

Gemma shook her head. “It’s not working.”

I sighed then went about taking my hair out of the braid and letting the curls fall loose to the middle of my back. “Can you see it now?”

“You’re good.” Gemma grinned. “I take it that means you and Asher made up?”

Last night went through my mind again, my face warmed. “Oh, yeah.”

Gemma chuckled.

“How was the rest of the party?” I asked before I took a deep drink of my coffee.

“Ugh. My head is killing me,” Elena said as she all but slumped over her coffee and breakfast sandwich. “I’m never drinking again.”

“You didn’t drink that much,” Nova said before taking a bite out of her breakfast burrito.

I made a point to ignore the ache running down my neck as I asked, “How much did you drink?”

Elena rubbed her eyes, still half asleep.

“She only had two beers,” Gemma answered for her. “And she met a guy.”

I put my problems aside and focused on Elena. I set my elbow on the table then rested my chin on my palm and met Elena’s gaze. “Do tell.”

Elena focused on adding cream to her coffee.

“She even got her first kiss.” Nova beamed, like a proud big sister.

My eyebrows shot up as Elena’s face turned scarlet. “Wow.”

Elena rubbed her temple. “It might not be a big deal to you, but it is to me.”

Something inside me went still as I watched Elena. “Are you kidding? Firsts are extremely important. I still remember my first kiss. It was horrible, I had to pull away to sneeze.”

Nova and Gemma chuckled. Even Elena’s lips tweaked a bit.

“So, tell us, what happened? How was it?” I asked cheerfully.

Elena sighed. “Do I have to? I’m kind of a private person. I don’t want to be someone who shoves their personal life into someone’s face.”

Gemma eyed Elena, a bit surprised. Unsurprised, Nova took a drink of her coffee.

My stomach knotted. Something about the way she was avoiding looking at me... Was she talking about me? No, no. It was probably just sleep-deprivation paranoia. “Not if you don’t want to.”

The table fell into awkward silence while everyone ate.

Elena sighed. “Sorry, it’s just this headache.”

“Want some painkillers?” I asked as I reached for my messenger bag.

Elena gave a strained smile. “That’d be great.”

I pulled out my little bottle and handed her a couple of them, then took a couple myself before I closed my bag and let it hang on my chair.

My phone rang before I even twisted back around. It was Asher. “Shit. I’ll see you guys later.” Grabbing my bag, I got to my feet and answered as I walked away through the café. “Hey.”

“Are you alright?” Asher asked immediately. His voice was tired, almost slurred with exhaustion. “Is the bite scarred over?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. And no.” Checking had been the first thing I did this morning, along with taking my temperature. “Everything is normal so far.”

“Good.” He sighed. “Brendon has been running me through the wringer all night and will be for most of the day. I only got a chance to call because I needed to check on you.”

“Tilly told me he would run you ragged.” I pushed the door open and went outside. Then I told him what I had been thinking about all morning. “Ash, we have to tell the guys.”

The line was silent for half a minute. “I know.”

“We have that meeting this afternoon, I figure we should tell them then,” I added. My stomach rolled. Maybe coffee wasn’t such a good idea.

“I don’t know if I can make that, Ally,” Asher said. “Brendon and Tilly are having me move out of the dorm to live here for a while. They’re even talking about having me drop classes this semester.”

“If that’s what you have to do to be safe, it’s what you have to do.” I dropped my almost full coffee into the garbage and started for my first class. “I can tell the guys on my own. Hell, it might even be better if Zeke reacts the way I think he will.”

“They’re going to be really angry, Ally,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I’m cute. They’ll love me anyway,” I muttered, hoping I was right. “You, however, Zeke might hunt down.”

He huffed. “No more than I deserve.”

I took a deep breath. “It was an accident, Superman. We both got careless.”

“I know.” He sighed. “Listen, I’ll talk to the alphas and try to get them to let me come out for the meeting, but if they don’t—”

“I’ll call back and fill you in,” I promised. “Look, I gotta get to class.”

“I love you, Ally.” His warm, soft voice sent a flutter through my chest.

“Love you too.”

I WAS SITTING IN MILES’ SUV IN HIS DRIVEWAY WITH MY HANDS ON THE steering wheel. I had already been here for eight minutes. Bile seemed to settle into the back of my throat while my shoulders ached from worrying. This was not going to be fun at all. So far, everyone was inside but Asher and I, and I was running out of time to find my courage. I shook my head and took deep, slow breaths. Everything was going to be okay. Everything was going to be okay.

I had been telling myself that since I’d left my last class for the day and it was starting to irritate me. “For fuck’s sake. Grow a pair, Lexie,” I muttered under my breath as I pulled the keys from the ignition and climbed out of the vehicle. You love these guys, and they love you. It’s going to suck for a while, but it’ll be fine in the long run, I hoped.

As I reached the gate for the yard another SUV pulled up to block the driveway. The passenger side opened allowing Asher to step onto the sidewalk.

Some of the tightness in my body eased. “I thought you weren’t going to make it?”

Asher looked a bit ragged. He had bags under his eyes and wore a pair of sweats that were too big and a white shirt. He met my gaze. “Tilly and Brendon agreed that, due to the circumstances, I needed to come out for this and could be in public in a group. With some conditions.”

The driver’s door closed and a man I didn’t know stepped up onto the curb. He was a large bald man, around his forties I’d guess. Ripped jeans, a

black shirt and a leather biker vest with patches were well used. He joined us on the curb with a friendly, open smile on his face.

“Ally, this is Nolan. Nolan, this is Lexie,” Asher said. “He was one of the conditions.”

My eyebrow went up as I turned to Nolan.

He grinned down at me. “In other words, I’m his babysitter.” He reached his hand out to me. “Nice to meet ya.”

I smiled and shook his hand. Something about the energy he gave off just made you want to smile. “You too.”

He shook my hand carefully then let go. “Asher filled me in on the situation in the car. Just pretend I’m not here. Everything you guys talk about will stay here.”

“Thank you.” My shoulders relaxed even more as I turned to Asher. “He’s here to make sure you don’t go all wolfy?”

Asher nodded. “He’s Brendon’s second in charge, so he can pretty much handle anything I could do. He’ll be my shadow for at least two weeks.”

“Well, that’s good at least.” I turned toward the house, my pulse starting to pick up. “You ready for this?”

“Not at all,” he muttered as we started toward the house.

We walked into the living room together, Nolan following. The living room was welcoming, warm wood and cream paint, built in bookcases on each side of the old fireplace. The windows let more than enough light shine in on the boxes and new furniture. The guys were sitting on the two brown leather couches facing each other in front of the fireplace. It reminded me so much of Miles’ old house that it made me want to smile. Almost.

When Nolan walked in, everyone turned to us and went quiet.

Without a word I sat down in the corner directly across from Zeke while Asher took up a position behind my couch. Nolan nodded to the others with a friendly smile then moved to begin looking at the books.

Miles turned to Asher and I, frowning. “Who is this?”

“This is Nolan,” Asher announced to the already tense room. “He’s second in the pack and he’s here to babysit me.”

Isaac shifted on the sofa so he could see Asher behind us and the others. Ethan raised an eyebrow from beside Miles, and Zeke... well, Zeke went perfectly still. Not a great start.

Miles closed his laptop and set it down on the coffee table. "Why is he babysitting you?"

Asher hesitated.

My heart began to pound as I wrung my fingers together. "I... Asher and I..." Oh, I really didn't want to say it. This was going to be bad. Come on, Lexie. I took another deep breath and forced the words out. "We had an accident last night."

Zeke leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. His sky-blue eyes were starting to simmer. "What kind of accident?"

This time I hesitated.

"My wolf bit, Ally," Asher announced.

My temper tweaked a bit. Did he really say his wolf bit me? I pushed back my irritation and corrected him. "Asher bit me."

My chest grew tight as the silence stretched. No one moved. Cars didn't seem to pass on the road. No one seemed to breathe. The world just went silent.

Zeke's burning eyes met and held mine. "Are you okay?"

I thought about it then half shrugged, which made me wince. "Physically? Yeah, I'm fine, but mentally I'm still kind of processing what it means for the rest of my life."

"How much damage did he do?" Zeke asked in a barely controlled voice.

"It was just a single bite," Asher answered.

Zeke didn't take his eyes off mine as he waited for me to answer.

"It was just one bite. As soon as we realized it happened we cleaned the bite. Then Asher insisted on taking me to the pack doctor to make sure I was okay," I explained. "Doc did an exam and a few X-rays. Everything is normal."

"Show me the bite," Zeke ordered. He closed his eyes for a second before changing his tone. "Please?"

Without a word, I pulled my hair to the side and looked down at my lap.

Zeke got to his feet and lumbered over to me. His thick fingers were gentle as they pulled the tape off the gauze and lifted. I sat still, almost not breathing as he examined the wound.

I held my breath hoping he wouldn't notice.

"That's not a human bite," Zeke stated.

“No, it’s not,” I admitted. I knew he’d see it. Zeke had worked rehabilitating abused wolf hybrid dogs for adoption. He knew a wolf bite when he saw one.

Zeke carefully covered the bite and pressed the tape back into place before straightening to glare at Asher. “You shifted before biting her.”

“Just my jaw,” Asher admitted.

The tension grew almost thick enough to see.

“What the fuck, Asher?” Isaac got to his feet, his brow drawn down. “You’re supposed have control!”

“I know.” Asher didn’t take his eyes off Zeke.

Zeke moved between Asher and I, standing behind the sofa. Rage shimmered off him in waves I could practically see as he stood perfectly still. Oh shit... this really wasn’t good. When Zeke got angry, he moved. Paced, ran his hands through his hair, made fists. But he was standing perfectly still.

And he wasn’t the only one who had moved. Ethan and Isaac circled around the couch to spread out, not exactly hovering but clearly in protective mode. My heart ached. I had been afraid of this.

“How did this happen?” Miles asked, his voice was icy.

Asher sighed. “I broke several rules last night—”

“Asher.” Miles’ voice was glacial as he looked up at the werewolf. “It’s extremely important for you not to say another word for a few moments.”

My heart clenched. They were going to blame him. “We *both* made some bad decisions that led to me getting bitten last night. This is just as much my fault as his, so don’t just blame him.”

“No, we’re pretty sure it’s Asher’s fault,” Isaac said.

I sighed deeply then slid my hand into Zeke’s from behind.

His fingers squeezed mine gently once.

“Guys, I need you to sit your asses down,” I said in a tired voice.

Zeke looked down at me over his shoulder.

I met his eyes and let him see how tired I was, then I asked softly, “Please?”

That got through to Zeke. He squeezed my hand again then went back to his spot on the other couch. The twins followed, taking up their spots again. It was silent for at least a minute while the guys got their shit together.

“Okay. You got bit,” Ethan said in a matter-of-fact voice. “We’re pissed, but we’ll deal. What does this mean for you? Are you going to become a werewolf?”

“If she starts shifting we can get her a bright pink collar with rhinestones,” Isaac offered, his eyes twinkling.

I turned to him, offended. “Black leather and metal studs, bitch.”

The twins and I chuckled a little, thankful for the distraction. But I still had to answer the question.

I turned back to the others. “At the moment we don’t know if I can actually be converted. The alphas are trying to get some info on that. It’s possible nothing might happen, but until we know, it looks like I’ll either become a werewolf or it’s a mate mark.”

Zeke’s eyes settled on me again.

“And for us non-shifters that means what?” Isaac asked.

“Essentially,” I took a breath and said, “werewolf marriage.”

It was almost a full minute before anyone said anything.

“Wait, so you just bite her and she’s married to you?” Isaac looked up at Asher, confused.

“No,” Asher said quietly. “She has the choice of accepting or rejecting the mark.”

“It can be reversed?” Miles asked as his tapping fingers began to slow. “She just has to reject it?”

“Yeah,” Asher said, “but that would mean some pretty big repercussions for me.”

“Like what?” Miles’ voice grew cold again.

“My wolf will be injured for the rest of my life.” Asher’s gaze met mine. “And I’ll never be able to mark another as my mate. It’s a one-shot deal.”

My head began to pound. I tried rubbing my temple hoping it would go away. I met Asher’s rough eyes. “I honestly don’t think I could do that to you.”

Asher’s shoulders relaxed with relief.

Tension hung like dust in the air.

Ethan looked around the group. “So, we’re allowed to propose to Lexie? We’ve never talked about that.”

I shook my head, already tired of today. “No one is proposing.”

Isaac gave me an overly sympathetic look. "Sorry, Red, but that's exactly what happened."

I shot him a glare.

"Unless you reject him or shift." Isaac smirked. "Technically, you're on your honeymoon."

"Yeah, shitty honeymoon, Asher," Ethan chimed in.

"Shitty wedding too," Isaac added.

I snorted as the twins chuckled.

Miles' gaze went to Nolan at the bookcase then back to Asher. "Nolan is here to make sure you control yourself."

"Yeah," Asher answered. "I've also been moved out of the dorm to the alphas' place and dropped my classes this semester."

Zeke lifted his gaze to Asher. "Your alphas don't trust your control *that* much."

Asher's eyes were rough as he shook his head. "No, they don't. Apparently, I'm way behind in where my control should be."

"Did you know that?" Zeke asked directly. "Before you bit Lexie, did you know you didn't have as much control as you should?"

Asher met Zeke's gaze and shook his head. "I knew he was closer to the surface than he should be, but I hadn't had an issue in months so I thought he was under control."

Zeke turned back to me. His jaw clenched. "If she's your mate or shifts, we're done."

My heart clenched in my chest as my breath left me.

Zeke's gaze moved to Asher. "Understand?"

That's when it hit me. He was talking to Asher, not me.

Asher nodded.

Zeke silently got to his feet and walked out of the house, slamming the front door on his way out.

Silence once again filled the room. Zeke and Asher had been friends since they were kids. Over a decade of friendship, and it might have just gone up in smoke. It took a few minutes for everyone to process.

Heart aching I turned to Miles, not knowing what to do.

"Let's get the dating schedule worked out," Miles decided for us.

"Zeke just left," I pointed out.

Miles' face softened as he met my gaze. "I have his schedule already."

I sighed. I wasn't really in the mood, but something normal sounded great right about now. "I've managed to keep my classes to mornings every day of the week, but I'm hoping to keep dates from six to ten at night so I can still get some sleep and keep up with my homework. I have energy manipulation lessons on Tuesdays at six, but I can do something after that. Does that work for everyone?"

The guys nodded.

"If that doesn't work one night we could do lunch that day instead," Asher suggested.

"That works for me," I said, trying to focus on the conversation and not how the skin around my bite was begging to be scratched. Good sign or bad? I could probably ask Nolan. No. Not with everyone here. I pushed the thought away and focused on the now.

"I can't do Wednesdays or Fridays," Isaac said. "I'm trying to keep those days open for work."

Miles nodded.

Asher raised his hand. "I can do Wednesday night."

"I need to keep the weekend free for work," Ethan said, "but Thursday fits my classes."

Miles made a mental note as he looked down at his phone. "Zeke has Friday and Saturday nights off, so that should work for him."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Any day works really." Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "Okay, so far we have Isaac on Tuesdays. Asher on Wednesdays. Ethan Thursdays. Zeke can take Saturdays. And I'll take Sundays. Does that work for everyone?"

Everyone nodded.

Miles turned to Asher. "I've got a dinner this week that I'd like Lexie to go to. Mind if we switch this week?"

Asher shook his head.

"What about group meeting and date night?" I asked.

"Today worked," Isaac said. "We could have them in the afternoon and that way Lexie can have Sunday night to herself."

"I'd like that. No offense, guys, but I've got to do laundry sometime," I said dryly.

They chuckled.

“Let’s go out this afternoon,” Asher suggested, then he sobered and turned to Nolan. “Would that be okay?”

Nolan nodded. “Considering how exhausted you are, yeah. This time.”

“So, what are we going to do this afternoon?” Ethan asked.

I half-heartedly raised my hand. “I’ve got an idea.”

OceanofPDF.com

I snorted as Asher held his nose closed while we entered Pike Place Market. He grumbled as we moved past the big fish counter, but he almost had a grin on his face. Even Nolan cringed a little as we walked in. Poor werewolves.

“Why’d you want to come to the market?” Ethan asked as he linked my arm with his.

“Because we didn’t get to come this summer when we did orientation,” I reminded him. “Besides, Miles needs to get some groceries for his house.”

The guys chuckled.

“Only if you want them to go to waste,” Isaac muttered.

“Miles can’t cook, Beautiful,” Ethan reminded me.

Miles’ ears turned pink in front of us. “It’s true, and I’ve learned to accept it.”

“He can’t be that bad.” I tried to be supportive, but I’d seen Miles cook pancakes on a camping trip once. It wasn’t pretty.

“Oh, he can,” Ethan said.

“And he is,” Isaac added.

The guys chuckled.

“I have given up trying to cook,” Miles admitted.

“More like he’s been banned from it,” Asher sent over his shoulder.

“Well, he can’t eat out every meal,” I said.

“That’s what the meal plan at the university is for,” Miles countered, “but it would be good to have groceries for whenever you guys come over.”

With that in mind we walked through the vegetable stalls. Asher and Nolan picked out things here and there for Miles' house. Miles simply handed over his card without a word.

Ethan, with his arm around mine, stopped with me at a jewelry vendor. Out of all the guys, Ethan liked jewelry and clothes more than the others. "Let's check this place out."

I smiled as we began looking through the display cases. Ethan was checking out some small hoops for his ear when my eyes fell onto a lovely little ring. The gold was intricate, an ivy vine holding a small synthetic emerald at its center, the length of the stone running along the band between two small cubic zirconium stones. It was small and simple and I loved it. I smiled as I picked up the ring. It was the right size too. I checked the price and winced. I didn't have that kind of money for a ring, even with fake stones. I looked up and found Ethan paying for his new jewelry.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked.

I half shrugged and put the ring back. "Yeah, but it's too rich for me. You?"

"A nifty silver and onyx ring." He glanced down at the display before we walked out of the shop and all but ran into Isaac as he eyed the shop across the way. "What are you doing?"

Isaac tipped his chin up at the sign in front of a new age shop. "Ever wonder if some psychics that advertise are real?"

I thought about it. "I guess it's possible."

Ethan rolled his eyes and walked off to join the guys in one of the other stores.

Isaac turned to grin down at me. "Wanna find out if this one is?"

I snorted. "Sure."

Isaac walked into the open shop doors. The new age shop was full of goodies. Crystals large and small lined the shelves. Candles were stacked everywhere. There were even several shelves of books and labeled glass jars. I took a closer look. Rosemary, cardamon, mostly basic ingredients. There was nothing out here that would have packed a punch. Odd.

Isaac was looking at a metal goblet when a woman came in from the back carrying a book. She greeted us with a smile that faded a little when she saw us. It was only a heartbeat before it was back in full force. I quirked an eyebrow.

She kept her face pleasant as she greeted us. "Welcome to Sisterly Secrets. Is there anything specific you are looking for?"

"I was hoping to get a reading," Isaac said cheerfully.

Her smile disappeared and a chiding look crossed her face. "No, you aren't. You're here to see if I'm a fake."

Isaac grinned widely. "Guilty, and I guess my question is answered."

She sent him a warm smile before turning to me. Her gaze swept me from head to toe, making the hair on the back of my neck raise. "You, on the other hand, may need a reading."

"Why me?" I asked, curious.

She moved to a small bistro table draped with a purple cloth. "Your energies are interesting. In flux. I'm curious as to why." She sat down at the small table.

"What the hell, why not?" I sat across from her.

"People call me Iris," she said as she shuffled a stack of worn tarot cards.

"I'm Lexie," I said as Isaac moved behind me to watch.

"Interesting name," Iris replied as she set the worn deck in the middle of the small table. "Very recognizable."

My eyes shot to hers.

She gave me the tiniest of nods.

Yep, she was a witch and had heard of me. Great.

"Cut the deck three times."

I did as she asked.

She picked them up then laid down the top card. "This card represents your past." She flipped the card over. The chariot. "Hmm. You've overcome obstacles to get where you are. Faced conflict, gained power, and triumphed." Her eyes met mine.

I fought not to squirm.

"This card represents your present." She flipped the card. It was the lovers card. Iris smiled. "Love, balance and harmony." Her eyes unfocused on the card. "You're in a very good position at the moment. Happy."

"Most of the time," I admitted.

She picked up the next card a bit slower this time. "This card represents your future." She flipped over the card and set it down. It was the devil card. The blood drained from her face as her eyes grew even more unfocused. Fear filled her features. I glanced around and saw nothing that

would cause it. I turned back to her to find her eyes even wider, her breathing down to short pants.

“Um... Ma’am?” Isaac moved from behind me into her field of vision.

She jerked as if waking from a dream, lifting her trembling fingers up off the card. Iris blinked several times, clearly trying to get her bearings again. Her eyes filled as she looked around her shop and out the French glass doors to the people walking by outside.

My shoulders began to ache from the tension running through me. I watched Iris’s face. “Are you alright? Can we get you anything?”

She blinked back tears before she managed to pull herself together enough to meet my gaze. She shook her head. “You are connected to something much larger than anything I’ve seen.”

“I know,” I said, still confused. Had she seen the Veil? If so, what had scared the shit out of her so much? “It was necessary at one point.”

She nodded, her gaze growing distant once more. “It may be again.” She blinked and focused on my face. “Tough times are ahead.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Tough times are ahead?”

Iris nodded.

“You just about ran out of your own store from what you saw and you’re only going to tell me tough times are ahead?” I asked, my irritation pushing through.

She swallowed hard. “Please leave.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Isaac put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I shut my mouth, got up and pulled out my wallet. “How much?”

She scoffed. “No charge.” She refused to look at me as she said with a sincerity that made me pause, “Good luck.”

I gave her a nod then left the store with Isaac.

“What did you get off her?” I asked when we were out of ear shot.

Isaac shook his head. “She was freaking out.”

“Scared?” I asked. That’s what I’d figured.

“Terrified.”

I came to a stop and looked up at him. “Terrified?”

“Down to the bone.” Isaac looked back to the shop. “Enough to make her close up early.”

Stunned, I turned to look. He was right. The sign had been flipped to closed. The doors were shut and the lights were out. “What the hell did she see?”

Isaac shook his head. "Maybe you should come back later in the week and see if she'll tell you then."

I nodded slowly. "Good idea."

We started looking for the others amongst the chaos. Eventually I spotted Nolan and Asher's heads, taking Isaac's hand and heading in that direction.

The hair on the back of my neck rose. I looked around at the crowd. Someone was watching me. Us. Everyone went on with their business as if we didn't exist, but the feeling of eyes on me intensified. I shook my head and chalked it up to paranoia.

Only, by the time we rejoined the guys it hadn't gone away.

They were debating where to go next when Miles' hand went to my lower back. "Lexie?"

I turned back to him with a fake smile. "Yeah?"

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Did you hear Isaac?"

All the guys looked at me expectantly. Nolan was more focused on the area around us.

I cringed. "No, sorry. I was looking around."

"I asked if you wanted to go to the candy store over there?" Isaac repeated for me.

I nodded. "If that's cool with you guys?"

Everyone agreed.

We checked out the candy store, we laughed and joked around. There was something for everyone here. Even Miles picked up a couple of local treats to try. All the while, that feeling of being watched never lifted. It wasn't long before one of them noticed.

"Guys," Asher called, everyone turning back to him.

Asher pulled me into the center of the circle. His ocean eyes met mine. "What's the matter, Ally?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, it's stupid."

"Something's bothering you." Asher's eyes narrowed on me. "What is it?"

I sighed. "I feel like I'm being watched."

Nolan immediately began looking around the area for a follower.

"How long have you felt like that?" Ethan asked as he began looking around too.

I lifted one shoulder and let it drop. "Like, the last thirty minutes or so."

Isaac cursed. All the guys stepped closer to me and began looking at the crowd around us. Asher lifted his chin and took a deep breath through his nose.

“Anything?” Miles asked.

Asher shook his head. “I can’t smell anything other than fish and body odor. Nolan?”

“The same,” Nolan answered.

“Guys, it’s probably just me being paranoid,” I muttered.

“Doubt it,” Isaac said as he continued to search the crowd. “You have a pretty good radar for creeps.”

“You’ve had enough practice at it,” Ethan pointed out.

I couldn’t argue with that. Between a stalker and the witches trying to kill me, I’d had plenty of practice at being followed.

Nolan moved to Asher’s side. “Let’s get them back to the car, then we can get out of here.”

Miles’ hand went to my lower back. “Good idea.”

Everyone started moving toward the closest exit, keeping me in the middle. It was an old habit that no one even thought about anymore. A couple blocks away, the crowd finally began to thin out.

“Anything Asher? Nolan?” Miles asked as he scanned the street around us.

Asher took a big sniff. “I only smell humans.”

We were almost to the parking structure when I slowed to a stop.

There, standing between us and the garage, was a man in all black. With bronze and black scrolling tattoos down both sides of his neck.

Every one of us snapped to attention. Miles moved closer to me. Asher moved to keep me out of sight while the twins closed ranks on the right and behind me. I barely resisted rolling my eyes as I stepped out from between the guys and greeted him. “Afternoon, Templar.” Templars were the law keepers of supernatural creatures. Funded by gargoyles, the actual protectors of this world, they kept whatever city they were in safe and free of supernatural troublemakers. Or at least they had been. Some groups had gone rogue. Some had decided to do as they pleased and made a menace of themselves. The rest acted like mediators between species now. I didn’t know which way Seattle went yet.

He held his hands out to his sides as he slowly approached us. “Alexis Delaney, I presume.”

Asher moved to my side.

"How'd you know it was me?" I asked, my face as blank as a wall.

"Every Templar knows about you since the incident in Boulder." His eyes glanced towards Isaac then back to me.

I bristled. At least he wasn't looking at Isaac like he was a bug under his shoe.

"It's become *the* case to study on possession." He turned back to me.

I unclenched my jaw. "What do you want?"

His face was pleasantly blank. "A word. That's all."

I eyed him. "About?"

"An opportunity."

I raised an eyebrow.

"For you."

"You want to talk only to Lexie?" Miles asked as he pushed up his glasses.

The Templar grinned. "Yes."

"That's odd." Nolan finally drew attention to himself. "Isn't it, Perez?"

The Templar turned to Nolan. "Nolan, glad to see you're keeping an eye on your new pack member."

"Keeping tabs, are we?" Nolan countered, irritation edging his voice.

Perez shook his head. "Purely grapevine gossip."

I thought it over quickly. I could say no and probably keep being harassed until I wanted to scream or I could listen now and get it over with.

"You have five minutes."

We found a coffee shop down on the corner and followed the Templar inside. The others took a table across the room from us. Nolan went to get coffee while I sat down with my back towards them.

"What do you want?" I asked, not beating around the bush. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mitchell Perez. I'm the head Templar here in Seattle." Cool brown eyes ran over me. "And I'm here to offer you a job."

I sighed. Not again. "Why?"

Perez nodded. "From your activities since your visit to the city this summer, it's become clear that you mean to settle here."

I narrowed my gaze. "You've been watching us."

"Since a plane belonging to Huntington Industries landed here, yes," Perez confirmed. "With that name, we pay attention."

I really didn't like that.

"You mentioned a job." I began to clean under my nails with my thumbnail. "What kind of job?"

"The becoming a Templar kind," Perez said simply.

I blinked at him. Was he serious? Becoming a Templar? "Why would I become a Templar? The ones in Boulder were jerks because I'm a necro."

"For the training to take on demons and other supernaturals, for one thing," Perez stated, matter of fact. "Access to our resources. Scholarships. Not to mention the pay is nothing to laugh at."

I began to bounce my knee under the table. "You want to hire me? A Necromancer? When most Templars can't even stand normal witches."

Perez nodded. "That was Colorado. This is Seattle. We're a great deal more progressive about who we work with."

"You work with witches?"

He nodded slowly. "The local Coven, yes, when the case warrants it. I believe you've met their leader, Abby Roberts."

"And what kind of case would warrant working with a necromancer?" I asked in a low voice.

Perez sighed, suddenly looking older. "You cross the dead, right? We deal with the dead more often than you'd think."

"What kind of cases?" I wasn't about to let him sidestep my question.

"Hauntings," Perez said. "The rough ones. The kind that local priests can't handle on their own."

"What else?" I leaned back in my chair. "I mean, you can't just be handling only hauntings and possessions."

A light filled his eyes. "You're right. We handle more than that, but we wouldn't expect you to deal with anything else that involves the living, at least not at first."

That was oddly ominous and somehow reassuring all at the same time.

He leaned forward on the table. "You'd have a chance to do some real good. Help people who need your type of help."

I blinked. Help people? "How could I help people?"

A grin slipped across his face. "Moving souls on that don't want to move on. The ones that want to hurt the living."

"The dangerous ones," I surmised.

Perez met my eyes. "Yes."

“There’d be benefits for you,” Perez continued. “You’d get the best training, the best gear. Access to the best occult library in the northern hemisphere. To our experts. Health insurance and great benefits.”

“Why do you want me and not the others?” I asked.

His gaze flickered over my shoulder to the guys at the other table then back to my eyes. “You’re the one with the gifts. They’re unknowns. Well, except for your werewolf friend.”

I focused on keeping my face blank. They didn’t know about Ethan.

Perez slid a white business card across the table. “The money isn’t bad either.”

I brought the business card to me but didn’t flip it over.

“You would be providing a unique service and would be compensated as such.” Perez leaned back in his chair with a smug look on his face. “That would be your yearly salary. Starting.”

“I don’t think money is going to change my mind,” I said. “But tell me more about these cases.”

He pulled a manilla folder from his messenger bag and set it down between us. “This is one rough case that we’ve made no headway in. I think you can help.”

I didn’t open the file. There was a picture of a little boy clipped to the front. He couldn’t have been older than ten. If I opened it... Instead, I met Perez’s gaze. “How do you know it’s not a demon?”

His eyes narrowed. “The signs are all wrong. There’s no object movement, no physical damage, no voices, only an apparition appearing and the effect on the boy.”

“What effect?”

“The child is tired all the time. Exhausted,” Perez explained. “It’s at the point where he sleeps thirteen hours a day.”

“That doesn’t automatically mean a ghost,” I pointed out. “That could be something medical.”

Perez shook his head. “We’ve exhausted all medical tests. Physically, he’s perfectly healthy.”

“Depression.”

Perez shook his head again. “He’s been evaluated. The child is mentally and emotionally fine.”

That was weird. “Just exhausted all the time?”

Perez tapped the file. “Exactly.”

“Have you tried black salt? Burning sage?” My fingers itched to touch the file, my curiosity nudging me.

“All had no effect,” Perez said.

“Then why do you think it’s a ghost? That stuff should have worked,” I countered.

He eyed me with a small grin on his face. “It should have, but it didn’t.”

That was odd. “Look, I know what you guys do is important, keeping the peace and all”—I licked my lips—“but I don’t want to be a Templar. I want to be a tattoo artist.”

“We have tattoo artists,” Perez said. “We could arrange for you to have an apprenticeship with one of them.”

An apprenticeship. “I’d want to do more than just Latin scrollwork.”

“They do normal tattoo work most of the time, they just happen to do this as well.” Perez’s lips twitched. “So, there’s the pitch.”

“That’s it?” I asked, surprised.

Perez nodded. “That’s it. I’m not going to try to persuade you. You’ll either work with us or not.” Perez slipped the file out from under my fingers and began to tuck it back into his bag.

“Leave the file,” I said before I could think twice about it.

Perez’s face was neutral as he set the file back on the table. “My card is inside the folder if you decide you want to take me up on my offer or have any questions.” He rose to his feet and slipped his messenger bag over his shoulder. “It was nice to meet you, Alexis.”

I nodded my head. He turned and left the coffee shop. I ran my finger over the folder. A kid needed help.

The others came over and sat down around me.

“You heard?” I asked Asher.

Asher nodded. “And relayed the entire conversation to everyone else.”

“They want something from you,” Miles was the first to say what we were all thinking as he sat down beside me.

Ethan turned the chair around and sat in it backwards. “I can’t believe they just want you to work for them.”

“Yeah, it’s a surprise,” I muttered, still looking at the photo on the file.

Asher took the file from me then flipped it over so the photo was no longer visible. “What are you thinking, Ally?”

I kept my eyes on the table as I shrugged.

“You do remember how they treated you in Boulder?” Miles asked.

I nodded. "With suspicion and disdain. Yeah, I remember."

"Do you want to deal with that all the time?" Asher asked.

"Well, this is a different group of Templars," Isaac countered. "They did say they work with witches."

"So did the group in Boulder, but that didn't stop them from acting like she was a bomb waiting to go off," Ethan shot back.

"That's not true," Asher countered.

"Isn't it?" Ethan asked.

Asher turned to me. "Ally?"

I stopped chewing on the corner of my bottom lip and lifted my head to find them all watching me. "Hm?"

Miles met my gaze. "What are you thinking?"

I dropped my gaze back down to the tabletop and the file lying there. "I think that there is a kid out there that needs my help."

"Remember what happened the last time a kid needed your help?" Isaac asked, his voice soft.

My heart ached. The last time I helped with a haunting Isaac had been possessed by a demon. It nearly killed him, and I almost ended up possessed as well.

"That's not fair," Asher snapped.

"Let's not forget that this could turn out the same way," Ethan added.

"What happened wasn't Lexie's fault," Miles countered.

"I didn't say it was." Isaac held his hands out to his sides. "I'm just pointing out that there are a lot of unknowns with the supernatural. Things we might not be ready for."

"You can point that out without insinuating it's Lexie's fault," Miles said, his voice stern.

They were getting a little too loud. "Guys—"

"Hell, I didn't mean to insinuate that." Ethan held his hands up in surrender. "I'm sorry."

"But we are kind of new at this, and the Templars have been working with this sort of stuff for hundreds of years," Asher countered. "They would know better than we would if something is dangerous to her."

The people around us gave us looks. I tried again. "Guys—"

"Hello, Lexie isn't new at this," Isaac pointed out. "She's been dealing with it all her life."

“The dead, yeah. But not shapeshifters or witches. Well, besides Jadis,” Ethan countered. “That’s experience in only one area. And Templars deal with it all.”

“What concerns me is why they only want Lexie to work for them,” Miles reminded the group. “We were all in Boulder.”

“Yeah, what’s with that?” Asher asked.

“Same here,” Ethan muttered.

I buried my face in my hands. Nolan watched from the counter where he was waiting for his coffee.

“Excuse me.” A woman in black slacks and white blouse had come to our table. “Could you lower your voices please? Other people are using this space too.”

The guys cringed.

“We’re sorry, we’ll watch our volume from now on,” Miles said for the group.

I dropped my hands to my lap as the woman walked away. “You guys need to be a lot more careful of where we talk about these things. And at what volume.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Isaac muttered.

The rest of the guys mumbled apologies.

“Lexie, you’ve been quiet,” Miles said. “What are you thinking?”

“In all honesty,” I sighed. “If I can use this ability to help people... That’d be a nice change.”

Tense silence filled the table.

“You do help people,” Ethan pointed out.

I nodded. “Yeah, after they’re dead. It’d be nice to help the living for once.”

“So, you’re going to work for them?” Isaac asked.

I shrugged. “I’m saying I don’t know.”

“I don’t like that you’d be there without one of us,” Asher stated. “And I know Zeke would agree with me.”

“He’d be so far up your ass that it’d be hard to breathe,” Ethan pointed out.

“That’s what she said,” I muttered in unison with Isaac.

There were small chuckles and snorts around the table.

“Guys, I’m not taking the job now, or anytime soon,” I reminded them. “I just... it would be nice to be able to help the living for a change.”

The table grew quiet again.

“Let’s head back to the house,” Miles suggested.

Everyone agreed and got to our feet. We left the coffee shop and started back towards the parking garage.

“Who’s going to tell Zeke about the Templars?” Isaac asked.

I immediately placed my finger on my nose. “Not it.”

Everyone but Miles did the same, practically in unison.

We grinned at Miles as he sighed.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Miles said, resigned.

The rest of us chuckled as we went on our way.

IT WAS GETTING LATE WHEN I WAS ON MY BED TRYING TO READ THE chapters for my ancient history class. The room was quiet since Elena was at her desk doing the same for her classes.

I reread the same sentence for the fifth time. Cursing under my breath, I shut the textbook and leaned my head back with my eyes closed. The Templar’s offer kept swirling into my head. I opened my eyes and looked down at the file sitting on the corner of my desk. On top of it sat the card with my starting salary. Curiosity nagged at me. What would it hurt to just see how much they were offering? I realized where my thoughts were going, cursed again, then set my textbook on top of the folder, hiding it from sight. I already had enough on my plate to deal with.

The room door opened and closed before Gemma stormed around the corner.

I raised an eyebrow as she set her bag on her bed. “Bad day?”

She turned and dropped onto her bed to stare up at the ceiling. “I talked to John.”

Oh. “How’d it go?”

“You guys were right.” She sat up and shook her head. “He says he’s in love with me.”

I winced.

Elena turned around with a big smile. “That’s good, isn’t it? You guys can be official now.”

Gemma shook her head. “Except, I’m not interested in him like that.”

Elena’s brow drew down as she frowned. “Then, why were you sleeping with him?”

“Because he’s a good friend with a great package,” Gemma stated simply.

Elena frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“I get it,” I admitted, then turned to Elena. “Sometimes there’s a person who you physically have amazing chemistry with, but on an emotional level it’s just friendship.”

Elena gave me a look as if she didn’t believe me as she got to her feet, then she headed into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

“Amazing, explosive, forget your own name chemistry.” Gemma shifted on the bed. “You ever have that, Lexie?”

I smiled immediately as I thought about the guys. “Oooh, yeah.”

Gemma chuckled then quickly sobered. “I had to call it off.”

“That sucks,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Gemma shook her head. “I couldn’t leave him on the hook. He deserves better than that.”

“And you’re not a shitty person,” I pointed out.

Gemma sighed. “So, how are things with Asher now?”

I half shrugged. “We had a development that’s complicated life for a while and I’m still processing it.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Are you pregnant?”

I scowled at her. “No way in hell.”

Gemma sighed with exaggerated relief. “Oh good, I was not ready to become an aunty.”

I snorted.

The bathroom door slammed open making both Gemma and I jump.

Elena strode into the room, steam practically shooting from her ears. “Lexie, you can’t leave your towel on the floor!” She threw a blue and white striped towel onto my bed. “You’re not the only one living here, and I shouldn’t have to clean up after you!”

I ignored the towel and eyed her. Her face was pale, her eyes a little glassy.

“Um, that’s mine,” Gemma admitted, getting to her feet and picking the towel up off my comforter.

Elena turned to Gemma, her eyes wide. “Oh.” All the air seemed to leave her as she blinked at Gemma. Elena went to her desk and sat back down. “Sorry.”

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked.

She sighed. “Yeah, just, this dang headache is getting worse. I just took some painkillers again so it should be better soon.”

“Have you been drinking water today?” I shared a look with Gemma. What in the hell was that reaction to a towel?

Elena nodded. “And had one of those electrolyte drinks. Nothing helped.”

Gemma frowned. “That’s not good. Have you eaten today?”

Elena rested her forehead in her palm. “A little, my stomach is feeling off.”

I turned in my chair and hit the button on my always full electric kettle then leaned down and opened the left bottom drawer of my desk where my kit supplies were hidden. I pulled out the bullion concentrate that I used whenever the dead got pushy and I couldn’t eat. It wasn’t long before Elena was sipping a steaming cup of chicken broth with a cold washcloth draped across the back of her neck.

Elena cautiously took a sip then waited. She relaxed and took another. “Oh, that’s good.” Her eyes, still slightly glassy, met mine. “Why do you have this?”

“I have a seizure disorder that makes it difficult to eat sometimes. That’s my ‘I’ve been sick and can’t do solid food’ stash.” I fell back on the old lie easily.

Elena gave me a lukewarm smile before taking another sip.

Gemma turned to me. “I didn’t know you had a seizure disorder. Why didn’t you tell us?”

I half shrugged. “I’m on a drug therapy that’s working amazingly well and haven’t had one in”—I tried to remember the last time the dead made me ill—“over a year and a half, I think.”

“Go meds.” Gemma grinned before turning back to Elena. “You, on the other hand, might be allergic to alcohol. Or you’ve caught something.”

Elena groaned and felt her forehead with the inside of her wrist. “I can’t be getting sick. It’s the first week of college.”

I twisted a little back and forth in my chair. “Yeah, but it’s the best week to be sick if you have to get sick.”

Elena set her now empty mug on her desk and lay down on her side. “I feel cruddy.”

I got up, grabbed the fuzzy throw blanket on the end of her bed and draped it over her. “You officially have permission to skip reading tonight

and to sleep in tomorrow.”

Elena’s eyes were already closing as she nodded.

Gemma went to Elena’s small bulletin board and took something off it. “She’s got the same English class tomorrow as I do, same teacher just a different time. I’ll bring her a copy of my notes.”

I leaned forward and looked at Elena’s class schedule. “I’m taking the same art history class. I’ll bring her a syllabus and tell the instructor she’s sick.”

Soon enough we were both on our own beds slugging through the first week of college reading assignments.

Eventually, I got ready for bed and snuggled down with my cell phone. I hadn’t heard from Zeke since this afternoon. It wasn’t anything new. If shit hit the fan, this was his typical response. Shut down, close up and figure out how to deal.

Lexie: I know you’re dealing with this situation as best you can. Just wanted to tell you good night, and I love you. I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk.

I hit send. It wasn’t long before his little dots dropped below the message. He began texting back.

Tough Guy: Go to bed. You haven’t been sleeping well.

I smiled to myself. Yeah, that was Zeke’s version of ‘I love you too.’ I plugged my phone into my charger and closed my eyes.



Zeke
Late that night

MY HEART POUNDED IN MY CHEST AS I FOCUSED ON THE CEILING WHILE taking deep, slow breaths. A round of group laughter came through the wall again. I gritted my teeth as I grew even more tense. Who the fuck in the housing department thought it was a good idea to put someone with PTSD in the room right next to the fucking common room? I moved to my stomach and slammed my pillow over my head to try and drown out the noise. It didn’t work. Nothing was going to work, and noise canceling headphones weren’t an option.

I flipped to my back. Bang! I jerked upright and scanned the room. Nothing. It was coming from the other side of the wall. Bang! I jumped again, my nerves shot. My hand shook as I surged to my feet and began to pace in what little room I had between my bed and the desk. This was not going to fucking work. I needed to get some fucking sleep! I eyed my bathroom. Maybe... I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. Another round of laughter went up in the common room, but it didn't make me jump this time. My shoulders relaxed a fraction. Okay, in the bathroom. Fine.

I walked back out into my bedroom and removed the security stick from the door, took my blanket and pillow, and stomped into the small bathroom. There wasn't much floor space but... I sighed. The tub was going to have to do. It wouldn't be the first time I'd slept sitting up. I dumped my pillows and blanket in the tub, closed the door and put the security bar in place. Satisfied that it would hold, I folded myself into the tub. With my knees raised and my head against the wall, it could almost be comfortable. I left the light on and closed my eyes.

Asher's face popped into my head. I shook it and tried to keep my mind blank. It didn't work. A heartbeat later Asher was again looking at me as if I'd gutted him. The fucker had bit Lexie without her consent. I shifted in the tub trying to find a sweet spot. He may have just forced her into a marriage she might not want. Why the fuck did I feel guilty for drawing the line at what I found unacceptable? He wasn't honest with us, and it hurt Lexie. That I couldn't forgive. He was still looking at me in shock. I sighed. I needed to fucking sleep.

My phone vibrated on the side of the tub. It was Lexie.

Baby: I know you're dealing with this situation as best as you can. Just wanted to tell you goodnight and I love you. I'll be here when you're ready to talk.

The corner of my lips twitched as I texted her back.

Zeke: Go to bed. You haven't been sleeping well.

I dropped my phone to my chest, laid my head back and hoped for sleep.

TUESDAY

Asher

The sun was just rising when I slowed to a walk as I came out of the woods in front of the alpha's house. The morning fog was just beginning to rise off the grass. The morning dew clung to my legs as I moved through the parking area. Panting, I wiped the sweat off my face and headed toward the porch. Damn, I needed a shower.

Brendon was already sitting in one of the deck chairs with a mug of steaming coffee in his hand and another on the small table next to him.

I slowed a little more to get my breath back faster. What was this about now?

"You've been running for several hours," Brendon said.

I shrugged as I climbed the stairs to the porch. "Needed to work something off."

"Sit down, Asher," Brendon ordered when I tried to walk into the house.

I mentally cursed, then took the seat next to his. The wood creaked under my weight in the silence of dawn. When he didn't say anything, I sighed. "Can you say whatever it is you want to say so I can go take a shower?"

His eyes narrowed on me. "You're angry with me."

"I've had a rough couple of days," I admitted.

“Tell me what has you running for four hours before dawn?” he asked. “And while you’re at it, tell me why you’re angry with me.”

I shook my head and looked out at the fog rising from the gravel. “You made me leave college. Move out of the dorms and move in here, and now I can’t go anywhere without a chaperone.”

He watched me, waiting.

“You just made me upend my life. Again,” I said, frustration simmering under the surface.

Brendon’s gaze took in my face, then he tilted his head to the side a little. “To protect humans from you, yes. And I won’t apologize for that.”

A growl reverberated deep in my chest. “I’m not a danger to anyone.”

“Tell that to the back of Lexie’s neck,” he countered.

All that frustration disappeared in a flash, leaving me deflated. “It was one time.”

“One time is all it takes,” he said, his voice soft and serious.

I turned to look at him. “I’d never hurt her.”

“You already did,” Brendon reminded me.

I couldn’t argue against that.

“One time is all it took for my brother, Jonah, to murder his girlfriend in the heat of the moment.”

It was like dumping a bucket of ice water over my head. I turned to him. “What?”

Brendon’s gaze was unfocused on the woods. “My brother and I were both turned during an attack while hiking. We were taken in by the local pack and began learning how to control ourselves.” Brendon’s gaze focused and met mine. “He was impatient. He wanted to get back to his old life and girlfriend. The problem was, he was hurrying so much that he wasn’t doing what he needed to do, only what he needed for the semblance of control.”

My heart sank. “What happened?”

“He snuck out one night to meet her. They’d been together for years, promised to be married. Highschool sweethearts, the whole fairytale.” Brendon looked back out at the woods. “He snapped her neck in the same position you and Lexie were in.”

I didn’t say anything, and he didn’t expect me to it seemed.

“He didn’t realize at first that she was gone, so he kept going.” Brendon shook his head then turned back to me. “It was only a minute before he realized he’d killed her. He cradled her in his arms.”

“What happened to him?” I asked quietly, not really wanting to know.

Brendon’s eyes grew shadowed. “He called me and told me what happened. I went out to get him. He was so broken by then...” He swallowed hard. “I put a silver bullet in his head at his request.”

Holy shit. Stunned, I looked out at the woods.

“It would have happened anyway,” Brendon explained. “He knew he’d be executed—it’s pack law—he just didn’t want her to have to wait too long for him to join her.”

Fuck. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“The point is that you can’t force control to grow at your pace. Not without disaster,” he explained before taking a drink out of his mug.

I thought about what he’d said, and he was right. Besides, I wasn’t really pissed at him. I was angry with myself. “I was rough with Ally. During sex.”

Brendon set his mug down on his arm rest. “And that wasn’t your usual before you were bitten?”

I looked down at the porch and shook my head. “I bruised her hips by holding her too hard.”

Brendon nodded. “There’s a need in male werewolves to dominate their partners. It’s part of our species.”

I shook my head. “I’ve never been that way before.”

He took a sip of coffee. “How did she feel about it?”

My face burned as I remembered the way her body clenched me and bathed me with warmth inside her. “She... she didn’t seem to mind.”

He set his mug down. “Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t like being rough with women.” I shook my head. Wasn’t it obvious?

Brendon nodded. “Some werewolves get into BDSM to satisfy the need in a safer environment. Others play dominance games. You’re going to have to figure out what you’re looking for and find a way to incorporate it safely.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t like being rough with the girl I’m with.”

“I didn’t say you had to be. There are alternatives,” he countered. “Now, think. What was it you wanted from her while you two were being physical?”

Hating this, I sat back in the chair and looked out at the forest. What was I trying to get out of her when I held her too tight? My wolf shoved forward with an answer. I shoved him back down without looking too close at it.

“There.” Brendon pointed at me. “What just happened?”

I shook my head. “My wolf thought he had the answer and I shoved him back.”

“The wolf is you, Asher,” he stated. “You’re answering yourself. What were you going to say?”

I sighed and let my wolf come back up. I shook my head.

“Asher?”

“Submission,” I muttered with distaste. “I wanted her to give me everything. Everything she is or will ever be. I wanted her to be mine,” I bit out. “But she’s not mine. She’s ours. She’s with the others, too.”

“That, I believe, is a two-part answer.” Brendon relaxed in his chair. “And I believe you just discovered why you bit Lexie.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I picked up the coffee mug and took a sip.

“During sex did you ask her to say anything? Do anything out of character for you?” he asked.

I nodded. “I... I wouldn’t enter her until she met my eyes. And I...” I swallowed hard. “I made her ask to come.”

Brendon nodded. “Dominance and submission dynamics. That’s what will help keep her safe during intimacy. Now, the second part.” He met my gaze. “You want her for yourself, so you as a wolf bit her to get that outcome. Do you think, now that she’s been bitten and is possibly your mate, your wife, that she may choose to be with only you?”

Hope rose in my chest. It was twisted up with other emotions I didn’t really want to look at. I tried to hide it, but from the look on Brendon’s face, I hadn’t.

“And that is why you bit her,” Brendon stated. “That is why you aren’t safe around her.”

“This isn’t her fault.” I shook my head. “I should be better, I should be stronger than this.”

Brendon met my eyes. “You should be honest with yourself and accept you are the wolf. Until you do, you’ll be living here.”

Son of a... I sat and watched the sun rise slowly over the mountains while running around in circles in my head. I wanted Ally to myself. That wasn't up for debate. "Do you think she'll pick me if we're mates?"

He set his mug down on the arm of his chair. "That is something you should ask her."

I sighed. I really should, but... "I don't want my friends miserable."

"I get that," he said. "I don't envy your situation."

I shook my head. "I don't know what the hell to do anymore."

"Go with Nolan and ask her, tonight, so you know where you stand," he said. "You can finally figure out if you can handle a polyandry situation as a werewolf or not."

"What if nothing changes?" I asked.

He finished his sip of coffee before answering. "If you two are still together, we'll talk in more detail about dominance and submission games." He met my gaze. "They won't hurt her at all and are completely consensual, but you need to know which way this is going to go."

I let out a deep breath, got to my feet and headed inside with my mind racing.



Lexie

I SHIFTED IN MY CHAIR AS I CHECKED THE TIME ON MY PHONE. THE WOMAN I was meeting was fifteen minutes late. Hell, I didn't even know who I was meeting. I looked around the small café. It was a cute little place with comfy chairs and a warm atmosphere that begged you to sit and stay awhile. It radiated calm and peace from the décor to the cute design on the mugs. The scent of brewed coffee hung heavy in the air. I was going to have to bring Miles here, it was just the kind of hidey hole place he'd love. I began going through my emails while getting more and more ready to leave. I was about to say screw it when a woman sat down in the sofa kitty corner to my chair and set her black leather briefcase on the coffee table. Her dark hair was in many small braids which were tied back in a French

twist. She had the striking cheekbones of a model. Her dark gray eyes met mine. "Sorry I'm late. I was on the phone with a client who would just not get the hint that the call was over."

I blinked at her. The woman was perfectly put together. Her thin shoulders were accented by a tailored black blazer, slacks and white silk blouse. She practically bled poise and sophistication.

She raised a perfectly plucked brow. "You're Lexie, right? I'm Laila. Or did I just sit across from the wrong redhead?"

I shook my head. "Is there something about being a werewolf that makes all of you gorgeous?"

She chuckled, her white teeth flashing as she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I think there is, but whatever it is, it's subtle as heck and happens over time."

"Really?"

She nodded as she settled into the sofa and took a sip out of her to-go cup. "It didn't happen right away but one morning, like a year after conversion, I woke up and noticed my face was slightly different."

"That's creepy as hell." I shook my head.

"Oh, it was. So..." She eyed me. "You're the human the new pack member is dating."

"Yeah." I narrowed my eyes at her. "What's the pack gossip about us?"

She made a point to look down at the lid of her cup. "Oh... just the usual gossip you hear when a human is dating a pack member."

"Which is?" I asked, not letting it go.

"I wasn't going to start off on this topic, but..." She sighed. "Being a human in a wolf pack isn't easy."

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "Rank and status. There are always wolves wanting to move up in the pack and lately there has been several challenges that frankly just piss me off."

"Challenges?" I asked.

She nodded. "As a wolf it's how you rise in rank among the pack. Basically, a challenge is issued and they fight it out until one of them yields, falls unconscious, or dies."

"Damn." I stirred the coffee in my cup. "Sounds pretty cut-throat."

"Usually, it doesn't come to that," she assured me. "Brendon and Tilly keep it to a yield or knock out."

I winced. "Still, ouch."

"The leaders protect the weaker members of the pack," she explained. "A weak leader means a weak pack."

That made sense, I guess, but still. "That doesn't sound like something anyone would want to belong to."

"I'm sorry, I'm going about this all wrong. A pack is like a family. We have the same problems as one. The personality clashes that happen can cause fireworks that are pretty spectacular." She sighed deeply then met my eyes. "It isn't always easy or peachy, but the good definitely outweighs the bad when it comes to our pack."

"Really?"

She nodded. "The pack has my back. Even when I was human and only dating Ember they had my back. They'll bring you soup when you're sick, they'll defend you to outsiders, and they'll fight to the death for you. For the most part, they've supported and encouraged me more than anyone in my life besides Ember."

Having a pack sounded wonderful, but there were always downsides. "You never did say what the gossip was about Asher and I."

She shifted on the sofa while sighing. "There are some wolves that believe that we weaken the pack when we're human. They believe that if you become mated as a human you should be converted immediately to eliminate the chance of weakening the pack."

I bit back a grin. "So, they think I'm weak?"

"Only a small number in the pack," Laila explained. "They don't respect the right of others to make their own decisions."

"Sounds like a bunch of assholes," I muttered.

"Some of them are," she admitted before taking a drink. "Then there are the challenges."

"What happens if I'm challenged as a human?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"You'll have to fight," she said.

"I'd have to fight a werewolf," I said out loud just so it would sink in.

"Tilly and Brendon manage to skew it so it's mostly fair," she explained. "No claws or weapons, no shifting. It helps but it's not great." She met my gaze. "How's it going with Asher?"

My hand automatically went to the back of my neck, my fingertips running over the bandage. "He's not doing as well as we thought."

Her eyes stayed on my neck while she tilted her head to see the white of the bandage. "Tilly didn't tell me much about what was going on. Do you want to talk about it?" she asked gently. "I mean, I know I'm a stranger, but it's not like you can really talk about it with normal girls your age."

Something about Laila... warmth and sincerity seemed to radiate from her. "We got physical, more than we should have, and he bit me."

She nodded, her face carefully blank. "That's not too uncommon. It's how I was converted."

My heart sank. "It was?"

She nodded. Her voice softened. "Yeah, back when we were just starting to date. She'd been werewolf since an accident when she was a kid. She wasn't a newbie when we got together but she still lost control." She gave me a warm smile. "I was converted."

I asked the first thing that came to mind. "Do you regret it?"

She thought about it. "At first, I did. I was angry and I had to go through that. But eventually..." She smiled a genuine smile. "I've come to enjoy being a werewolf. The speed, strength, it's given me a confidence that I wouldn't have had otherwise."

I nodded. "I know how personal this is. Thank you for sharing with me."

She grinned. "It's okay, you need to know what to expect when you do convert."

I leaned back into my chair. "Oh, I'm not planning on converting. Not if I get a choice."

Her brow drew down as she frowned a little. "You might not get the choice if you keep dating a werewolf."

"That's a lot to think about. Right now, even thinking about leaving him..." My heart clenched painfully even thinking about it. I looked down at my lap. "I don't think I can do it."

"I get that," she said softly. "You need to decide if you will be alright as a werewolf or not."

"I have so much to think about and I'm still in the 'did this really happen' stage." I shook my head. "I try to think it out and I just go blank."

"Take your time," she said. "You'll find the answer."

I met her gaze. "Thanks. I really appreciate this."

She pulled out a small notepad and pen, scribbling down a number before tearing it out and handing it to me. "This is my number. Any

questions about anything, call me.”

I took it gratefully. “Thanks.”

She grinned. “Now, tell me about this poly situation that everyone is gossiping about. How does that work?”

I chuckled as we changed the subject.

THAT EVENING, I WAS CHEWING MY THUMBNAIL AT ABBY’S DINER WHILE running in circles in my head.

Camille walked in wearing another sleek pantsuit, gray this time.

I got to my feet and mentally shook off all the other worries of the day. I needed to focus on the here and now.

She gestured for me to come with her. I hurried to follow her into the back of the restaurant. She led me through the small bustling kitchen, past the walk-in fridge, the storeroom and through a door at the very back of the restaurant.

The room was completely empty. The cinder block walls were bare, as was the cement floor. Well, bare except for the warding symbols painted in white on almost every surface and the large pentagram in the middle of the floor. The scent of fresh paint hit my nose.

Camille shut the door behind us. “Good, you didn’t bring that animal today.”

I turned on her, bristling. “That man means a great deal to me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Apparently, if you’re willing risk your life dating a werewolf.” She strode through the room to the pentagram. “Sit down in the circle.”

Biting back my irritation, I sat down and took a calming breath. “So, you’re not going to teach me in your usual practice space?”

Camille’s eyebrow shot up. “How’d you know this isn’t our usual space?”

I looked around the room then back to her. “You’d never put something that important, or that warded, in an area as unprotected as a diner. Plus, I can smell the fresh paint.”

“Of course I’m not going to show you the heart of our Coven. This will suffice.” Camille sat across from me, her feet crossed under her, our knees almost touching. “Abby filled me in on where you’re at in your studies and skills. We can pick up where you left off with your last teacher.”

“Okay.” I shifted until I was comfortable.

“Now, where do you work magic?” she asked.

“In my grounded state,” I answered automatically.

She nodded. “What happens when you pull energy from a stone or from around you?”

I pulled a ping-pong ball sized quartz orb out of my pocket. “I allow a little energy in, my channels and my brain turn it into my energy, then my will controls what I do with it.”

“Exactly.” Her eyes glanced down at the small orb. “Quartz?”

“I used to use carnelian, but since I blew that stone I haven’t been able to find another,” I explained.

The lines around her mouth tightened a little. “Carnelian?”

I nodded.

“Hmm.” Her face remained serene as she continued. “Alright, these exercises are going to be about fine tuning your control and visualization. I imagine it will take you several months to get through them all to my satisfaction.”

Okay... “Should be fun.”

“Your lessons aren’t about fun, Lexie,” she said, her voice hard. “It’s about having more options than blowing a stone and killing everyone.”

There was nothing I could say to that. She was right. I was here to learn, and I would learn.

Camille continued. “What is a crystal orb for?”

“Storing energy for use later. It’s a portable, easy access battery,” I answered.

She nodded. “Good. Now, find your grounded state.”

I let out a slow breath and closed my eyes. I’d had enough practice finding my center without needing much time. When I was at that place that was me, right before dropping into my memories, I held myself in that spot. “Here.”

“Good,” she said, her voice serene. “Now, pull energy from the crystal.”

I cracked my barriers a little, a trickle of energy poured through me. A warm calm stream that was relaxing in an odd way. “Done.”

“Now, you’re going to create little lights in the air between us,” she said. “Picture fireflies at night, that’s what I want you to create.”

“How many?” I asked without opening my eyes.

“Fifty.”

I opened one eye.

Her face was serious.

I closed my eye again. Creating something from nothing was easy for me now, but making fifty of them at once? “Okay.” I held my hand out palm up and pictured one firefly. That tingle of energy ran down my arm to my fingertips. There was a slight pop feeling in the air in front of me, telling me I’d done it. Then I pictured another firefly. There was another pop as my first disappeared.

“You have to maintain the image of the first firefly while creating the second,” Camille instructed, “hence the challenge.”

Crap. I knew that. Okay. I changed the picture in my head to two fireflies buzzing over my hand. I pictured how their wings would bat, the way they glowed, how they would move.

“Good,” Camille said. “Only forty-eight more to go.”

Keeping my breathing deep and slow, I pictured another firefly bursting to life beside the others. It took time. A lot longer than I thought it would. By the time I finally managed the fiftieth firefly, I was panting for breath after using magic for so long.

“Good,” Camille said.

I let the picture drop from my mind and opened my eyes. Sweat dampened my forehead as Camille smiled at me.

“Think you’re done?” she asked. “Do it again. And faster.”

Fuck me.

“ZEKE, I KNOW YOU’RE WORKING THROUGH STUFF... JUST CALL ME WHEN you get this” I sighed into my phone. “I’m worried about you.”

Exhausted, I hung up before I reached the door to Isaac’s residence hall. A guy came out the door. I caught it before it closed and hurried through. It wasn’t long before I was knocking on his door.

Isaac opened the door with a smile. A smile that quickly faded as he took in my face. “What’s wrong?”

I shrugged. “Just tired.”

He opened the door further. “Was your lesson that bad?”

I walked into his relatively clean room. The two beds were against the walls, their desks close to the door. It was a little cramped, like every college dorm room. “Not bad, just tiring.”

He ran his eyes over me as he shut the door. "Want to watch a movie and hang out for tonight?"

I smiled. Damn, he really was sweet. "Throw some cuddles in and you have a deal."

It wasn't long before we were cuddled up on his bed with his laptop facing us on his desk. I didn't even care what movie was on, all that mattered was that I was in Isaac's arms and listening to him tell me about his day.

I listened to the rumble of his voice from his chest. Felt the warmth of his body against mine. Calm and peace moved through me. My eyes closed.

"Red?"

"Hmm?" I nuzzled against his shirt.

"Are you asleep?" he whispered, his lips brushing over my hair.

"No?" I forced my eyes open. The movie was over. All I could remember were the opening credits.

"Liar," he teased.

I looked up at him. "I'm sorry. That lesson took a lot out of me, and I'm not sleeping for shit."

He shifted out from under me to lay on his side facing me. "Tell me about it."

My hand went to his chest, absently plucking at his shirt. "Well, she started with irritating me, then made me work hard on creating fifty fireflies. Then once I managed it the first time, I did it again and again."

His hand moved to my hip and squeezed gently. "That's all you did in your lesson? The same thing over and over?"

I nodded. "Yeah, she wants me to practice working on multiple levels at once. Like using two hands at the same time to play the piano. I can already do it to a point, but she wants me to be an expert at it or something."

His eyes softened. "And you're not sleeping because of the bite, right?"

I nodded. "More from worrying about the rest of you and how it'll affect all of us. And well, those nightmares."

"Are you doing okay with it?"

I sighed. "I'm trying not to be mad at Asher."

He raised an eyebrow. "How's that working for ya?"

I snorted.

He smirked and dropped his eyebrow. "If you're mad at him, be mad at him. You can't push that shit down and not have it affect your relationship."

“I’ve been trying not to think too hard about it,” I muttered. “It’s a big change either way, and I think I’m fed up with big changes lately.”

“No. Don’t say that.” Isaac closed his eyes grimacing. “You so totally just jinxed us.”

I thought about what I said and groaned, burying my face against his shoulder. “Fuck, I did! We’re so screwed!”

We both chuckled. I lifted my head and met his gaze.

“How were classes today?” he asked softly.

I smiled. “They were good. Lots of reading. And my art lab should be fun...”

His eyes went to my lips.

My heart thumped in my chest. I closed the distance between us. His lips parted, his tongue stroking mine. Everything else fell away as he pulled me closer against him. Heat flooded my veins as I met him stroke for stroke. His hand left sparks as it moved down my hip to cup my butt. I moaned at the feel of him pressing into my lower stomach. His fingers squeezed mine. My stomach flipped as hunger rose. I lifted my leg and wrapped it around his hip, pressing my core against his rigid length. He inhaled through his nose before his lips pulled from mine only to trail down my cheek to my neck. I tilted my head back to give him better access. His hand moved up my side to the hem of my shirt. Fingers brushed the skin of my ribs. His lips reached my collarbone. I moaned softly.

The door to the room opened.

Isaac quickly pulled my shirt back down as I lifted my head to find a very surprised guy in the doorway.

“Oh, no. Sorry. Didn’t know,” he said before going out the door and shutting it behind him.

Isaac cursed under his breath as he lifted his head and met my gaze. “I should have locked the fucking door.”

“He has a key,” I reminded him.

Isaac shook his head. “Red, I’m not kidding. That guy is always around and scared of me.”

“He’s your roommate.” I smiled up at him.

Isaac sighed. “I’m starting to think Miles had the right idea.”

“Which one?”

“About not living in the dorms,” he grumbled as he rolled to his back. “We’d have our privacy then.”

I rested my hand on his chest. "It's not just this, is it?"

He met my gaze.

"Something else is bugging you."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You know me too well."

I smiled. "Spill it."

His fingers began stroking the back of my hand. "This place is different."

I squeezed his fingers.

He looked up at the ceiling. "I thought having a roommate that wasn't Ethan would be better, but it's not."

"You miss him?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess," he muttered. "I haven't seen him today. It's weird. He's always been there. Every day."

"Not so weird," I said softly. "You're twins. You've been together since before you were born. It's going to take some time to get used to not having him there all the time."

He muttered under his breath.

I tried not to smile again. "What was that?"

"Nothing," he said as he met my gaze. "So, any news if Asher marked you or converted you?"

I sighed. "The bite's not healed over yet, but..."

Isaac's eyes were patient. "But?"

I sighed, going boneless in his bed. "I've got a big feeling it'll be the former. With my luck."

Isaac sighed. "Well, on the bright side, being mated is still better than being a shifter."

I met his gaze. "Yeah, but being mated is going to affect every relationship I have."

He raised his shoulder and dropped it. "Nah, not that much."

"I'd be werewolf married," I reminded him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring pop still in its wrapper. "Would you rather be completely human married?"

My heart slammed in my chest as he looked at me with warm eyes. The world stopped. "What?"

"Marry me, Red."

I couldn't move. I didn't even understand how I could still be breathing. Isaac.... Marriage.... Proposal... I gaped at him for a solid minute. At least,

until I saw the sparkle in his eyes. “You fucker.”

He burst out laughing as relief poured through me leaving me shaking.

“You’re an asshole!” I tore the pillow out from under his head and slammed it into his hysterical face. I hit him with the pillow several more times before climbing over him and getting off the bed.

He pulled it off his face, tears glinting at the corner of his eyes as he sat up. “Y–you so should have seen your face!”

I shoved my feet into my sandals and shot him a glare which just made him crack up even more. I put my hands on my hips as I waited for him to be done.

“I’m sorry, Red,” he tried between breaths and laughs, “but damn!”

“I’m going back to my dorm.” I glared at him, then reached out and snagged the ring pop out of his hand. “And I’m taking the ring pop with me!” I strode out of the room leaving Isaac to continue cracking up.

By the time I reached the first floor I was smiling to myself. The ring pop was cherry flavored and made me feel better. I crossed the lobby by the large common area when a shiver ran down my spine. I slowed as I looked around. There. Sitting at one of the tables was a guy. Loose wavy blonde hair, angled jaw and sapphire eyes that watched me as I walked towards the door. Something about him nagged at me. Something familiar, I just couldn’t put my finger on it. I reached the door and walked out of the building, knowing his eyes were still on me.

THE REST OF MY WALK WAS BORING, AT LEAST UNTIL I REACHED MY residence hall. Outside, in mesh shorts and a white tank, was Asher. Nolan was sitting on a bench next to him. Something inside my chest shifted and settled. I gave him a small smile as he started towards me. The wind shifted, pulling a few strands of my hair from my braid.

Asher stopped walking. He growled deep in his chest as I reached him.

“What’s wrong?” I tilted my head back to meet his eyes. That silver vein was back. His wolf side was close to the surface.

“You smell like Isaac,” he stated, clearly not happy about it.

“Well, yeah. We just had our date for the week,” I pointed out.

A strange energy moved over Asher as he stepped closer. He began to sniff me, starting with my hair before moving down to my face. Already tired, I stayed perfectly still since this was clearly a wolf thing, but it was

kind of starting to get on my nerves, especially when he moved down my collarbone to sniff between my breasts over my shirt.

“Ash!” I hissed as people walked by, staring at us. “We’re in public.”

Asher took another long sniff, snorted, then straightened to his full height. “You didn’t have sex with him.”

My temper snapped. I focused on keeping my voice low. “That’s what the sniffing thing was about?”

He met my gaze, his voice deeper than usual. “You’re mine, Ally.”

A warm shiver ran down my spine to settle between my thighs. I did my best to ignore it as I reminded him, “I’m not *only* yours.”

The silver in his eyes grew, his shoulders tensed. “Maybe you should be.”

My already racing heartbeat kicked into overdrive. “Do you really want to talk about this right now?”

“I think I need to,” he said, a bit uncertain.

I looked up at him. “You agreed to this arrangement, Asher.”

“I know, but my wolf...” His eyes were rough. “He didn’t, and he’s struggling with it right now.”

I sighed then stepped closer. “I talked to Tilly. She explained everything to me.”

He pulled himself to stand a little taller.

“You and the wolf are the same person. The wolf does what you really want to, deep down inside, and unless you accept it and deal with your issues you’re going to struggle.” I took a slow deep breath and let it out again before adding, “So, how are you going to deal with it?”

“It might not be possible for my wolf—” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before meeting mine again. “For *me*, to be in a polyandry relationship right now.”

My heart ached. I took a steadying breath. Asher might be right. It might be best if he walked away for a while. “That’s going to suck.”

“A mate bond is a huge thing. Life altering.” Asher stepped closer again. “It means things need to change, but they’ll adjust.”

I raised an eyebrow. Um... were we not on the same page? I made a point to keep my voice neutral. “They?”

“I don’t want to hurt the guys, but...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s just going to take time for them to heal.”

My temper sparked. I focused on keeping calm. “Asher, if you can’t be in a polyandry relationship then you’re the one who needs to walk away, not me.”

“Ally, if you aren’t a wolf—” His eyes narrowed at me. “I’ll be your mate. It’s an actual bond with repercussions. It’s marriage. It’s forever.”

“Asher, you bit me without my consent.” I fought to keep my anger from my voice. “Now, I’ll admit I fucked up too, I got carried away, but I’m not going to change my entire life just because you won’t deal with your shit.”

“We have to deal with that side of me, Ally,” he bit out between his teeth. “We have to keep ... me... stable.”

My anger rose hard and fast. “This is not a problem that *I* can fix. The wolf is you. You are the same person. Your instincts, your urges, your issues. You wouldn’t have bit me if you didn’t, *you, the human*, didn’t want me only for yourself. And since you aren’t dealing with your shit, you bit me.”

He stepped closer until he was all but pressed against me. “Yeah, he... I, I want a girlfriend that’s only mine sometimes.”

“Yeah? And I don’t want to be in a marriage I’m not ready for.” A hard weight settled in my chest as I met his eyes again. “Let me make this extremely clear for you,” I said, my voice hard and low. “This is not a ‘we’ problem. It’s a ‘you’ problem. There is nothing I can do to fix it. There’s nothing anyone else can do to fix it. *You* have to fix it.”

His eyes began to shift to wolf again.

“I love you. I do. I’ll work with you to a point, but mated or not, your issues are not going to dictate my life for me.”

He stood there, stunned.

All my energy left me. “I love you, but good night.”

I turned away from him and headed into the residence hall, exhausted.

Back in my bathroom I carefully pulled the bandage off the bite mark. It was still fresh and angry. I cleaned it and rebandaged it. Twenty-four more hours till we knew.



Asher

I WATCHED ALLY WALK INTO THE DORMS AND LET THE DOOR CLOSE BEHIND her. Stunned, I didn't move.

Nolan got to his feet and strolled over to my side to watch Ally climb the stairs through the glass doors. "I like that one. She's got backbone."

I shook my head as I turned and walked back towards the car. When we were alone and out of earshot I said, "I thought she understood what a mate bond was."

"I think she does." Nolan shot me a half grin as we reached the car. "That doesn't mean she's going to throw all of her plans for her life away because of it."

We got in the car and headed for the interstate.

"If I marked her, I'd have to change my life too. I'm willing to make those changes," I said, still trying to process what Ally had said.

"Yeah, but how much would your life actually change?" Nolan asked as we started up the on ramp. "You'll be going to back to the school you planned to go to, you'd still be in a relationship with the same girl, only you'd have her all to yourself. She, however, would have to break her own heart by breaking up with your friends. Break their hearts, and basically from what I saw the other day, lose four rather important people in her life."

I turned and looked at him.

Nolan glanced at me. "All because you want to avoid dealing with difficult emotions."

Is that what I was asking her to do? I rubbed the back of my neck.

"It's easy to ask someone else to do all the sacrificing when you aren't the one that's going to be hurting," Nolan added.

Son of a... I dropped my head back against the seat rest. "I'm the biggest asshole on the planet, aren't I?"

"Yep," was Nolan's only reply. The rest of the ride was silent.



Zeke

I SIGHED DEEPLY AND CURSED A LONG BLUE STREAK. I NEEDED TO GET SOME sleep. Tonight had been the same as last night, those fuckers in the common room making a commotion, hitting a plastic ball on the wall over and over. Now, even when it was silent, I couldn't get close to sleep.

I needed help. "Fuck." I snagged my phone off the side of the tub and texted for back up.

Zeke: I need a favor. No questions.

Blue Hair: Zeke asking for help? Has the world ended and no one told me?

I growled. The little fucker...

Blue Hair: I got ya. What do you need?

I sighed as I texted back, hating every letter.

Zeke: Crash here tonight.

It was almost a minute before he answered.

Blue Hair: I'll be there on the next train.

The tension in my shoulders relaxed. I closed my eyes and rested my head back against the cold tile. He'd know as soon as he saw me how bad it was. He better not make any fucking jokes or I'd hang him out the damn window by his ankles.

I wasn't even close to sleep when there was a knock on the door. I climbed out of the tub, unlocked the bathroom door, unhooked the security bar, then dropped my bedding on the bed before opening the door to the hall.

Isaac took one look at me, worry lining his forehead. "Zeke?"

I stepped back into the small room and let him in.

Isaac came in and shut the door behind him before eyeing me more closely. "Your aura is shit, man."

"Funny, I feel like it," I muttered before gesturing to the bed. "Take the bed, I'll crash in the tub."

He scowled. "The hell you will. Red would kick my ass if I let you do that."

I went to say something but Isaac shook his head.

"No. Go sleep in the bed, I'll be sitting with my back against the hallway door," he said.

The tension inside me eased. I hesitated. I should really be the one on the floor.

Isaac met my gaze before I could protest. “Go to bed or I’ll call Lexie and she’ll be the one yelling at you.”

I sighed in defeat then went to the bed. Exhausted, I dropped to my stomach like a boulder. Hell, something even cracked in the bed. Isaac would watch the door... He’d keep me safe. Trusting Isaac, I sank into sleep like a rock. My last memory was of my blanket being draped over me.



Lexie

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN, A WHITE WALL IN FRONT OF ME, HEART TRYING leap from my chest. The dorm room was still dark. Every instinct I had was shouting at me. What had woken me up? Breathing behind me. Ragged breathing. I looked over my shoulder and went still.

Elena was standing beside my bed. Her eyes were barely open to slits. Her skin was pale and clammy, the neckline of her white cotton nightgown soaked with sweat. She looked like she had the worst cold imaginable. Slowly, I pushed back my covers and sat up. Her head moved, her eyes tracking me as if she were awake. Heart pounding, I pushed back the urge to wake her up.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught movement. Nova pushed back her covers, her worried gaze on Elena.

“Elena?” I said softly.

Her lips moved but no sound came out.

I got to my feet slowly.

“Is she sleep walking?” Nova got out of bed and stood behind Elena.

“I don’t know,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Did she say she sleepwalks?”

Nova eyed Elena but shook her head. “Didn’t mention it to me.”

“Me either.” I got a little closer. Burnt sugar filled my nose. “Elena, it’s time to go back to bed.”

“Elena, bedtime,” Nova said, her voice firmer. “Let’s go.”

Elena shuffled her feet as she turned around. Nova reached out and guided her back to bed then tucked her in.

“That was strange,” I muttered as I sat back down on my bed.

Nova’s face was worried as she went back to bed. “Yeah, it was.”

I tried to put it out of my head as I lay down and pulled my covers over me. I watched Elena’s bed from mine, then scooted backwards until my back was against the wall. My nerves settled. Eventually I drifted off a little.

OceanofPDF.com

WEDNESDAY

Weary, I wiped my towel down the steamy mirror and caught sight of my face. Bags hung under my eyes and I was starting to look pale, even for me. Another night, the same nightmare, only this time I remembered it. Running. I had been running through the woods. The muck dragging my legs down with each step. Something had been hunting me, calling my name, taunting me. Telling me to invite it in. Darkness had crossed the world and blacking out the sun like an impenetrable fog as I fought through the woods. I took a deep steadying breath. Then the bodies started showing up along my path. I shuddered as the images filled my mind again. Asher, Zeke, Miles, the twins... all dead and bloody. Mutilated, the scent of blood so thick in the air I could taste it. And that sweet voice continued calling for me, enticing me, tempting me to call out. Just one word and it'd find me.

I took another deep breath to steady myself. Where the hell had that dream come from? I'd been hunted before by Jadis. Wouldn't I have had that dream then and not now?

I used my towel to wipe my mouth and looked back to the mirror. This time I turned to the right so I could see my neck. No scar. It wouldn't be too long before we knew if I was going to be a shifter or mated.

I sighed as I opened the door and began braiding my hair. I was coming out of the bathroom when Elena tried to get up. Frankly, she looked like crap. Her hands shook as she pushed her blankets away, her hair oily and her skin was paler than yesterday. And I wasn't the only one to notice.

“Elena, are you feeling okay?” Gemma asked as she finished pulling on her shirt for the day.

“I don’t feel right,” Elena muttered as she tried to get to her feet but got distracted by something on the ceiling. She blinked quickly then stood.

Worry ate at me. “You should probably go to the med center. See a doc or something.”

“I’m fine,” she bit out before going into the bathroom. “I don’t need *your* help.” She all but slammed the door behind her.

My eyebrows went up as I turned to the others. “Who else thinks she needs to go to a doctor?”

“Yeah, she needs to go,” Nova replied while watching the bathroom door.

“We’ll take her to the walk-in clinic,” Gemma said, worry filling her voice, “but I think you better go before she gets out.”

“Text me when you find out what’s up.” I grabbed my bag and headed out the door before Elena could come back out.

AFTER MY MORNING CLASS I WAS HEADING BACK TO THE DORM TO PICK UP A notebook for my next class when my phone beeped.

Gemma: The doctor said Elena probably has a bad cold and should stay in the dorm. We tucked her in and headed off to our classes. I should warn you, she was muttering about you being the devil when we put her to bed. So, heads up.

That sucked. As I crossed the residence hall lobby a girl caught my eye. She was pale, the bags under her eyes were thick. Her clothing stained. But what had me stopping was the way she was staring intently at the paint on the wall in the stairwell.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pausing on the landing.

“The music needs to stop,” the girl muttered as her gaze moved to the ceiling.

I raised an eyebrow. There was no music playing. “Umm...”

She turned her head towards me, her eyes unfocused. “Shh. They’ll hear you and we’ll all be in for it.”

Okay... that wasn’t good. “What’s your name?”

The girl blinked hard at me several times. Her eyes focused. “Kat.”

“Okay, Kat,” I said, keeping my voice soft, “are you feeling okay?”

She turned her head and looked at the wall. She drew down her brow and eyed it again. “No, no, that’s too loud. They’ll hear. They’ll find us and they’ll hurt us.”

Okay, totally out of my realm of expertise. “Kat.”

She turned back and struggled to focus on me.

“They aren’t going to find you here,” I said gently. “This is a blind spot. Stay right here and you’ll be safe. I’m going to go get someone who will protect you.”

She thought about it really hard, then nodded.

I hurried up the stairs to the second floor and all but pounded on the resident advisor’s door.

A guy in his early twenties opened the door, scowling down at me. He had a diamond face with tight brown curls sticking out every direction. “You know, not everyone takes morning classes. We kind of design it that way.”

“There’s a girl on the landing between the first and second floor who is talking to the wall, hearing it respond, and hiding from someone she says is going to hurt her,” I stated simply while looking up at him.

He sighed as he slipped his feet into a pair of flip flops and grabbed his keys. “Fucking drugs. Every year.” He closed his door and followed me down the stairs. “Who is it?”

“Some girl named Kat,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Sunny,” he muttered as we reached the landing.

Kat was exactly where I left her, huddled in the corner. Her eyes were unfocused again, as if she were listening to something none of us could hear.

I knelt down beside her. Burnt sugar tickled my nose as she turned to focus on me. “Kat, this is Sunny.”

Kat looked up and blinked hard at the RA.

“He is here to protect you,” I said in a calm voice.

Sunny began eyeing Kat.

Kat’s face changed. It was like the sun coming out from behind clouds she was smiling so bright. “You’re here.”

“Uh, yeah,” Sunny said, uncertainly.

“We’re going to keep you safe.” I shifted a little on my knee.

Kat relaxed against the wall, the tension melting from her.

“We need to take her to the emergency room.” He turned to me. “I’ll need you to come with us.”

“Why?”

“She’s out of it. We don’t know if something happened to her or if someone drugged her,” he said emphatically. “I don’t want to get blamed later for something I didn’t do.”

That was reasonable. I nodded then turned back to Kat. “Okay, Kat. We’re going somewhere even more safe for you.”

Her eyes got bigger as she began nodding. “Yes, yes, please.”

I reached out my hand. “Okay, let’s get up and we’ll head there now.”

She slid her hand into mine and allowed me to pull her to her feet. She clung to my hand as we started down the stairs. Sunny took up her other side as we headed out the doors. Something was off. I held her hand a little tighter as I tried to pinpoint what was bothering me. I focused on it as we walked to the emergency room. It wasn’t something obvious, but it was pulling at me. I still hadn’t figured it out the by the time we walked her into the waiting area.

I took her to sit in a chair while Sunny went straight to the desk. I could hear him talking to the receptionist in the empty waiting room. The words possibly attacked or drugged were mentioned. We weren’t sitting long. The receptionist herself got up and led us through the doors. She personally walked us to an empty gurney.

“Try to see if she has any ID in her pockets,” she said before closing the curtain.

I turned to Kat. “Hon, do you have your wallet with you?”

She looked at me as if I had three heads.

I pulled out my wallet and held it up. “Something like this?”

She stared at me blankly for a little longer before turning to stare down at the pillow. Her fingers ran over it. “Soft.”

Yeah, there was no way I was going to try to check her pockets for an ID. I tucked my wallet back in my pocket and sat down next to Sunny.

“What do you think she’s on?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I have no clue, but she doesn’t look like the sort to do drugs.”

Sunny scoffed. “Trust me, anyone can be the type. Preps, jocks, hipsters. As long as you have the cash it doesn’t matter.”

He had a point. “But it’s daytime.”

Sunny shook his head, still watching Kat pet the pillow. “Could be a long trip from last night, or it doesn’t matter to her.”

I eyed him. “You’ve seen a lot of these?”

Sunny’s eyes narrowed as he watched Kat. “Not this, but people just as out of it, yeah.”

The partition was pushed aside by a man in dark blue scrubs. “Alrighty, who do we have here?”

“All I’ve gotten is that her name is Kat,” I answered, “and she doesn’t seem to understand what’s going on.”

The doctor nodded as he watched Kat. She began to smile and coo at the pillow as if it were a cat. “Tell me what happened.”

We explained quickly what we knew, which wasn’t much.

The doctor nodded. “We’re going to need blood tests to see if she’s on anything, then we’ll go from there.”

He ducked out of the area.

It wasn’t long before someone came to get Kat’s blood.

After the first time Kat shrugged off the nurse, I got to my feet and went to her side. “Kat?”

Kat blinked up at me. “Hide, he’ll get you too.”

“Kat, this lady needs to take your blood,” I said gently. “It’s so we can find out how the bad guys are finding you. We’ll be able to make them go away.”

Kat watched me as if she didn’t quite believe me but then gave her arm to the nurse. Once the needle pierced her skin, all hell broke loose.

BY THE TIME I LEFT THE HOSPITAL IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON AND I HAD several fingerprint bruises around my wrist. Kat had become violent. The staff ended up restraining her until they got the results back from the lab. Nothing Sunny and I did could calm her down after that, though I kept trying.

Thankfully, they put a rush on it. When they knew it was safe they sedated her. She practically dropped like a rock.

I rubbed the tension in my neck as I started back towards the university.

“At least she’s going to get some help,” Sunny said as he kept pace with me.

I nodded. “I just hope no one hurt her while she was so messed up.”

He grunted his agreement.

We had just reached campus when my phone rang. It was a number I didn't recognize.

"Hello," I answered.

"Lexie, I got your number from Asher," Brendon's voice said in my ear. "I've heard back from Cerberus."

I gave Sunny a strained smile. "Thanks for helping with Kat, but I've got to take this."

"See ya around." He started back across campus.

I waited until he was out of earshot. "Okay, what did you find out?"

"He won't talk to me," Brendon said, irritation coloring his voice.

I blinked. "He won't talk to you? Was the price too high?"

"He won't deal with me, Lexie," he said. "You're the one who needs the information so he will only deal with you."

My heart sank a little. "That doesn't sound good."

"He wants to meet with you today," he said, clearly not liking it. "Then he'll tell you what the price for the information will be."

"Is this how he normally does business?" I asked carefully.

"No. It's not." Brendon sighed. "Look, Cerberus knew your name, which I sure as hell didn't use. From what I know, getting his attention is rarely a good thing."

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "Sorcerers get their power from demons. They make deals, trap them, even enslave them. It's why they're so strong and one of the reasons they are so rare."

My stomach knotted as I walked down the path. "Demons? He works with demons?"

"Yeah. And you can probably imagine the kind of things they want in exchange for power," Brendon said.

Having met a demon... yeah. I did.

"Look, if you still want the information I'll take you and make sure you get out of there safely," he said, "but honestly, I don't think it's a smart move."

I tucked a stray curl behind my ear as I thought about it. Did I really need the information so badly that I'd deal with someone like that? I listened to my gut. "No. No way. If he already knows who I am and plays games like that, no. I'm not going to deal with someone like that."

“Good call,” he said. “How’s the bite?”

I ducked into By George, being around three it wasn’t that busy. “As of this morning, no scar.”

“Well, you have a few hours left before you hit seventy-two hours,” he said. “I’ve got to go. Stay safe.”

“You too,” I muttered before I hung up, picked up a couple of sandwiches and ordered some hot soup to go. Elena probably hadn’t eaten much today.

When I quietly slipped into the dorm room I stopped in my tracks. The scent of burnt sugar practically coated my nostrils. What the hell was that? What kind of perfume was going around campus? I walked into the room. Elena was on her side facing the wall, her breathing deep and steady. I set the soup and one of the sandwiches on the desk next to her bed, grabbed some of my things, then slipped out again without a word. Since I wasn’t her favorite person it was probably the only way she’d eat what I’d brought.

I settled into the common room and opened my art history text while starting on my own sandwich.

I was halfway through my sandwich when a chill ran down my neck. I kept my eyes on my book as the ghost girl from the hallway walked into the common room.

“And of course there’s someone in here.” She stood over me and glared. “Get out, meat bag. This is my space.”

Without lifting my head I glanced around the room. It was empty. Luckily. Before I could say anything, the girl sank to the floor in front of me, tears pouring down her face. “Please. Please. I just want to be alone.”

I lifted my head and met her eyes. “I can see you.”

Her eyes grew wide.

“And hear you,” I added. “If you really want me to go, I’ll give you your space.”

Her eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “You can see me.”

I nodded. “I’m Lexie.”

She smiled, tears still trailing down her face. “Candice.”

I gave her a soft smile. “Why are you still here, Candice?”

She wiped her nose and took a deep breath. It always struck me as odd that dead people still took deep breaths when upset. I focused on the dead girl.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I hate people. I never even wanted to come to this stupid college, and I sure as hell don’t want to spend eternity here.”

I eyed her. If she hated it, why would she be stuck here? “Do you have any unfinished business?”

She thought about it. “Not really. I just want to be alone out in the woods, but I’m stuck here.”

I tilted my head to the side. “What happened to you?”

“A bitch from our dorm spiked my drink with something at a party here in the common room.” She huffed. “Rachel didn’t realize I had a heart condition. I had a heart attack in here and everyone was too wasted to notice.”

I winced. Talk about fucked up. “Do you know what happened to Rachel?”

“No,” she muttered.

“Do you want to know?” I asked.

She was suddenly interested. “Yeah, actually.”

I pulled out my laptop and turned it on in my lap. “Full name.”

“Rachel Martin,” Candice said.

I did a search for her name and the college. “What year did she graduate?”

“’89”

I found three in Seattle. Luckily, they had pictures. “What did she look like?”

“Blonde, perky bitch,” Candice said dryly.

That only matched one of them. I pulled up the article and turned the laptop toward her. “This her?”

Her eyes grew wide as she nodded. She got to her knees and began reading the article. “Holy crap.”

“What?”

Candice sat back down on her heels, stunned. “She’s a drug educator now. She’s been working with a non-profit since the year I died.”

I turned the computer back around and skimmed the rest of the article. “She’s also the coordinator for their college’s Candice Burgeon outreach program.” I met Candice’s gaze. “Sounds like she’s been trying to make up for it ever since.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t make up for it.”

“I know,” I said softly. “She killed you, even if it was an accident. Does it help at all to know that she regretted it? That she spent her life trying to make up for it?”

Candice thought about it, then nodded. A small smile came to her lips before she met my eyes. “Thanks.” Her body began to fade.

“Enjoy the woods, Candice,” I whispered before she disappeared completely. Once she was gone I put my laptop away and pulled out my sketchbook of the dead. I hadn’t helped someone cross like that in a long time. I turned to a blank page and pulled out the pastels I always carried with me and began Candice Burgeon’s entry.

I had just finished when my phone rang. It was Asher.

“Hey,” I answered as I wiped my hands on my jeans, smearing colors together.

“I’m outside your hall,” he said. “It’s time to check your neck.”

My stomach knotted. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

I packed up my stuff and headed downstairs.

Asher was pacing outside under one of the trees as it began to sprinkle. Nolan was sitting on a bench nearby, giving us at least the illusion of privacy. Asher’s head lifted when I came out the door.

His eyes met mine. “I’m an asshole.”

I stopped walking. “What?”

He began to rub the back of his neck. “I was an asshole last night.”

I moved closer so people walking by couldn’t hear us.

“I’ve been so fixated on fixing my environment to avoid issues that...” He met my eyes. “That I forgot that those changes should only affect me and not everyone else.”

“Which means?” I asked softly.

He looked down at the ground between our feet. “I shouldn’t have expected you to leave the poly for me just because I’m having issues with it.”

I half shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly in the best mood last night either. I kind of snapped.”

He shook his head. “All you did was hit me over the head with the truth. And I needed it. I’m the wolf. I need to accept it.”

I stepped closer and wrapped my arms around his neck. He pulled me against him and buried his nose against my neck. Warmth surrounded me,

filling my lungs with cinnamon and vanilla. I closed my eyes and was just glad he was there.

It was a while before he pressed a soft kiss just below my earlobe. “I need to check your bite, Ally girl.”

I sighed as I slid my hands down to his waist and lowered my forehead to his chest so he could look at the wound.

His fingers were gentle as they moved my hair out of the way and pulled the tape up. He stopped breathing. The bandage crumpled in his hand.

I closed my eyes, already knowing what he was going to say.

“It’s scarred over. It’s a mate mark,” he whispered.

I sighed deeply, taking him into my lungs.

“We need to talk about what this means.” His fingers gently traced the new scar on my neck.

I lifted my head and met those rough ocean eyes. “It all depends on whether or not you think you can deal with being in a poly.”

He held my gaze. “Reject me, Ally.”

My heart dropped as I went still. “What?”

“It doesn’t matter if I think I can handle the poly or not. I marked you without your permission. I tried to tie you to me for the rest of our lives and you didn’t get a say,” he began, his voice tight. “I’m the one who messed up. I should be the one to pay the price, not you.”

“Superman, it was an accident,” I reminded him. “We both messed up.”

He shook his head. “No, honey, this is on me. Reject me and we’ll go on as we were. Nothing will change.”

“Except it’ll cripple you as a werewolf,” I pointed out.

“It’s what I deserve,” he stated. “Hell, if you had any sense you’d do what Zeke did and just walk away from me.”

My heart sank. “You guys haven’t talked yet?”

Asher looked over my head. “No, he’s probably blocked me by now.”

“He just needs time,” I said.

Asher shook his head and looked down at me. “No, not this time. He said if you were my mate we would be done, and he meant it. He doesn’t change his mind.”

“Asher...”

He slipped out of my hands as he took a step back. “Reject me, Ally. He’ll start talking to me, and you won’t be mated. It’s a win-win for

everyone.”

“Except you,” I countered.

He shrugged. “That’s an outcome I can live with.” He turned and started towards the parking lot. Nolan got to his feet and followed quietly.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and sighed. Anger simmered through me just under the surface. I pulled out my phone and texted Miles.

Lexie: Do you know where Zeke is?

It wasn’t long until I got an answer.

Miles: He’s here, in the garage unpacking his tools.

Lexie: Thanks.

I tucked my phone into my pocket and started for Miles’ house.

ZEKE WAS EXACTLY WHERE MILES SAID HE’D BE. HE WAS MOVING HIS TALL, beat-up metal toolboxes into place. Cardboard boxes were strewn here and there.

He looked up as I stepped through the big garage door only to drip onto the cement floor.

His brow furrowed. “You’re soaked.”

I half shrugged. “It was only sprinkling when I left, but it really started coming down when I crossed the bridge.” I stopped by the stack of boxes in the middle of the dim garage. “I’ve given you as much space to deal with this as I could, but time’s up.”

Zeke stood there, silent as a statue.

“When are you going to talk to Asher again?” I asked.

Zeke’s shoulders tensed as he picked up a box and set it on the built-in workbench without answering.

“Zeke,” I said in a hard voice.

He turned back to me. “Did the bite scar over?”

I took a deep breath and let it out before I nodded.

Zeke cursed then went back to unpacking the boxes.

“You’re angry. I get it. I’m still a bit pissed too,” I admitted. “But not talking to Asher—”

“I told him what would happen if he marked you,” he bit out as he set some parts down harder than necessary, “and that’s between Asher and me.”

“You can’t just throw Asher out of your life.” My heart clenched. “He’s been one of your best friends since you were all little kids.”

He stopped unpacking the box. He turned around, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the bench. "He lied. Not only did you get hurt because of it, you're mated to him because of it."

"That's why you're pissed? Because he lied?" I snapped. "Not because what we did was reckless, not because it could have been much worse? Just that he lied?"

"It was a big lie. He lied to us, he lied to you, and now your having a choice taken away."

I sighed deeply, at a loss. Zeke wasn't fighting with me. He always fought with me. But now, he was simply stating facts. I lost the steam I had built up on the walk over. "I haven't accepted his mark yet."

Those sky-blue eyes met mine. "You will."

I tilted my head to the side. "Am I that predictable?"

"You wouldn't do anything that could hurt someone you love, especially if there's something you can do to stop it," he said in that soft, gruff voice he only used with me.

Okay, he had a point. "I might not be able to avoid it this time."

He grew still, his eyes on me. "What do you mean?"

I moved to stand next to him at the workbench, then hauled myself up to sit on it. When I opened my mouth it all spilled out. Everything I was doing my best not to think about. "I'm not ready for this. To be someone's mate." I looked down at my feet dangling over the cement floor as my eyes began to burn. "It's too big. It's too permanent. It's... fuck, it's for my entire life."

Zeke kept silent.

"We're not even twenty. How the hell am I supposed to know if we'll want to be together even five years from now. And he's a werewolf. Tilly says all human mates get converted eventually." I looked up and saw the hard lines of his face. "I'm sorry, I know you don't want to hear about my relationships with the other guys, I'm just... it's kind of hitting me now that this is real."

"Ignore me," he said as he pulled out his handkerchief and began wiping the grease off his hands. "Talk it out."

I stared at the wall across the garage without really seeing it. "I'm already a necro, do I really want to deal with being a werewolf too? Not to mention, I'm pretty sure Asher wants kids. I'm still on the fucking fence about that and usually leaning towards no. At least biologically. And we've never discussed it. If I don't accept, Asher won't ever have a mate, but we

could also make each other miserable if I say yes. It's not like marriage where you can get a divorce if it doesn't work out." I shook my head. "The cons just seem to outweigh the pros." Exhausted, I wrapped my arm around Zeke's and rested my cheek on his shoulder. Warmth radiated off him and pushed back the chill.

He turned his head and pressed his nose into my hair. "You're scared."

"Terrified. This is a big, for the rest of our lives, decision," I muttered. "I don't know what to do, tough guy."

His breath moved through my hair. "Trust your instincts, Baby."

I sighed deeply.

"Got an answer?" he asked, his hand moving over mine.

With a heavy heart, I nodded. "You know, he told me to reject him today."

He lifted his face from my hair. "He did?"

"He doesn't want me to pay for his mistake, and he wants you talking to him again." I kept my cheek on his shoulder while lifting my chin so I could see his face. "I think you were a big part of that request."

Zeke eyes unfocused as he grunted an answer.

"Don't throw away one of your best friends, Zeke." I sat up straight, still holding on to his arm. "That's not you. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you do."

He looked down at the floor and grunted again.

I leaned forward and kissed him gently on the cheek before hopping down and starting towards the house.



Zeke

I WATCHED LEXIE DISAPPEAR INTO THE HOUSE. WHY WAS SHE ALWAYS right? Ever since the family meeting I've been shut down. From feeling, thinking. But now... Rage coursed through me, making my hands clench and my heart race. Lexie was right. Again.

I closed the garage, got on my motorcycle, and headed out of town. The whole ride to the alpha house my anger simmered. Lexie was right, I couldn't just cut Asher off, but fucking hell! He couldn't pull this shit with Lexie. Rain splattered against me, soaking me to the bone by the time I pulled off the road onto the dirt drive.

I revved the engine as I raced up the drive then skidded to a stop. Asher was already stepping off the porch into the rain by the time I turned off the bike.

"You didn't need to rev the engine. I heard you a mile out," Asher said as rain soaked his shirt.

I got off the bike, dropped my helmet onto the handlebar and started towards him.

Asher shook his head. "Zeke, I—"

I clocked him hard with a right hook. He staggered away from me, cursing as he turned back to me, his eyes lightening with his wolf. "You don't want to do this."

"No, but you fucking need it," I growled back.

He bared his teeth at me and charged. He hit me like a wrecking ball. I hit the mud with a splat, then I used our momentum to shove him over my head. He hit the mud hard and slid as I moved to my feet. My heart pounded in my ears. Adrenaline burned through my veins.

He moved back towards me and swung for an upper cut. I barely moved back in time. Still, I felt the wind as he missed my chin by millimeters. But I didn't see the next one. Blood filled my mouth as I staggered back, my jaw throbbing. Asher stepped towards me. I changed direction and grabbed his chest, shoving him back with my calf hooked around his. We dropped like a rock. I quickly pressed my thick forearm against his windpipe and began to apply pressure. Asher's hands automatically went to my forearm. I brought my other fist down across his face. He spit the blood out and glared up at me, but he didn't move. It was all he could do to struggle to breathe.

"You took away her choice," I growled between my teeth as I stopped applying weight and just held him in place.

"I didn't mean to!" he choked out.

Rage coursed through me. "You have to do better."

He blinked up at me then stopped struggling completely.

I moved off of him to sit in the mud and bleed.

He sat up slowly, still watching me. "I hate myself for it."

I wiped the blood from the corner of my mouth and met his gaze. "You should."

Asher swallowed hard and looked down at the mud growing between us. "I told her to reject me."

"I know."

He met my gaze.

"That's the only reason I'm even here," I said in a gruff voice. "You lied to us about your control, Asher. And she got hurt because of it."

He scoffed as he looked down at the mud again. "I lied to myself."

The rain pattered off our heads and shoulders, washing some of the filth away.

Asher shook his head. "And... I can't be her mate if the cost is you."

I growled as I fought not to hit him again. I hated this shit. "It's not."

Asher met my gaze.

I shook my head. "You're my brother, you jackass."

Asher's eyes grew glassy. "Always."

"But if you ever fucking take a choice away from her again, I won't stop," I growled deep in my chest.

He nodded. "And I'll let you."

We fell into silence.

"Now that that is resolved, will you two get your butts out of the mud and rain?" a woman shouted from the covered porch.

I snorted. We were both covered in mud and soaked to the skin. Shit...

Lexie

I walked into Miles' house and closed the door behind me. "I'm here."
"Upstairs in my office," Miles' called back.

I slipped off my sandals then followed his voice. I stuck my head through open doors on the second floor only to find him in the third room. My eyebrows shot up as I took in his new setup. Four large computer monitors hung on the wall, his desk right below them. A computer tower I'd never seen before sat on the right side of the desk near his mousepad. His eyes were focused on one of the screens with a live video feed of a man in his fifties.

"Let's transfer the balance to her account," Miles said.

I leaned against the door jamb as the roar of Zeke's motorcycle headed down the road.

"Will do. She'll be well taken care of," the man's voice said through speakers hung on the wall.

Miles shook his head. "You'll have to continually remind my mother that the money in those accounts is for her living expenses and not to fund research or charities. The company has departments specifically for that to make the biggest impact."

"It's still hard to believe she emptied that account," the man said.

“Drug research is expensive.” Miles sighed. “Thanks for running as go between and taking the job.”

The man nodded. “That’s what you hired me to do. Have a good night.” The accountant disconnected, leaving the window blank.

Miles leaned back in his black gamer chair then turned to me. “Sorry about that, an issue came up.”

“Your mother drained an account?” I asked, surprised.

His face was tired as he nodded. “She took her part of my father’s estate and spent it all to create a pharmaceutical company.”

My eyebrows shot up. That... that had to have been millions...maybe more. I didn’t exactly know how much his father’s company was worth. “Holy shit.”

“She decided that the money could do some good in the world instead of sitting in a bank, but she failed to think of her own finances before using all of it.” He pushed his rimless glasses up his nose. “So, I’m giving her enough money that she will be taken care of and hired an accountant to monitor her spending habits to prevent her from doing this again. Any large spending has to go through him first.”

“She’s probably not going to like that,” I said.

Miles met my gaze. “I had to make it clear to her that this was a one-time bail out.”

I gave him an understanding smile. That had to have been a shitty conversation. “So, fun week?”

“It’s been eventful.” He gave me a half grin. “How about you? How are you doing?”

Before I could over think it, I pushed off the door and moved to him, sliding into his lap.

He opened his arms, giving me room to rest against his chest as I hooked my knees over the arm of the chair. His arms wrapped around me and settled my body more comfortably against him. The scent of wintergreen filled my lungs. That feeling of home settled inside me as my mind began to slow down.

He rested his cheek against my forehead. “That bad?”

I listened to the beat of his heart. “The bite has scarred over. I have a dormmate that hates me. Zeke and Asher are being idiots. The demon-summoning sorcerer who runs the supernatural market in town, knows who

I am. And I just got back from taking a girl who seems to have lost her marbles to the hospital.”

His breath ran through my hair. “That is a busy week.”

“And it’s not even over yet,” I said with forced cheer.

“Let’s start with the demon-summoning sorcerer,” Miles said, his brain already working. “When did that happen?”

“Today,” I muttered as I closed my eyes. “One of Asher’s alphas was trying to get information about necros being able to become werewolf. This sorcerer guy knew my name even though Brendon didn’t use it.”

Miles began tapping his fingers on my thigh. “And he summons demons?”

“Yep.”

“That’s concerning,” Miles said carefully. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said. “He wanted to meet me in person to make a deal for the information. I turned down the offer.”

“How long ago did you turn down the offer?” he asked, his voice curious.

“Before I called you to ask about Zeke.” I opened my eyes and looked up at him. “You think he’ll pull something?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Depends on his intentions.” His eyes narrowed on me. “The more urgent question is, why are you soaking wet?”

“It started raining harder while I was walking over.” I grinned. “Can I borrow some clothes?”

Frowning, his hand moved from my hip down to the skin of my thigh. “You need more than just clothes, Angel. Did you forget we have that dinner tonight?”

My heart stopped. “The fancy one with your uncle?”

He grinned. “Yes.”

I groaned as I dropped my head to his shoulder. “I didn’t even remember to get a dress.”

He chuckled.

I peeked up at him to see if he was angry.

He smiled down at me. “After Asher bit you I knew you’d have a rough week so I hired a stylist to pick out your dress. I even had her buy the makeup you’d need.”

I frowned at that. “How’d she know my coloring?”

“I showed her a picture.”

I sighed.

"I would really appreciate the back up," he admitted.

"You need me, I'm there," I said. "That's all I needed to know."

Miles lifted me up with him as he got out of his chair.

I squeaked at the suddenness. He ignored it as he carried me out into the hall.

"You need to warm up then get ready," he said as he carried me into the room directly by the top of the stairs. It was clearly his bedroom. Warm cream walls, a burgundy bedspread. That was all I could see before Miles walked me into the bathroom. The walls were a shade of powder blue tiles set in a herringbone pattern. The floor was simple white tile. He set me down beside the deep freestanding tub.

"Take a bath and I'll leave those things on my bed for you," he said as he straightened to his full height. "All of your usual stuff is here on the ledge next to the tub."

I went up onto my toes and kissed him sweetly before dropping back flat to my feet.

"If you drop your clothes down the laundry chute I'll put them in the dryer," he said before leaving the bathroom and closing the door behind him. Smiling to myself, I started the tub. I quickly stripped off my soaked clothes, squeezing out as much water as I could before dropping everything down the laundry chute.

It was difficult, but I managed not to stay in the tub overly long. I really wanted to, though.

When I was done, I wrapped the fluffy white towel around me and left the bathroom. Miles' room was cozy, but nothing like his old house. The windows had gray shades that were pulled down, making the room dark. A chestnut platform bed with built in nightstands sat against the wall with the bathroom. A lamp glowed, filling the room with warm light. Three windows pushed out on the other wall, creating a cozy niche.

And there, on the bed, was a black dress. I lifted it by the small shoulder straps and eyed the deep v neck and back. It didn't look like much on its own but knowing Miles it was probably designer. I sighed then began to get ready.

I kept my make up light and natural, adding a little more eyeliner. I slipped the dress on. Holy fuck. The silky fabric slid down my skin like water. The deep v showed the space between my breasts. The hemline was

just at my knees, with enough fabric in the skirt to not be binding. I smiled. Miles knew me too well. The dress was amazing, showing off my curves to a level I was comfortable with and not a bit more. I eyed my hair. The thick, curly copper mass was frizz-free from the products Miles always bought me. It was long again, to the middle of my back. I grinned. Fuck it. It looked good on its own and I was loving this look.

I was still grinning in the mirror over the dress when there was a knock on the bedroom door. "Come on in, Miles."

The door opened and Miles stepped in. My heart slammed in my chest as my brand-new panties became damp. Miles was in an elegant black suit. Armani or some other designer, I bet, but whoever made it? Dear god..... It fit his frame like it was made for him, which, given Miles, it almost certainly was. The suit was black on black, but it didn't stop me from gaping. Miles looked up from the floor and stopped in his tracks.

He blinked several times as his scalding gaze ran over me from head to toe and back again. "Angel..."

I smiled as my cheeks warmed. "You're looking pretty damn good yourself."

His cheeks tinted pink as he met my gaze. "I have a gift for you." He held out the black velvet box in his hand.

"Miles, you didn't have to." I took it carefully as he moved closer.

The scent of wintergreen filled my senses as he grinned. "The stylist said they go with the dress."

Curious, I opened the box. My breath caught, my heart stopped. There, nestled in velvet, was a stunning rose gold and diamond necklace. The first diamond sat at the top of the y, a round stone about the size of a pencil eraser glinting in the light. The other was a dangling teardrop diamond the size of my thumbnail. That wasn't all. Two rose gold and diamond teardrop earrings sat to the side. "Miles."

"Here," Miles said softly as he took the case and pulled out the necklace. He set the case on the dresser, then moved behind me. I pulled my hair up for him. He slipped the necklace around my throat, the cool metal warming almost instantly. His fingers brushed along the sensitive skin of my mate scar as he fumbled to fasten it. He never did get all his dexterity back in his hand after that explosion. The teardrop diamond sat between my breasts perfectly, the entire look was high class and elegant. So very, very not me. The awe in Miles' eyes, however, made me want it to be true.

His smile was warm as he met my eyes in the mirror. “We better get going or we’ll be late.”

Miles went to the door and held it open for me.

I slipped on the strappy black heels and headed out the door. “You’re returning the necklace.”

He gave a warm chuckle. “Don’t worry, it’s on loan.”

Relief had me smiling as I went down the stairs. “Good.” Please don’t let me embarrass him.

THE RESTAURANT WAS SOMETHING I’D NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE. THERE was valet parking. That was a first for me. Miles handed his keys to the guy along with a folded-up bill that I’m sure was at least a fifty. Definitely new to me.

The restaurant was in a mid-century house, sleek and beautifully decorated. The hostess greeted us with a welcoming smile. “Welcome. Do you have a reservation?”

“Huntington for four,” Miles answered.

The hostess’s smile turned up to megawatt level. “Of course, your table is ready. Your other guest did call to say he’s running a little behind and that it will only be three of you.”

Miles nodded, resting his hand on my lower back and nudging me to follow the hostess. The table that was waiting for us was the best in the house, with an amazing view of lights twinkling off the water. Miles held out my chair and helped me scoot into the table. He was so slick you’d think we’d done it a hundred times before. Fabric tablecloths, elegant glassware.... Yeah, I was out of my element. I tried not to squirm as Miles took the seat to my left, putting his back to the window and view. The hostess handed each of us a menu then left once we were settled.

I turned to Miles. “Your uncle called the restaurant to tell you he’s running late?”

Miles was watching the restaurant door. “He doesn’t have my number.”

I leaned forward into his sight line until he turned towards me. “Why?”

He relaxed into his chair and gave me his attention instead of the door. “After my father died, my mother made the mistake of giving him her contact info in case he needed anything. He began to harass her about his portion of my father’s estate.”

I frowned. "But that was in trust to you."

Miles nodded, his gaze going back to the door. "He wasn't aware of that, and once he realized that my mother had no say in how the money was spent, he started trying to get in contact with me through the CEO's office. He has an investment idea that he wants my support on. That was over six months ago."

I raised an eyebrow. "He's persistent."

Miles sighed. "That's one way to describe him."

I reached over and tangled my fingers with his. "Is that why we're at this fancy place?"

Miles grinned as he squeezed my fingers. "Brett respects money and his reputation. Here, he can't make a scene."

I nodded. "Clever."

His attention moved back to me. "I'm sorry I scheduled this for Asher's date night, but having you will help me stay calm."

I gave him a warm smile. "As long as I get fed, I'm happy."

Miles chuckled softly as our server came to our table.

"Good evening, I'm Aiden, I'll have the privilege of serving you tonight," the tall man in a lovey black uniform announced softly. "Is there anything I can get you to drink?"

I went to order then hesitated. It was only a heartbeat, but it was enough time to change my order. "I'd love an iced tea please."

Miles' eyes were on me. "Coffee, cream and sugar please."

Aiden nodded then left to make it happen. I opened my menu and fought not to squirm as Miles watched me.

"Angel." His voice was soft in the restaurant.

I met his gaze.

"Why did you hesitate?" he asked in a low voice.

"Why is it you're oblivious to women flirting with you, but anytime I'm the slightest bit uncomfortable you catch it?" I asked, hoping to divert him.

He leaned in close. "Because I love you, and they mean nothing to me."

My heart melted into a puddle right there. Damn, he was good.

"Now, please, why did you hesitate to order?" he asked again.

My cheeks warmed as I admitted it out loud. "I figured this wasn't the kind of place to have soda." I shrugged. "I guess I didn't want to seem like a kid."

His eyes grew warmer as he ran his gaze over me before meeting mine again. "Angel, no one is going to mistake you for a child in that dress."

I chuckled and smiled. Aiden came back with our drinks.

Miles leaned back in his chair and looked up at him. "She'd honestly really like a soda. Can we make that happen?"

Aiden smiled happily. "Of course." He turned to me. "Which would you like?"

My face on fire, I muttered a brand and he hurried off to make it happen.

"You don't care what other people think about you," Miles said, curious. "Why now?"

I turned to him and focused on his tie. "I guess... I didn't want to embarrass you in this fancy place."

He scowled at me. "You could be drunk and screaming show tunes while stripping, Lexie, and I'd still never be embarrassed by you."

I smiled as warmth filled my heart. Relaxing, I started looking at the menu. We had just started discussing what each dish would taste like and what sounded good when a slim gentleman walked up to our table.

Brett Huntington looked a lot like his brother, enough that I did a double take. Short, curly chestnut hair turning white at the temples. Same straight nose. He really did remind me of Miles' father.

His pale green eyes ran over me before he greeted Miles. His gaze left a slimy feel along my skin. "Miles. It's good to see you."

We both got to our feet.

"Brett, how are you?" Miles said, shaking his hand then letting go quickly.

"Not bad, not bad." Brett turned to me. "And who is this?"

"This is my girlfriend. Lexie. Lexie, this is my uncle Brett," Miles introduced us carefully.

I held out my hand. "Nice to meet you."

He took my hand in both of his and smiled a leery grin. "I can see now why Miles turned down MIT."

My heart dropped as I shook his hand then pulled away as fast as possible. Miles moved to my side to hold my chair for me again as all of us sat down.

"We missed you and Charlotte at the funeral," Miles stated before sitting down and taking my hand again.

I focused on settling myself in my chair. Damn, Miles wasn't wasting any time.

"I'm sorry about that," Brett said as he adjusted his suit blazer. "I was stuck in Spain and couldn't get a flight back in time. And Charlotte... well, she left me almost a year ago. Around the same time."

Miles nodded in understanding. "I'm sorry to hear that. I've always remembered her as a nice woman."

Brett raised his hand and snapped his fingers in the air.

Stunned, I watched as a server came over.

"Can I get the best scotch you have, quickly," Brett demanded as if he owned the place before turning back to Miles. "Unfortunately, she was extremely nice to our pool guy."

I made a point to keep my face blank while I took a sip of my drink.

"She took me for everything," Brett sighed then turned to Miles. "Which is why, when I came across this investment opportunity, I had to jump on it."

I shared a look with Miles. Not a big one, just connecting gazes before turning back to Brett.

Aiden arrived with my soda, set it down, then picked up my tea.

I looked up and smiled. "Thanks."

"Anything you like." Then he turned to Brett and set his scotch down in front of him. "Sir, please refrain from snapping your fingers at our servers." He turned and left without another word.

Brett made his eyes wide as he held back a grin as he turned to me. "Oh dear, I'm already in trouble."

"I emailed you to go to the CEO about any investment ideas you had," Miles said as he began looking at the menu again, though his eyes weren't moving over the text.

Brett chuckled and turned to me. "He hasn't seen me in years and he's all business. I'd thought we'd have dinner first."

If he was expecting me to chuckle he was looking at the wrong girl.

He seemed to realize this as he adjusted his tie. "Let's have a few drinks and order. Then I'll tell you about my opportunity."

"I'm not twenty-one," Miles reminded him. "Neither is Lexie."

That seemed to take him back a heartbeat, but he was back with that oily smile and shaking his head. "I can't believe I forgot. You've always seemed much older than your years."

When Miles said nothing, Brett turned to me. “Lexie, I imagine you’re at a university now. What’s your major?”

Something inside me told me to lie. This guy was giving off all kinds of leech vibes and I wanted to give him nothing. “Psychology. I’m fascinated by the minds of con artists. How they work, their tells, their lack of empathy and their motives.”

He blinked at me but kept the smile in place as he turned to Miles. “She’s beautiful and smart, keep this one.”

Keep this one? “Excuse me?”

He turned back to me, still grinning.

“What do you mean, keep this one?” I asked sweetly.

He reached over and placed his hand on mine next to my soda. “Only that it’s hard to find a woman with both looks and brains these days.”

I raised an eyebrow as my skin crawled. “Get your hand off of me,” I warned, my voice low and sickly sweet.

He chuckled as he snatched his hand off mine and turned to Miles. “She’s got a temper, too. You hit the jackpot.”

Miles’ face was hard, his eyes glacial as he met his uncle’s gaze. “One more comment about Lexie and we’ll be walking away from this table.”

Brett sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Alright.”

Aiden came into view. I met his gaze and shook my head, warning him off. He caught it and veered to check on another table.

“To business.” Brett’s smile was back as he turned to his nephew. “I’ve found a practically untouched vein of gold in Argentina.”

For fuck’s sake. Was this guy really going with ‘I’ve got a gold mine, invest’? I tuned him out and began stirring my drink with the small stir stick with a cherry on it. Miles mostly listened and took in information while I sat and listened to the lies. Finally, half an hour later, Brett held his hands out in a voila gesture. “That’s the idea.”

Miles leaned back in his chair and eyed his uncle. “A gold mine, in Argentina.”

Brett looked pleased with himself. “Where the safety laws are laxer and there isn’t a minimum wage. It’s the perfect profit machine.”

My stomach chose that moment to growl. Loudly. I continued playing with my stirrer as if nothing happened.

Miles looked around the dining room and slightly raised a single finger to get Aiden’s attention.

“Are we ready to order?” he asked cheerfully when he reached us.

“Could we get an order of your truffle fries for the table, please? We’re still trying to decide,” Miles requested.

Aiden nodded. “Absolutely, sir.” He turned and hurried off.

“I like Aiden,” I said without thinking.

Miles smiled. “He’s bringing you food.”

I smiled at Miles before turning to Brett. “So, what’s this land like?”

Brett turned to me with ice in his eyes. Hmm. Must be a Huntington thing. “It’s an otherwise useless bog.”

“Won’t that make it difficult to bring machinery in?” Miles asked, drawing Brett’s attention back to him.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m looking for more investors,” Brett explained. “The vein is there, it’s just hard to get to.”

Miles nodded, but his back was straight and his eyes cold.

“What about the animals that live in the bog?” I asked. “How are you going to deal with them.”

Brett looked at me as if I had two heads. “We’ll relocate them, of course.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What kind of animals are there?”

“I don’t have a list on me. I was expecting to share an opportunity with my nephew, not get the third degree.” Brett gestured to Miles. “We’ll deal with the animals later. Humanely of course.

Humanely? That was vague. If he was telling the truth.

“I’ve already made my decision on the matter.” Miles pulled out his checkbook from the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket.

Stunned, I watched as he began to fill out the check only for the ink in his pen to run out.

“I need to get a pen from reception.” He excused himself then got to his feet and headed toward the front of the restaurant.

I shook my head as I waited quietly.

Brett should have done the same. He turned on me. “Look, don’t mess up my business and I won’t mess up yours.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What business of mine are you talking about?”

He scowled at me. “Oh, please. A girl as pretty as you. You’re here for his money, too.”

I snorted. I couldn’t help it. “I really don’t care about his money.”

“Yeah, it’s his personality.” He scoffed before downing his scotch in one big gulp. He turned back to me and leaned closer. “Look, you back off, sound excited about this mine idea I have, and I’ll cut you in on what he gives me.”

The scent of scotch, even good scotch, was too much for me, not to mention how close he was. It reminded me too much of Ordin. I really didn’t like it. “Back away from me.”

Instead, he did the opposite. He leaned even closer, his fingers brushing my bare knee under the table. “We could become partners—”

I slammed my knee up, crushing his hand under the table. He cried out as everything on the table fell over. The sound of breaking glass brought everyone’s attention. I was already moving. Before I realized it, I had Brett in an armlock with his face pressed into the table. “I told you not to touch me!”

Several of the male servers moved to help me, including Aiden.

Miles reached my side first and moved his hands to mine. “What happened?”

I dropped my hands, trusting Brett to Miles and took a step back. “He fucking touched my knee.”

Miles’ head snapped around and met my eyes. Cold shivers ran down my spine at the icy rage in his eyes.

I wrapped my arms around myself as the servers reached our table.

Miles took several deep breaths before jerking his uncle to his feet.

“I was just talking and she lost her senses!” Brett protested as Miles began to move him through the restaurant.

“You touched her,” Miles stated, his voice glacial. “If I was there, I would have broken your arm.”

Aiden moved to my side. “I’m pretty sure the manager is going to ask you to leave.”

“Sorry about this.” I picked up my small clutch and started following them to the door.

Aiden walked with me. “It’s no problem. From the sound of it, that guy was a real sleazeball.”

We reached the doorway just as Miles shoved Brett out of the restaurant. His uncle tripped on the curb and went down in the valet station.

Brett pointed at me as he sat up. “That gold digger is lying!”

“I wasn’t going to invest in your con, Brett,” Miles stated. “I was just going to pay you to go away.” Miles took a threatening step towards him. “The only gold digger here is you.” He held up a check and tore it to pieces. “Never contact me or my companies again.”

Brett got to his feet, his face bright red. His burning eyes settled on me.

Aiden stood between me and Brett, making Miles’ uncle lose sight of me. “I’ll help you to your car, sir.”

Aiden walked out into the lot with a fuming Brett.

Miles moved to me. His fingers went to my bare shoulder but stopped just before touching me. “Are you alright?”

I nodded, reaching up and pressed his palm to my shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

He squeezed gently.

We were about to leave when we were met by the manager, who was holding a paper bag. He thanked Miles for taking the problem outside so as not to upset the other guests, comping us the fries in the bag.

Miles got me into the car and shut the door for me. It wasn’t long before we were on the road.

A mile later, Miles fiddled with the heater again.

“Why are you turning on the heater?” I asked.

“In case you go into shock,” he admitted, glancing at me before looking back at the road. “Eat those fries, Angel.”

I wasn’t going to argue, not with my stomach growling. I opened the bag and started in on the fries. “Holy shit.” I couldn’t believe that these were fries. They were like the ambrosia of fries. “Oh, I’m eating all of these and you can’t have any.”

He chuckled as he took us off the I5. I was still stuffing my face when he drove up to a local fast-food place and pulled into the drive through. “What do you want?”

“I got my fries, but a burger and a soda will make me happy,” I said, popping another fry into my mouth. Miles chuckled before he ordered for us and pulled forward.

It wasn’t long before we got our food and Miles parked in the parking lot so we could sit and eat.

I took the burger he handed me with a smile. “Are we really doing this?”

“Doing what?” Miles asked as he opened his chicken sandwich.

“Eating fast food in a parking lot in a brand-new SUV, with both of us in designer get ups?” I picked up the necklace, dangling the diamond for him to see. “Wearing thousands in diamonds?”

Miles met my gaze. “Would you rather go back to the restaurant?”

I shook my head immediately then looked down at my lap. “I didn’t mean to cause a scene. I just reacted.”

Miles’ brow drew down as he frowned. “He touched you. You didn’t make the scene, he did.” His eyes met mine. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

With my mouth full I nodded.

“Then that is all that matters to me.” He opened a ketchup packet and dipped a fry.

“I know I don’t really fit into your high-class life,” I said carefully, picking a fry out of the bag in my lap. “I can fake it for a few hours but at the heart of it, it’s just not me.”

He reached over and used his fingertips to turn my chin back toward him. His eyes were as warm as his touch. “Same here. And I was born into it.”

I grinned back and took a big bite of my burger. Feeling less guilty, I used a napkin to wipe mustard off my lips. “I thought you really wanted a fancy dinner tonight.”

“You know those places aren’t really for me.” He sighed as he picked up his drink. “I’d rather have a nice meal at home to be honest.”

“How about next date night I make you dinner?” I asked. “I’m no Asher but I do make a mean mac and cheese from scratch.”

Miles smiled. His eye crinkled a little at the corners, his eyes lit up and some weight seemed to leave his shoulders. It lit up his entire face and showed exactly how handsome he really was. That smile was my favorite little secret of his. “I would love that.”

“Then that’s the plan,” I decided before taking another bite of my rapidly disappearing burger.

“So, why did you give up MIT?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Miles’ chewing grew slower as he avoided my eyes. “Things changed.”

I stopped eating. “Did they not take you?”

“No, that wasn’t the problem.” He turned to me. “Could we not discuss this right now?”

My heart dropped. I nodded. We finished in silence.

After eating, we made our way home and upstairs. I moved to Miles' dresser and began to take off an earring. My stomach clenched over and over again. Did Miles not go to MIT for me? If so, what the hell was I going to do? I didn't want to get in the way of his dreams. In the mirror I watched as Miles pulled off his suit jacket and tossed it onto the bed. He began untying his tie, his shoulders relaxing.

"Miles," I said, my voice soft.

"Yes?" He looked at my back then met my eyes in the mirror.

"Why didn't you go to MIT?" I asked again. "I need to know."

His brow drew down. "Why?"

"If it was me, then I need to know," I said softly without facing him. It was a hard question and probably had a painful answer. Please let it not have been me... "I don't want to stop you from going after your dreams."

He took off his tie and looked down at it in his hands. "This is one of those things that will gnaw at you until you know, right?"

"Yeah."

He lifted his head and met my gaze in the mirror again. "I died, Angel."

I took off the second earring but didn't look away from him. "I know."

"No, Angel, you don't." He shook his head then moved behind me, his body heat warming me. "After that blast, when I looked down at my body,... it was clarifying."

"Clarifying, how?" I all but whispered.

His eyes unfocused over my shoulder at the mirror. "It stripped everything away. Expectations, preconceptions, everything I thought I was and thought I had to live up to. And it showed me exactly who I really am." His eyes were determined when they met mine.

My heart jumped in my chest as warmth washed through me.

"It showed me what was important. Who I worried about. Loved. Needed." His smooth timbre moved down my spine, making me fight not to curl my toes.

"And it wasn't astrophysics," he said softly. "It wasn't video games." He brushed his fingers down my arm softly. I leaned back against him, his arms moved around me and his body against mine. Lean and strong, Miles wrapped around me. He pressed a small kiss to my bare shoulder. "It was you and the guys."

His breath moved over my skin making my breath hitch. "Really?"

His glowing eyes met mine in the mirror. “Really. It was all of you I worried about. The future I mourned was the one without any of you in it.” He brushed his lips against my ear. “The life I mourned was the one where you didn’t know how much you meant to me, all because I’m always second guessing myself.”

Heat pooled between my legs as his hand moved down my waist to the top of my thigh. My core clenched as his fingers began to ball the silk in his hand, slowly bringing the hemline of my dress up higher and higher. Energy thrummed along my skin, his body growing harder against my lower back. My breathing deepened as everything else faded into the background.

“I love you, Alexis.” His smooth timbre sent shivers of heat down my spine as my hemline continued to rise.

My heart seemed like it would burst any moment. “I love you, too.”

His fingers brushed the skin of my upper thigh.

I caught my breath as sparks shot between my legs. His hand at my waist pulled me back against him fully, his hard cock pressing into my lower back, my nipples straining against the silk at the feel of him full and hard against me.

His fingers moved to my inner thigh. “Every single time I’ve seen you in a dress there’s been something I’ve wanted to do.” My breathing grew deeper still as his fingers trailed up between my thighs under my dress. His fingers, brushing the damp material of my panties. My head fell back to his shoulder as a moan slipped out of my lips.

He drew in a shaky breath. “Lexie...” His fingers stroked between my folds through the fabric. His fingertips found my clit without hesitation.

Sparks shot through me as my back arched from his chest. “Miles...”

His hand left my waist. He took my chin between his fingers and brought my face to the side. He lowered his head. His lips took mine with a hunger I rarely felt from him. My head spun. Miles’ lips were soft but insistent and once I opened my mouth to him I was lost. He swept in and took over, shooting every thought I’d ever had out of my mind. His fingers stroked me in rhythm to his kisses over and over until I was trembling against him. His fingers left suddenly making me whimper in need. His hands turned me back to the mirror then went to the zipper at my back. I leaned forward on shaky legs as the zipper slowly moved down my back. The fabric loosened enough that I reached up to pull the straps off my arms. Miles’ hands stopped me. I met his eyes in the mirror. Desire glowed from

behind his rimless glasses as his hands went to my straps. He slowly slid the straps down my arms, his eyes moving with the fabric. First my naked breasts slid into view, then my ribcage. Heat built inside me as his hungry gaze followed his hands while he slid the dress down my hips. Finally, the dress fell to the floor and there I stood, black string thong, diamond necklace and black heels.

Breathless, I watched Miles' face in the mirror as his gaze moved over every inch of me. He took me in slowly, as if I was the most beautiful woman in the world, and with him looking at me like that I felt like it. He scooped me into his arms, one arm under my knees the other around my back. I gasped as he moved toward the bed. He set me down on the edge and took my lips again. Hunger tore through me as I kissed him back. My fingers worked the buttons on his shirt.

He pulled back and looked down at me. "I need to taste you."

My core clenched as another wave of heat and desire ripped through me. He moved his warm hand to my stomach and pressed me back on the comforter until I was laying down. I looked down between my breasts at him. His mouth left hot, wet kisses on my lower stomach while his fingers hooked into the strings of my thong and pulled them down my legs and over my heels. My head swam as I burned. Miles' lips and tongue moved over my labia. Then he stroked his tongue between them. Need hit me hard and fast as his mouth worked me.

"Oh, fuck," I groaned as I dug my nails into his shoulders. He proceeded to make me forget my own name. Miles had always been an amazing kisser, but he was even better between my thighs. The edge climbed up fast. Between one breath and the next I flew over it. I gripped his shoulders as I pressed harder against his mouth while crying out and moving my hips to his rhythm. Wave after wave of pleasure poured over me.

Breathless, I clung to his shoulders until he wrung the last tremor from me. "Shit, Miles..." Just when I got my breath back he slipped a finger inside me. I cried out as lightning shot through me, my body clenching around his finger. His tongue found my clit once again. He worked me until I was writhing against his mouth again, mindlessly reaching for that edge once more. "Yes, yes, holy fuck," I whimpered as his fingers and mouth worked my body. I cried out again, a ragged cry as I was torn apart. Stars danced across my vision, only he didn't stop or even slow down. Another

orgasm slammed through me out of nowhere, tearing a scream from my throat. My body clamped down on his fingers while I clawed at anything nearby. Relentlessly he worked to give me every wave of ecstasy he could.

After he'd wrung the last tremor he could from me, the bed shifted. Miles was shirtless as he moved up beside me. Still scattered, I rolled and pressed against him. His hard cock pressed against my naked stomach through his slacks as he began kissing my neck. Half crazed, I reached down and opened his trousers. He sprang free in my hand, groaning against my throat as I squeezed him. He fit in my hand perfectly. He shifted, his hands moving my limp body where he wanted. We stayed on our sides, facing each other, my leg hooked over his hips. His chest brushed my nipples as he moved in close. His lips took mine as I reached between us and positioned his cock at my entrance. Sensitive nerves sparked as his hand moved to my hip while he began sliding into me. My eyes practically rolled into the back of my skull as I dropped my head to the bed.

He stopped and kissed my shoulder. "Please meet my eyes, Angel."

I opened my eyes and met his. He pressed further into me. I whimpered as heat built all over again, but I didn't look away from his gaze. I clung to his back as he stretched me slowly. When he was as far as he could go, I moaned in the back of my throat at the stretched fullness inside me. He pressed his forehead against mine and tried to take deep, slow breaths. "Angel... you feel..."

"So fucking perfect," I whimpered before I began to move my hips.

His hand went to my waist and gripped me. "Oh, no, don't do that. Not yet."

I moved my hips away from him then slid him back inside. "Or what?"

He opened his eyes and met mine. "Slow. I want slow."

I stopped moving as his hand went to cup my jaw.

"I want to slowly make love to you while looking in your eyes," he whispered. "I need to touch you. To see your face change."

Everything I ever was, in that moment it was his. I nodded, and that was exactly what he did. His hips moved slowly with mine, running his length along my g-spot, leaving me gasping. Building the fire higher and higher. One arm held me to him while the other hand moved over my body. Slowly his fingers stroked my skin, making me burn. Little noises kept slipping between my lips whenever he tasted my skin. Over what seemed like hours he built the heat between us once again. I clung to his neck as we moved

together slowly until he reached between us and stroked my clit in time to our movements. I came again, clenching him until his rhythm faltered. He moved faster, his breathing growing ragged as he held my gaze, and for that moment I swore I saw who he was reflected in his eyes. Mine. He was mine. Fire rolled over me making me cry out as his thrusts grew a little harder. When he finally came we were wrapped around each other looking into each other's eyes. It was perfect.

He dropped his forehead to my shoulder, his sweat mingling with mine. Eventually our breathing evened out. We relaxed into the bed, holding each other close.

My body was still singing when he brushed my nose with his. It took a few heartbeats but I managed to open my eyes and meet his.

His hand held my face, his thumb tracing my cheek. "Marry me, Angel?"

I blinked up at him, stunned. "What?"

His eyes held mine. "Marry me?"

I didn't know what to say. My mind went completely blank.

"I'm not asking you to stop dating the others," he said softly in that silky smooth timbre. With his body still inside mine, I'm sure he felt the squeeze his voice brought out in me. "I'm not asking you to marry me in the next year, or even five, if you aren't ready. I'm asking you because I'm yours. Utterly. Hopelessly. Completely yours."

My eyes began to fill. Warmth and love poured through me.

"I'm asking you, now, for me and you. Will you marry me?"

Tears slipped out of the corner of my eye as happiness washed through me. "Yes."

His eyes widened in shock only a heartbeat before his whole face lit up. He kissed me until I barely remembered why we were so happy.

When he pulled away he moved to get out of bed. He opened the closet and pulled out a black cotton robe with little white skulls all over it. "I got you something."

I eyed him as he held out my robe. "You realize I still can't move."

"It's not far," he promised.

Curiosity had me sitting up and taking the robe. I slipped it on while Miles pulled on his green one. I toed off the heels before he took my hand and helped me a bit unsteadily to my feet.

He was grinning ear to ear as he wrapped his arm around my waist to help steady me. I leaned into him, still all warm and fuzzy. He brought me to the balcony door and opened it. I went through first as usual with him following close behind me.

I looked out at the rainy night then turned back to him. "Okay, what are you showing me?"

That grin turned into a full smile. "Look over the railing."

Suspicious, I did as he asked. My heart stopped. No... he didn't.... I turned back to him, stunned speechless.

"I couldn't find a ring that suited you. Not until a couple days ago. Ethan helped me find it." He began tapping on the rail while looking down at the shiny, newly rebuilt Blazer that was sitting on the back lawn. "Then I realized you'd appreciate this more than a ring. But then I realized the Blazer was a reminder of your father and I didn't want to change that—"

I reached over and stopped his tapping. "Miles?"

He turned his hand to hold mine then met my eyes. "I got the Blazer from the junkyard and sent it out here the day after you got rid of it. And I got you an engagement ring."

I smiled warm smile. "You're worried I won't wear a ring?"

His eyes echoed that worry as he met mine. "With the other guys things are complicated. I'd understand if you didn't want to—"

I smiled up at him, practically glowing. "Where is it?"

His face lit up. "Oh, um." He went to pull it out of his pocket, only he didn't have one. "One second." He hurried back inside while I held back a big laugh as he went to the nightstand and pulled out a small black leather ring box. When he came back outside he handed it to me.

Smiling at him, I opened the small box. My heart warmed even more. It was a slim gold band with a small emerald cut stone in the center, only its length was along the band. On either side of the emerald sat a small round diamond. It was simple. Understated. So very much me, and it was almost exactly like the one from the market. My eyes swam as I pulled out the ring and slipped it on. It fit perfectly. Tears slipped out as I looked up at him. "It's perfect."

His smile burst from him as he moved closer. "I didn't know if you'd want to wear it yet."

I reached up and held his face in my hands as tears continued to slip down my cheeks. "I'm not hiding shit," I whispered, my voice rough. "I

love you, Miles, and I'd scream it to the world if I could."

His arms moved around me and pulled me against him. His mouth took mine and kissed me until lights began to dance across my vision. I don't know how long we were outside on the balcony, but by the time we came back in the neighbors now knew Miles their new neighbor's name was Miles.



Asher

THE PACK WAS RUNNING THROUGH THE WOODS AT THE BASE OF MT. Rainier. My heart was pumping, my body working, my paws sure-footed in the underbrush. My senses were stretched to the max. The only scents for miles were earth, rain, and pack. My human consciousness fell to the back of my mind allowing my wolf full rein for once. I was free. The relief almost left me shaking.

A brush of fur moved over my flank. I ignored it, at least until a shoulder bumped into my side. I shoved back and continued to run. A silver and white wolf wove through the woods beside me. From the smaller frame I knew she was female.

It was only two steps before she was back, pressing her side against mine. A growl emanated from my chest, my lips curled.

The female's pace picked up. She pulled ahead, swishing her tail back and forth. A cloying scent reached me as she moved to stay directly in front of me, her tail brushing my snout. She was ready to mate and signaling for me.

Before my consciousness barely roused I was moving away from her. No. She wasn't my mate. She was only pack. I moved out from behind her and pushed my body harder, moved faster. I passed her and left her behind. My consciousness radiated approval before sinking back to observe again.

I o

OceanofPDF.com

THURSDAY

Lexie

Idrove the blade into his stomach. Hot liquid spurted over my fingers as his eyes went wide. Bile rose in my throat as I realized what I had done. He dropped his blade and grabbed my arm as he began gasping. The thick liquid covered my shaking hands, turning them crimson. It was so slick and warm on my skin,... Only this time, joy bubbled through me. The corner of my lips lifted into a grotesque smile. A not quite sane laugh erupted from my throat as I raised my coated fingers to my lips...

I JERKED FROM MY NIGHTMARE WITH A GASP. SWEAT POURED DOWN MY face as I quickly took in the room. Miles' room. Seattle. I sat up, stopping just before I touched my skin. Fuck. I could still feel the blood on my hands. Taking a deep shaky breath, I shoved the covers away just as Miles began to wake up.

"Angel?" he murmured, still half asleep.

Breath shaking, I hurried into the bathroom. The light bounced off the white tile making the room too bright. The memory of how it felt to sink the blade into Eric came back ten-fold. I began to scrub my hands with soap, just trying to get the sensation to go away. The feel of thick liquid pouring

over my hands. I scrubbed harder as tears trailed down my cheeks. God. Make it stop. Make the memory go away.

I was still scrubbing a few minutes later, the sensation still fresh in my mind. My hands were bright pink from the hot water and rubbing. There was nothing I could do to make it go away. I was going to start taking off skin.

Miles stepped beside me and turned off the water while I was still staring at it. "Call him."

Shaking, I looked up and met his gaze. A sinking wave of failure crashed through me. He seemed to see it.

"You need him," Miles said softly. "He'll understand, which is something I can't do."

I nodded then started out of the bathroom. Still shaking, I snagged my phone off the nightstand and sat down on the bed.

He answered on the first ring.

"What's wrong?" Zeke's voice was warm and laced with worry.

"When does it go away?" I rasped, knowing Miles was in the bathroom doorway watching me. "The feeling of blood." If anyone could answer my question it was him. Zeke had found his parents dead at eight years old. He'd tried to stop the bleeding for his mother.

Zeke took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It doesn't go away. Not completely. You just get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it," I said, my voice barely there as fresh tears flowed down my cheeks. "I want the dreams to stop."

Miles picked up the cashmere throw off the end of the bed and wrapped it around my naked shoulders.

"I know, Baby." Zeke's voice was the soft one he used with me once in a while. "I want that for you, too."

Miles sat beside me on the bed, his arm around me trying to get me warm again.

I wiped my face with a trembling hand. "The look in his eyes when I—"

"You didn't kill him," Zeke reminded me. "Evelyn did."

I shook my head. I might as well have.

"Lexie, you did not kill him," he repeated. "That guy destroyed hundreds of souls to keep Dylan's dad alive. Maybe thousands."

I wiped my nose and nodded even though he couldn't see it.

“He could have destroyed the barriers between earth, heaven and hell,” Zeke said. “He was too dangerous to be left alive.”

“I know,” I said, my voice small as I snuggled against Miles’ chest. “I know.”

“It’s not your fault he’s dead.” Fabric rustled on his side of the line. “It was his own choices.”

Miles slipped his arms around me and held me close.

I nodded again. “His choices could have ended the world.”

“Exactly.” Something on his side of the phone closed.

The sound pulled me out of my guilt a little. “What was that?”

“I’m on my way over,” he muttered.

“No, Zeke,” I groaned. “You don’t have to do that.”

“You’re scared,” he countered, “and we both know what helps you go back to sleep is one of us. Everyone else is asleep.”

“I’m at Miles’ house,” I admitted.

The line went silent.

“Does he know you’re calling me while you’re there?” he asked, his voice quiet.

I sniffed. “He told me to.”

Zeke let out a breath he’d been holding. “Good.”

I wiped my face and sniffed again. “Sorry I woke you up.”

“You didn’t,” he muttered as a door opened and closed on his end again.

“You’re not sleeping.” I didn’t even need to ask. Zeke’s history was traumatic. From an abusive father who used to cut him, to finding his parents after a murder-suicide, to the sexual assault he’d endured in foster care soon after. If anyone understood sleepless nights, it was Zeke.

“What can I do to help?” I asked softly.

“Crash over here on Friday?”

I smiled a little. “You got it.”

“Thanks, Baby.”

“Until then, I’ve got that white noise machine you gave me. You could borrow it,” I offered.

“I might just take you up on that.”

Now that I’d calmed down, I looked up and met Miles’ worried gaze.

“Thanks, Zeke.” I dropped my eyes from Miles’ and looked down at my naked lap.

“Anything,” he said. “Night, Baby.”

“Night.” I hung up the phone and struggled to understand what it was I was feeling.

“Lexie?” Miles asked softly.

I shook my head. “I’m still thinking on it.”

“I’ll get you some tea.” He got to his feet, pulled on his robe, and headed out of the bedroom to give me some space.

What the hell was wrong with me? I’d had a freak out and Miles told me to call Zeke, the one person who could help me. Miles wasn’t angry or upset. In fact, he was understanding. Accepting. I should be happy as hell right now. It was the best outcome I could hope for. I wiped my face again as shame crashed down over me. I was sitting here, still naked, with my new fiancé’s cum still smeared over my inner thigh, and I’d called another boyfriend. I buried my face in my hands. Was I this fucking broken? Was one amazing guy really not enough for me? Or had Riley been right? Had I been using the guys to shield me from pain and other people? Absently, I began to twirl my engagement ring on my finger while I tried to work out how I was feeling. I was so deep in my head and motives that Miles’ voice came as a surprise.

“Lexie, drink your tea,” he said when he came back in.

I blinked back to the present and took it gratefully. The warmth helped ground me in the present. I looked down into the brown liquid and wondered if I was too broken to love only one person.

Miles moved back to his side of the bed and sat with his back against the headboard. He said nothing as he simply waited.

I braced myself to raise the issue burning through me. “I should be happy as hell right now.”

Miles watched me with warm eyes. “Are you?”

I ran through it out loud. “Being engaged to you? Yes. Being with the others? Yes. But there’s still that nagging voice in the back of my head.”

“Ah,” he sighed as he wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “The ‘it’s not supposed to work this way’ voice.”

I set my tea on the nightstand and snuggled into his arms. “Yeah.”

“That voice does seem to crop up whenever there’s change,” he said as we lay down and he closed his eyes.

“You too?” I asked softly, looking up at the ceiling.

“Yes.” His fingers moved down my arm to tangle with my left hand. “Often enough that I’ve started ignoring that voice.”

I tilted my head back and met his eyes. “How do you ignore it?”

He gave me a small warm smile. “I remember that there is no ‘supposed to.’ That we all build our own lives and make our own choices. That ‘supposed to’ is a guide for some people and doesn’t work for everyone.”

“That’s a good argument.” I stroked my thumb along his. “Does it work?”

“Most days,” he said, his fingers stroking mine gently. “If you aren’t ready for the guys to know about our engagement you don’t have to wear the ring, especially if it’s too much too fast.”

I thought it over. Then I shook my head. “I might not be ready to tell them, but I won’t hide the ring.” I looked up and met his gaze. “Does that work for you?”

Miles nodded. “Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

I smiled up at him and snuggled even closer. “What page were we on?”

OceanofPDF.com

I I

Asher

I had just finished buttoning my jeans in the woods when a noise told me I wasn't alone. Turning, I spotted the woman walking out of the underbrush. Long white-blonde hair covered generous breasts on her lithe body. On her naked body. A breeze danced through the trees bringing her scent closer. That sweet, cloying scent from last night. Now I knew who it was.

Tilly's younger sister Reagan stepped closer. "Asher."

I moved my gaze to the shirt in my hands and stepped away a few steps. "Hey, Reagan."

She moved closer again, that scent growing thicker. "Is something wrong?"

"Nope." I pulled my shirt on. Nudity was nothing new in a pack. Everyone saw everyone else naked, but manners dictated that you didn't comment or act like you noticed.

She stepped even closer. "Wanna have a little fun this morning?"

"No thanks." I stepped further away, going to a log to sit down and pull on my socks.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "You have a human girlfriend. It's the biggest gossip in the pack right now, you and your human prospective

mate.”

Making a point not to look at her, I hurried to pull on my shoes.

She chuckled. “That won’t last long.”

I finished tying my shoes and got to my feet.

She stepped into my eyeline again. “You know it won’t.”

I held her gaze.

“No human is going to satisfy you now that you’re a wolf. Even as a mate.” Her eyes ran over me then met mine again. “Even if she ever gets the nerve to do what she has to.”

I smirked. “You don’t know Ally.”

“No, but I know humans.” She grinned as she stepped even closer and looked up at me. “You’re not human anymore, Asher. You’re going to have to accept that there will be some desires a human can’t fill.”

“Back off, Reagan,” I said, making myself perfectly clear.

She narrowed her eyes at me, as if deciding whether I was serious or not.

To make my point clearer, I stepped back from her and walked away. Nothing and no one was going to take me from Ally.



Lexie

MY HANDS WERE SWEATY ON THE STEERING WHEEL AS I PULLED OFF THE main road into the pack driveway.

Tilly: You need to decide today. And it needs to be in front of the pack. Get here asap.

Her text had me hauling ass out of town. I shifted in my seat and focused on pulling my shoulders back to relieve the tension. The pros and cons had been running through my head the entire drive out to the property. By the time I parked the repaired Blazer in front of the house my entire body was knotted to hell. Tilly walked out of the glass front doors and waited at the top of the porch stairs for me.

I swallowed hard. This decision was huge, and permanent. It was too big. But rejecting him would have consequences for the rest of his life. My chest tightened as I shut off the engine. In a game of pros vs cons, cons won out. Zeke told me to follow my instincts. Asher told me to reject him. I knew what I had to do. That didn't make it easy, especially not with Miles' engagement ring on my finger...

My breathing was a bit ragged as I got out of the Blazer and headed up the stairs to Tilly.

"Have you made a decision?" Tilly asked, her face filled with sympathy.

I nodded stiffly.

She took my shaking hands and met my eyes. "Alright. In order to accept or reject his mark, all you need to say out loud is 'Asher Westfell, I accept or reject your mark.'"

She gave me a warm, encouraging smile. "The entire pack is back there, so don't be surprised at the crowd."

I swallowed hard, my mouth going dry.

Tilly let go of my hands, turned me and guided me around the corner of the house with her hand on my upper arm. I focused on keeping my breathing slow and even. It wasn't hard, not until we turned into the backyard and all conversation stopped.

My heart jumped into my throat as I took in the scene. The backyard was mostly just a large clearing to the dense tree line, and in that clearing were around twenty-five people. All watching me. Shit. Asher stood, waiting, at the top step of the stairs to the backyard, rubbing his neck. He had to have been at it a while because his neck was bright red. Those ocean eyes met mine and the crowd mostly faded into the background. Tilly nudged me to keep me moving.

My sandals moved across the wooden boards until I was looking up at Asher.

"It's okay, Ally." He gave me a reassuring smile. "It really is."

I took as deep a breath as I could with the tightness in my chest. Was this really the right thing to do? God, I hoped so.

"It's time." Tilly left my side to stand behind Asher with Brendon. Both of them wore poker faces.

I opened my mouth, but the words wouldn't come out.

"You have to say it, honey," Asher said softly, looking down at the worn floorboards of the porch between us.

I wrung my fingers together until I began twirling my ring. It calmed me down. Here it goes. “Ash, over the last few days I’ve had to do a ton of thinking. Big life decisions kind of thinking. I made pros and cons lists. Thought about what I want my life to be, the things I want to do and all that stuff.”

He reached out and took both my hands in his, stopping the twirling.

His touch helped calm me even more. “What it all came down to was asking myself if I’m ready to be your mate slash wife for the rest of our lives without the option of divorce.” I looked up and met his eyes. “That answer was a big no.”

His eyes grew rough, his jaw clenched as he nodded. The silence echoed through the trees.

I held his gaze. “However, I do like a challenge.”

He blinked down at me.

I gave him a warm smile. “In the end, I need to trust my instincts.” I stepped closer and tilted my head back a little more. “I need to trust you. And trust us.”

Asher grinned down at me.

“I am going to trust you to work with me to build a life we can both be happy with,” I said softly, “even if it’s as far from *traditional* as can be. Can you do that?”

Understanding filled Asher’s eyes. He got what I was asking. His grin turned into a smile. “I’ve done a lot of thinking too, and...” He let out a deep breath. “I can love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

My smile grew bigger. “Asher Westfell, I accept your mark.”

His arms wrapped around my waist as his lips all but crushed mine. Happiness filled me as he kissed me like his life depended on it. The crowd cheered.

“Ease up, Asher,” Brendon warned. “You’ve gotten all you’re going to get for a while.”

The crowd chuckled.

A wave of dizziness hit me. I pulled back and blinked up at him. What the hell? Asher shook his head as if trying to clear his vision. We both swayed.

Hands steadied me. I looked up to find Tilly beside me, keeping me standing.

“What the hell was that?” A deep burning filled my chest.

“That is the mate bond being formed,” Brendon explained as he steadied Asher.

I pressed my palm against my chest as flames seemed to surround my heart. “Any reason why it feels like the world’s worst heartburn?”

Tilly chuckled. “It’s werewolf magic, and that’s usually painful.”

“Because the first change isn’t enough suffering?” Asher grumbled.

The alphas chuckled.

Just as suddenly as it started, the pain was gone. As soon as I straightened Tilly let me go.

“Better?” Tilly asked.

I rubbed my chest and nodded. “Any other surprises?”

Tilly and Brendon shared a look. Oh. I wasn’t going to like this.

Brendon turned back to us. “Every bond is a bit different with its own unique quirks. Eventually it’ll fill in parts of your relationship that you lack.”

“You’ll also have a need to see each other more often, and female werewolves will know by Asher’s scent that he’s mated,” Tilly warned, then smiled. “Now that that’s done, the barbeque can begin.” Tilly and Brendon moved around us and down the stairs to the backyard.

Asher turned to me, looking a bit stunned. He bent down and kissed me softly before pressing his forehead against mine. “I love you, Ally.”

“I love you too.” I pointed up at him. “But if you bite me again without permission, I’ll kick your ass.”

Asher smiled. “Deal.”

I pulled back and looked out at the backyard. The crowd had split up. Some of the women were gathering a group of kids in swimsuits into a line. Some of the men were moving large picnic tables to make one long enormous table while others were lighting a fire in the long brick and cast-iron barbeque to the right of the clearing. Still more pack members were walking past us from the house with large platters of meat.

“Whoa,” I said as I watched them bring out yet another platter piled high with thick steaks. “That’s a lot of meat.”

Asher chuckled as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. Happy goosebumps popped up on my neck. An odd peace settled in my heart.

Nolan walked around the corner of the house and took in all the activity. Grinning, he came over. “Sorry I’m late.” His gaze went to Asher’s arm around my shoulders. “I take it she accepted?”

“Yep,” I chirped as I watched all the hustle. “There was a barbeque planned for today?”

Nolan grinned. “It’s tradition in our pack to throw a party for the newly mated couple.”

My eyebrows went up. “Like a reception?”

Asher began to rub the back of his neck.

Nolan chuckled. “If it’s easier, think of it as more of a welcome to the pack party.” He headed down the steps leaving us alone on the porch.

I looked up at Asher. “We should invite the others.”

Asher hesitated. “Well, they are family, and they’re going to be around the pack a lot. You’re right.”

I pulled out my phone and texted them to come as soon as they could. Then tucked my phone back in my pocket.

Tilly stuck her head out the open back door. “Hey, you two. Come in here, we need more hands on veggies.”

Nolan chuckled before he moved down the steps and headed for the barbeque group.

Asher took my hand and led me into the house.

There were several people spread out around the kitchen. An elderly woman at one counter added something to several enormous bowls of potato salad. An older man was at the stove with two large stock pots, stirring the contents. Another woman, who looked very much like a younger Tilly, was at the island in the center. She was working on putting slices of vegetables onto a bamboo skewer. Another guy around his mid-twenties was chopping vegetables at the same island.

Asher and I slipped through the crowd and went to the sink.

“Where do you need us?” Asher asked as he dried his hands.

“I need you, Mr. Chef wannabe, to help cut veggies for the kabobs,” Tilly said as I began to wash my hands.

“No problem,” Asher left my side.

“And Lexie, we need more kabob assembling.” Tilly pointed to the island and her lookalike.

“You got it.” I dried my hands then hurried to the worktable, dodging another platter of steaks before reaching safety. “Hi, I’m Lexie.”

The tall, lithe girl had to be around my age. Her white-blonde hair was up in a messy bun, her jaw clenched as she put another finished skewer on the baking sheet with the others. “Yeah, the human.”

I caught the attitude and chose to ignore it. I picked up a skewer and some veggies. "Any specific order you're wanting?"

"It's a kabob," she said, her voice dripping with condescension, "you just put it together."

Wow. Someone didn't like me already. "I've been lectured by Asher, repeatedly, that presentation means something to some people."

Asher chuckled as he sliced half a green bell pepper. "I haven't lectured you that much."

I started making kabobs. "I heard that lecture at least twelve times when I helped in the kitchen back home."

Asher grinned as he went back to cutting veggies.

Everyone worked for several minutes. Conversation moved on around the kitchen. The atmosphere was warm as everyone worked together to get dinner out. Then the veggie pile ran low.

"Ash, you gotta keep up. Chop, chop." I snorted at my pun. "Get it? Chop, chop."

There were a couple of chuckles around the kitchen.

Asher groaned. "That was horrible, Ally."

I half shrugged, pleased with myself. "It made me happy."

"So," the girl turned to me, her voice louder than necessary, "when are you going to let Asher convert you?"

Silence dropped like a stone.

Tilly turned from making a giant fruit salad to gape at the girl. "Reagan!" She wasn't the only one.

I focused on working while I answered. "It's not in my plans."

Reagan dropped the kabob onto the sheet. "So you're okay being mated to a wolf but don't want to be one of us?"

I kept my face pleasant, though she was starting to irritate me. "Don't even know if I can." I turned to Tilly. "That reminds me, I need the address to the supernatural market. I need to get some supplies."

Tilly grinned. "I'll text it to you."

When I turned back Reagan was scowling. "You're a witch?"

"No." I stopped working to meet her eyes. "I'm something else."

Her brow drew down in confusion. "Like what?"

I gave her a sweet smile as I held my temper in check. "Necromancer."

Reagan went to ask something else.

"Reagan, that's enough," Tilly stated, her voice gentle but firm.

Reagan turned to Tilly. "Did you know what she is?"

Tilly sighed. "I did. And Brendon and I agreed."

Reagan shook her head. "It's ridiculous enough to have a human in a wolf pack, but a—"

"That is quite enough." Tilly's voice wasn't gentle this time. It was hard, commanding.

Reagan rolled her eyes with disgust.

"Go out and help watch the cubs swim in the lake," Tilly ordered.

Reagan dropped the half-finished kabob then all but stomped out of the kitchen.

Tilly moved to the door to watch Reagan's retreating back.

"Don't mind Reagan," the silver-haired man at the stove said, turning while wiping his hands on his apron. "That girl still doesn't understand her place in the pack. You coddle her too much, Tilly."

"I know," Tilly sighed then turned back to us. "I'm sorry about my little sister, but she does illustrate the major issue of being human in a pack."

I kept working. "Not everyone is going to like that I'm human."

Tilly nodded. "More than that, they'll know you're a necromancer."

Asher stopped cutting. "You guys said it was okay that she's human."

Tilly nodded. "And it will be, it'll just add some challenges to figuring out how to fit her into the pack."

The blood drained from Asher's face. "You mean the challenges."

"Yes." Tilly wiped her hands dry on a dish cloth while she leaned against the counter. "If I know my sister, and I do, then you can expect a challenge soon, either from her or one of her friends."

I turned to Tilly. "Will I be able to use my energy manipulation?"

Tilly smirked. "I could see that happening."

I waved her concern away. "I'll be fine."

"Not against a fully shifted werewolf," Asher countered as he stopped chopping. "We're fast."

I met his worried eyes. "I know, but I'm not defenseless."

He didn't seem to completely believe it, but he let the subject drop and went back to cutting.

"Tilly, we need the lemonade and tea." Laila walked into the kitchen in a pair of pressed khaki shorts and a soft white linen blouse. When she spotted me, she pulled up short. "Tilly! Do you have our newest member making kabobs at her own welcome party?"

Tilly chuckled. "Yes, I do."

Laila gasped dramatically. "No, that won't do." Laila came to my side and pointed at Asher. "Come with me, both of you. You need to introduce Lexie to the pack." She put her hand on my arm and pulled me away from the counter and out of a laughing kitchen. Asher wiped his hands on a dish towel and quickly followed us.

Laila brought us to a stop near the top step. "Now, go out and show everyone that Lexie will be an asset to the pack. Reagan's already got a trash talking campaign started." Laila made a shooping motion with her hands before heading back into the house. Asher took my hand and led me off the porch.

The first group we approached was the group of males at the barbeque. They were all older, each with a little gray in their hair but all of them fit. They were chuckling as they turned to us.

"Congrats, Asher." The taller of the three turned to us with a grin. "She forgave ya."

Blood rushed to Asher's face as he rubbed his neck. "Yeah, I got really lucky. Lexie, this is Deven, Patrick and Douglas. They're pilots."

The taller of the three turned his gray eyes to me. He was a handsome older man with several laugh lines along the corners of his eyes. His hair was tight black curls cut close to his head with white sprinkled here and there along his hair line. "Never met a necro before."

"I've never met a pilot before," I countered.

The older men chuckled.

"She's got you there," another older gentleman said before turning back to us. His brown eyes were warm as he said, "I'm Patrick." His long wavy brown hair was liberally streaked with gray. It gave him a roguish quality that seemed to fit him. "I'm a bush pilot in Alaska. I just so happened to be in town for the week."

"You're not part of the pack?" I asked.

Patrick shook his head. "I was, but once I was old enough I headed to Alaska to join the pack of old wolves there."

My brow drew down. "Wait, so if you get too old they send you to an old folks pack?"

The men chuckled.

"It's not the way it sounds," Douglas explained. "Seattle is a desired pack location, so there's often a lot of fighting. Once you get older you just

can't keep up, so instead of dying in a fight you can't win, you leave the pack and join the one in Alaska."

"Wouldn't they be a desired location too?" I couldn't think of a better place to roam as a werewolf.

"They are, but all packs in the states own a part of the land, so they all have a stake in that pack's safety," Patrick explained. "There's no hierarchy in the Alaska pack. No challenges, it's just family."

"So, there's no need to fight," I said. It sounded like a great system.

"Exactly. We go by vote up there," Patrick took a sip of his beer. "And the occasional game of chess or handball."

I raised an eyebrow. "Two werewolves playing handball. That I'd like to see."

The men chuckled again.

"It's as strange as you'd imagine," Patrick admitted. "We lose so many balls."

I bit back a laugh but couldn't repress my shit-eating grin. "So, when you run out of balls do you just chase after them as a wolf?" Please, please say yes...

The werewolves chuckled. I finally let myself laugh.

"That is quite the image," Douglas said as he eyed me. "You'll do just fine here, Lexie."

I gave him a genuine smile before the three men got busy with the grill.

Asher gave me a small tug and led me to another couple sitting at a picnic table feeding their toddler.

The toddler was sitting on the man's lap while the female tried to coax her to eat. The toddler kept flinging her arms whenever food came near her mouth.

"Let's try the applesauce, she's just not wanting solids today," she sighed as she put down the small Tupperware container and reached into a bag on the table.

"When did we give her painkillers last?" he asked.

"Three hours ago," the woman said as she pulled out a little container of applesauce.

"Hey Troy, hey Grace," Asher greeted them. "How's baby Ruby?"

Troy began to answer but stopped once he saw me. "I'm not risking my family because you lost control." He shifted the toddler onto his hip and got to his feet.

Stunned, I didn't say a word.

"Troy," Grace chided.

He kept his eyes on me as he answered. "Stay away from my family." He walked away from the table, keeping his body between me and his daughter.

Grace sighed then looked up at us. "I'm sorry. He just heard too many necro stories as a kid." She got to her feet and stuffed her things back into the diaper bag. "I've got nothing against you two, in fact, I'm happy for you, but I need to work with my mate."

"We understand, Grace," Asher answered for us. "Just give little Ruby a snuggle for me."

The tired woman gave us a smile. "Congratulations." She hurried off after her mate with the diaper bag.

"Wow. He really didn't like that I'm a necro." I sat down on the bench.

Asher sat beside me. "I didn't expect him to be so hostile about it, Ally. I'm sorry."

I met his gaze. "You knew he wasn't thrilled about me being a necro?"

He nodded. "He mentioned it once or twice. I thought once he got to know you he'd relax, but..."

I sighed. "I doubt that's going to happen."

Asher's arm moved around my lower back, his hand settling my hip. "I thought he'd at least give you a chance."

I watched the group at the barbeque work at getting the meat off the grill. "It's okay, not everyone is going to like me. It'll take time."

He leaned down and kissed my temple. "Ready to try again?"

I took a deep breath for courage then nodded. We got to our feet.

Names and faces began to blur into the afternoon. Some werewolves were friendly, others simply walked away when Asher introduced me. I refused to take it personally. They didn't know me, so fuck them and their opinions. I kept my smile up even when it was fake. I don't think they noticed, but I started to fade during dinner.

Luckily, that's when the guys showed up. Asher and I were just throwing away our trash when Isaac walked around the house.

"They're back here!" Isaac shouted, drawing the attention of the pack. I smiled a big smile as I left Asher's side and went to him. His eyes grew worried as I walked toward him but he put on a big smile as I wrapped my

arms around his neck. He lifted me off my feet and spun me. I giggled as the world spun. He set me down and met my eyes. "How's it going, Red?"

"Not bad," I lied as the others came around the house and down the porch steps. "What took you guys so long?"

"We had to stop and get our suits," Ethan answered as Asher reached us. "Beautiful's text said there was a lake."

"We had to get through Elena at your dorm to find your swimsuit," Miles explained as he stepped onto the dirt. "It took a while."

I shook my head as Brendon and Tilly joined our group.

"I wondered when the rest of your family would show up," Tilly said with a smile. "There's food left at the picnic tables, along with lemonade and tea. You are more than welcome to help yourselves."

"Are you sure about that?" Zeke muttered, his gaze behind me. That's when I realized it was eerily quiet in the backyard. I turned and saw why. Most of the pack were watching us. Some were getting up and leaving. Others were whispering to each other. My shoulders grew tight. Great...

I turned back to the guys. "Let's hit the lake. Give everyone some time to adjust to us."

Isaac eyed me, a frown forming on his face. "Alright."

Ethan handed me a tote and Asher led us into the house to change.

Tilly caught my arm, stopping me before I climbed the stairs. "Don't worry, they're safe here."

I looked back over my shoulder at the pack members who were leaving. "Being safe isn't the same as being accepted." I shrugged. "It's going to take time."

Tilly nodded, squeezed my arm, and let me go into the house.

I was walking toward the bathroom when Zeke walked out of it. That's when I noticed it. "What happened to your face?" I demanded when I reached him. Along his jaw, hidden in his five o'clock shadow, was a big, fat, black and purple bruise.

Zeke brushed his fingers over the bruise. "Asher and I worked our issues out."

"With fists?" I sighed.

Zeke half shrugged. "It got my point across."

I shook my head as I passed him and went into the bathroom. There was nothing I could say about it. They were going to do their guy thing no matter what.

By the time we came back outside there weren't a lot of people left in the yard. I shook my head as Asher led us through the woods on a well-used trail. The closer we got to the lake, the louder the sounds of splashing and voices. When we stepped out onto the beach we realized why. Everyone who stayed was in the lake having a good time. My heart warmed as we set our stuff down.

Suddenly I was off the ground and over a muscled shoulder. I squeaked as Asher ran for the lake. Then I was off his shoulder and under the icy water. I came up sputtering. "You shit!"

Asher chuckled, diving under as I got to my feet. The guys were laughing as they made their way into the lake. Asher swept me off my feet and lifted me out of the water. I shoved my dripping hair out of my face. "What are you doing?"

"Messing with you." Asher grinned down at me. Then I was airborne. Son of a— I hit the water on my back and went under. I came up ready for a fight. "That's it!" I went after him and I wasn't alone.

Zeke was already wading toward Asher. Asher made to dive under but he never made it. Miles surged up out of the water like a fish and tackled him. They both went under amid chuckles.

I was picked up from behind. The rings told me it was Ethan but that was all I had time to register as we both went under the water. He turned me and pressed his lips against mine. I wrapped my hands around his neck as he kept the kisses chaste before bringing me up for air. I smiled up at him before Isaac joined us. He pulled me away from Ethan and shoved his brother's head under water before walking several feet away in the shoulder deep water.

"You okay?" he whispered.

I grinned up at him. "I am now."

He grinned back down. "Talk about it later?"

I nodded.

He pointed his chin at Miles' back.

I smirked and nodded again. He let me go and we began to stalk Miles as quietly as we could. When I was close enough, I jumped on his back. He barely budged as I hung onto him, my legs dangling in the water. He chuckled as he looked up at me over his shoulder. "If you wanted a hug you could have just asked."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

He responded by reaching behind him and gripping under my thighs. I rested my chin on his shoulder as we watched the guys almost drown each other. It wasn't long before a little kid no older than five asked to be thrown. Asher got permission from the kid's parents before he picked up the little one and tossed him no more than a foot from him. The kid came up squealing in delight. Soon, all the guys were being asked to toss the kids into the water. Miles went off to help with the demand.

Getting chilly, I got out of the icy water and wrapped my towel around me. I sat on the sand and watched the guys play with the kids. Eventually, my gaze settled on Asher. He was a natural with kids. He genuinely enjoyed playing with them, his eyes sparkling. My heart clenched. He was a man that should have children, and we were mated now. Married. If he wanted kids... I wanted to give them to him.

Everything in my world went still. I was willing to have a kid. My chest grew tight, a breath was a little harder to get as panic streaked through me. What the hell did I do? I took slow, deep breaths, trying to ease the weight on my chest but it wasn't working. Icy tendrils of fear slithered through my veins, making it even harder to breathe. As calmly as I could, I got to my feet and made my way back towards the house. My breaths came faster and faster, in short pants by the time I got halfway there. If he wanted kids... I was going to have kids. Be responsible for a tiny little life. Holy fuck... I sat down in the middle of the trail, closed my eyes and focused on working through the panic attack. I was going to pass on Necromancy... I had always said I wouldn't... but seeing Asher and the others with those kids... I never really considered what I'd do if they wanted them. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I tried shutting down my brain, but the thoughts kept coming. Kids. Necromancy. How many? I couldn't seem to find my way out of the storm raging in my head.

"Red?" Isaac's voice brought me back to the real world, but that pressure was still there on my chest.

"Panic attack," I gasped, still trying to breathe through it.

He didn't ask questions, he just sat down across from me and took my hands. "Meet my eyes."

I did as he said.

"Now, breathe with me." He inhaled a long breath. I ignored everything in my head and focused on mimicking his breathing.

“Everything is okay,” he said, his voice soft and gentle. “Everyone is safe. You are safe here.”

“Not that kind of panic attack,” I muttered between breaths.

“Then just keep focusing on me,” Isaac said. “Stop thinking and take deep breaths.”

I did as he said and soon the weight in my chest lifted and I could take a full breath without struggling again. When I could finally let go of his hands, I wiped my face only to realize there were tears. I sniffed and made sure my face was clear.

It was a couple of minutes of simply breathing normally before Isaac asked, “Want to talk about it?”

I let out another deep breath first. “It was seeing you guys with the kids. How good you all are with them. Especially Asher.”

Isaac scooted closer. “Why did that trigger a panic attack?”

I looked down at the dirt between us. “It made me realize that h... He should be a dad. You all should.”

“Whoa, slow down, I can’t even keep a goldfish alive,” Isaac stated emphatically.

I scoffed. “Exactly.”

Understanding filled his eyes. “Have you and Asher talked about this?”

“Not yet.” I jumped but didn’t turn around at Asher’s voice behind me. Anxiety clawed at my stomach as Isaac got to his feet.

“You guys should probably talk.” Isaac reached down and kissed the top of my head before heading back to the lake.

Asher moved around me and took Isaac’s spot, his longer legs on either side of my hips. “Ally?”

I wiped my face again. “Just having a revelation.”

“That gave you a panic attack?” he asked carefully.

I nodded as I met his eyes again. Anxiety’s claws dug in, tears leaking from my eyes. “You should be a dad someday.”

His brow drew down. “What?”

“You’re great with kids.” I shrugged as I looked back down at the dirt between us. “You’d be a great father.”

“Ally, why did that give you a panic attack?” he asked softly, his hands moving to mine, stopping me from twirling my ring.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before meeting his eyes. “Because... I want to be the one to give them to you.”

His eyebrows shot up; his jaw dropped as he tried to wrap his head around it. After all, I had always been negative about having bio kids. To have that change? It was big. Huge.

He bent forward, his hands on my face as he kissed me gently and thoroughly. I kissed him back almost desperate for the contact. Our kiss eventually slowed, and he pulled back a fraction.

Those ocean eyes met mine. “Ally, I love you more than anything, and just the fact you’re willing to consider having kids with me is...” He shook his head, his eyes filling. “It means so much to me that you’re willing to think about it. We don’t need to do it now. We have time. We’re not even twenty yet.”

I wiped my face as I nodded. “I know. It just... the revelation...”

“Scared the shit out of you,” he said, fully understanding now. “I’m kinda resisting a panic attack now myself. I get it.”

I chuckled as I met his eyes. “We never talked about this, Asher, and now we’re mated. Married for life. Do you want kids?”

He looked down at the ground and wiped his face before meeting my eyes. “Honestly, I’ve always imagined my life with them, but not anytime soon, Ally. If you want to have my children then I’ll be over the moon, but let’s take the time we have plenty of to make sure we’re ready before we start panicking.”

I nodded. “Still fighting that panic attack?”

“Oh yeah,” he said emphatically.

We both chuckled. His hands squeezed mine. “Come on, the others are headed this way.”

He got to his feet then pulled me to mine. We walked to the house with my hand in his.

Friday

I found the address that Tilly had sent me for the paranormal market. It was a small occult store wedged between a coffee shop and a clothing boutique. A black metal sign hung out from the building on a metal bar, cut-out lettering reading 'Magnar's Den'. Sounded more like something you'd name a werewolf bar, but okay...

I pushed open the glass door and walked into the dimly lit store. It was like walking through a thick fog of energy. I only made it a couple of steps before I stopped. The energy clung to me as if I was moving through bits of cobweb. Looking around for the source, I rubbed the exposed skin on my arm, trying to wipe the feeling away. The store was packed with shelves of dusty items and overstuffed bookshelves. It was also empty of people except for the man behind the counter watching me with a slight grin. Long, wavy, dark-blond hair was pulled back off his face revealing high cheekbones, a straight nose and a square jaw sporting a thick five o'clock shadow that was edging into a beard. His massive shoulders were hunched over the counter, a thick book open on the surface. What kept me on the spot were his eyes, leaf green and watching me intently.

I rubbed my arm again as I looked around.

“Well,” he said in a gruff voice, “you’ve got some power, but I’ve never seen you before.”

I walked past the shelves towards the counter. Statues, ritual tools, and basic low power spell components. Nothing I was looking for. I stopped at the counter. “I’m new to town. I got this address from a friend. She said I could pick up some supplies that I can’t seem to get anywhere else?”

“What kind of witch are you?” he asked.

I eyed him again and made a decision. “The kind that likes to keep to herself.”

He grinned again then nodded. “Alright. I’m Magnar and I’ll be giving you the ten-cent tour.” He got to his feet, and I wasn’t surprised when he was around Zeke’s height. He moved out from around the counter and gestured for me to follow. “As you can see, almost everything out on the floor is for low-power humans.” He moved to an arched doorway and led me into a large inventory room.

“Lexie. And, yeah, I noticed. It’s also dusty as hell.” I made a point to stay a few feet from him as I followed him into the back. “Why is that?”

“That would be the Coven’s doing.” He led me to the brick wall on the right and started down the stairs. “They’re a big deal here in Seattle. They hold a lot of power and use it however they want, which includes keeping the good quality supplies out of public reach.”

I followed him down the steps. “Why?”

He looked back at me over his shoulder. “Well, my theory is they want to control all the magic supplies so they can decide who gets access to what. They’re rather snobby about being witches here.” He stepped off the last step and moved further into the basement.

“Aren’t most witches?” I muttered as I looked around the room. It was an empty basement. Clean cement floor and walls.

“Not all.” He chuckled as he moved to stand in the middle of the room and turned to me. “They do seem few and far between, however. Anyway, Cerberus had already created this safe-haven—the paranormal market—a couple hundred years ago. At the time there were only so many portals into the market.”

I leaned against the banister. “So, he expanded his business.”

He nodded. “Yeah. He now has portals in every major city across the world. Ever been to the market?”

I shook my head.

He pointed to a spot on the floor a couple of feet from him. “If you want to go to the market you need to be over here.”

I pushed off the banister and moved to the spot.

He eyed me before pulling out a pocketknife and opening it. “Every portal has a guardian, and that guardian’s blood is the key to getting into the market and back.” He met my eyes. “A warning before we go. Do not sign anything while you are there. There may be species you don’t know about, but don’t stare or you’ll find yourself in the fighting ring. Do not shake anyone’s hand. Avoid any skin-to-skin contact. Do not leave with someone you do not know. And this time, do not go off on your own until I finish giving you the tour.”

I nodded.

He pressed the blade to his large thumb, but it wasn’t blood that welled against it. It was crushed clay. Magnar flicked the flecks down onto the floor. He said something in a language that I’d never heard before. A flame flickered to life from the clay flakes. The fire spread in all four directions, almost carving into the cement a design. I stayed still as the flames moved around us, revealing an elaborate circle of symbols and signs carved into the cement.

“Whoa,” I muttered, stunned at the beauty and intricacy. I watched as the flames met again and snapped out of existence. I looked up at Magnar only to realize we were now somewhere else. Around us was an enormous dark stone room, flaming braziers lining the walls and casting shadows across the floors. The air was cool and damp as it flowed over the uneven bedrock floor.

Magnar put his knife away and wiped his dusty finger on my forearm. “If there’s trouble, run out the gates to this room and jump into any portal mark. My blood will take you back to Seattle.” He stepped out of the circle and headed for an enormous set of armored gates. They were patched together from different sizes of metal plating. Most panels near the bottom were rusting from the damp, others higher up shiny and new.

Stunned, I followed my guide. The gates had to be around twenty feet high. Several large figures were dressed in what seemed to be a uniform—black slacks, a sleek white button-down dress shirt and a black blazer.

“Who are they?” I asked as we passed the gates.

“That’s the Guard,” Magnar said. “They work for Cerberus. They keep things somewhat civil in the market, or at the very least, following his

rules.”

“So, what exactly is the power level difference between a witch and a sorcerer?” I asked as we drew closer to a sparse crowd of people walking through the area just beyond the gates. The light changed from warm and inviting to cool, rippling green.

“Well, the scale and duration of spells. Witches cast spells that last their lifetime and affect a semi-small area, normally.” He stopped walking and turned to me. “Sorcerers craft spells that last centuries and beyond their deaths.”

“And their scale?” I asked.

“Look up,” he said, deadpan.

“Holy shit...” Three stories above us a mass of water moved, flowing overhead. Sunlight glowed through the water causing the rippling movement in the light. My jaw dropped, my eyebrows popping. “Are we —”

“We’re under international waters, in an unknown location. Yes,” Magnar said patiently.

I blinked up as a dark blue shape moved into view from the left. “That’s a whale.”

“Yes.” Magnar’s voice was strained as he was clearly trying not to laugh.

I stepped away from him and looked around. It seemed the market was in a long trench on the floor of the ocean. Above the entrance from the gates and along the entire wall were walkways, stalls, stores, all bustling and glowing inside with candlelight. I turned my back on the gates to find that this level also had stalls built into the stone walls. Across the mass of people were another three stories of stalls connected by walkways to the opposite side. I went to my toes to see the ends of the trench only to see that it curved away from the wall with the gate. The place was enormous.

Magnar moved closer. “Okay, stop staring or they’ll know you’re new and you’ll be a mark.”

I did as he said and turned to look up at him. “How big is the market?”

He grinned. “To tell you the truth, I don’t exactly know. It changes with the needs of the buyers or at Cerberus’s command.”

I shook my head. Okay, mental note. Never piss off Cerberus or get his attention, because he could wipe me out of existence without even breathing hard. “Okay....”

“Come on, I’ll show you around.” He tilted his head for me to follow. We walked out into the middle of the crowd and he gestured around us. Unmatched tables were spread here and there outside stalls and stores. Some were ancient and others looked as if they were fresh from IKEA. “Here is, well, basically the food court. Every stall in this section sells food and drink for anyone to enjoy while at the market. Pretty much anything you could want. Raw meat for shifters, blood for vampires, and so on.”

“A bar?” I asked looking at one shop, surprised.

He nodded. “A tavern. There are several throughout the market. But be careful, not everything is made for human consumption, and not every tavern allows humans entry.”

He started down the center of the walkway. “Now, there are a few sections here. This is food and drink; there’s an armory section for armor.”

“Obviously.” I walked with him, trying my best not to gawk at the crowd.

“There’s also weapons, a magic section, and a unique or rare supply section.” He glanced down at me then went back to watching the crowd around us. “Be careful in that last section. Some things...” He turned back to me. “Cerberus isn’t against the dark side of magic, so it’s all allowed here.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“Blood magic, curses, hexes, cursed objects, supplies for darker spells. You can make deals with someone to do it for you or other pretty horrible stuff for you. That sort of thing.” His voice was serious.

We walked past a large pair of doors set into the inner bedrock on the inner wall. They weren’t the first set we’d passed. “Where do those go?”

Magnar sighed. “Those lead to the arena.”

“Arena?” I asked, curious.

“Yeah. It’s like underground mixed martial arts matches for humans. Except it’s for supernatural species, and it’s usually to the death.”

My eyebrows shot up. “To the death?”

“Unless agreed otherwise.” Magnar turned back to me. “If it’s a matter of insult, it’s always a death match. If it’s for entertainment and betting, then it might not be to the death. It depends on who’s fighting that night.”

“People bet on these things?” I asked.

He nodded. “A percentage of the bets go to Cerberus. Of that money, a good chunk goes to each of the fighters. Some make a career out of it.”

Yeah... no thanks. "I need to get some magic supplies."

He led me back past all the food stalls and vendors to the magic section.

A scent filled my nose as we walked through the section. "Is that cedar?"

"Yes. Yes, it is," a confident voice called from one of the stalls. "I have to keep burning it to clear the energy around here."

I turned to find a small woman. And I mean small. She stood on a stool behind the counter, she had to be around two feet tall. Her hair was ginger, shoulder length and tousled about. Her big eyes were amber and bright as they ran over me. Her ears were shaped like a fox. Only without fur and with several wooden piercings along the cartilage edge. Her face was heart shaped and pretty but had a look as if she were appraising something. She wore wool tunic and leather britches that seemed to end mid calf. And... she was barefoot. She leaned over the counter to look down the way towards the next section. "Because of you foul pricks!"

My eyebrows shot up as Magnar chuckled.

She stood up straight again with her hands on her slim hips and fixed her gaze on Magnar. "Another new one, eh?"

Magnar nodded, his body relaxed. "Lexie, this is Neely. She's a gnome, and a rather vocal protester of the darker section of the market." He turned to me. "If you ever need to know who's a good vendor to do business with, ask her. She'll set you on the right path."

I nodded then turned back to Neely. "Nice to meet you."

She eyed me from head to toe again then grinned. "You too. What are you looking for?"

"Warding supplies," I answered.

Her eyebrow went up. "What kind?"

"Um, mostly keeping away evil and for protection," I said, not wanting anyone to know I was a necro. "I've been going with Scandinavian lore for them."

Neely nodded. "Rock, symbols, and blood to power it, right?"

"Yeah." I glanced at Magnar only to find him leaning against the stall with an amused grin.

"I've got something better and easier." She stepped off to the side of the stool and hurried into the store. She grabbed several vines of ivy, a few branches with long thin leaves, and another set of brown branches. The pile was bigger than her as she hustled back and dumped the plants on the

counter. She climbed back up on her stool and went to work. "With those kinds of spells, the wards need to be outside in the elements. Right?"

"That's right." I watched her quick hands create the bones of a wreath with the bendable sticks.

She grabbed a long vine of ivy and began weaving it through the wreath. "And you have to remake them whenever the elements wear them out."

"Pretty much," I said.

"And since you're here with Magnar, I imagine you're from the Pacific Northwest of the States." She began adding another vine of ivy.

"Yep."

Neely nodded. "Yeah, that'd quickly become an annoying chore with how often it rains there." Her hands worked so fast I could barely follow them. "A wreath of rowan, ivy and blackberry is a rather nice shield against all evil. At least, the passive kind of shield."

"Nice?" Magnar chuckled and shook his head before meeting my gaze. "She's building you the equivalent of doomsday bunker. With blackberry in there, spells won't even work on the building. These are gnome-grown materials which means they're extremely potent, much more so than naturally occurring ones."

I looked down at the nearly completed wreath with interest. "Really?"

Neely ran her finger around the outer edge of the wreath. Energy filled the air, raising the hair on my arms. It was only a moment before it was gone. Neely looked up at me. "That's just a little magic to keep the wreath from falling apart. Basically, you hang this on the front door of any house, on the outside or inside, and the house will be protected for a year, thus turning an annoying weekly chore into a yearly one."

"And keeping you in business," Magnar added with a grin.

Neely shot him a look. "My forests aren't going to protect themselves."

Magnar raised his hands in surrender but kept grinning.

I eyed the wreath. "Would this work on a dorm room in a university?"

Neely thought about it. "For that I'd make a smaller version, but yes."

"What about in a car?" I asked, wondering what else I could do with this.

"I never thought to try it." Neely's eyebrows went up. "I'll make one for your car for free, and you tell me how it works. Deal?"

I thought about it. “Kinda hoping I won’t need to test it, but deal. Also, could I get three dorm room sized too, please.”

“Okay, in US currency, the house wreath will be a hundred and twenty. The dorm size will be forty each. Does that work for you?”

I thought about it. “Do you have any angelica for sale?”

Neely and Magnar exchanged a look.

Neely eyed me again. “What do you need that kind of protection for? You got some witch after you?”

“It’s not for me.” And that was all I was going to say.

Neely took a few seconds then nodded. “How much do you need? And in what form?”

“Ten ounces of fresh or powered should do it for now,” I said.

Neely nodded then went back into the shop for materials.

Magnar was watching me carefully. “If you’re looking for mobile protection from spells, I can take you to a great amulet maker a few stalls down. If you tell them what you’re looking for it might take a few days, but it’ll be damn good work.”

I thought about it then nodded. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to get the guys some more protection than just their shield generators. “Maybe next time. This is going to tap me out for a bit.”

Magnar nodded, his eyes full of understanding. “The market isn’t cheap.”

Neely quickly finished making the wreaths and getting the herb I asked for. I was about to pay when a phone rang. Neely and Magnar went still as both of their gazes darted to the old-fashioned black phone on the counter to the right of the antique register. The black surface was covered in a thick layer of dust, no buttons in sight.

Frowning, Neely picked it up. “Neely.” Whatever she heard on the other side didn’t make her any happier. Her gaze shot to me and stayed there. “Understood.” She hung up.

When she turned back, her face was blank.

I tried to hand her the money, but she didn’t take it.

“It’s been taken care of.” Neely picked up the large blue paper bag with the words ‘the market’ written across it in gold, then handed it to me. “Cerberus says welcome to the market, necromancer.”

My heart dropped. I forced myself to wrap my fingers around the handle of the bag. Magnar and Neely stared at me as if I’d grown a second head.

“Thank you, Neely. Hope to see you next time.” I turned and hurried back toward the portal room. Well, as much as I dared to hurry. There was no way I was letting this guy think he got to me. My heart pounded in my chest as I eyed the walkways above, searching for someone who was paying too much attention to me. I couldn’t find anyone. Everyone was going about their business.

Magnar caught up to me in a couple strides, then directed me where I needed to go. He seemed to grasp that I wanted to get the hell out of here. Now.

We walked through the gates back to the portal room and stepped onto the very first circle. The world rushed by in waves of color, feeling as if the floor dropped out from under me. Then I was in the basement of Magnar’s shop again.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax my shoulders.

Magnar eyed me. “That was interesting.”

I met his gaze. “I take it Cerberus doesn’t usually give new people a welcome message?”

He shook his head slowly.

I cursed and headed for the stairs.

He followed me up the stairs. “How the hell does he know about you if you’ve never been to the market?”

“I used up all my good luck last year,” I muttered as I reached the first floor, heading for the door.

“Cerberus is going to know what you bought.” Magnar’s voice stopped me in my tracks. “He’s going to know you’re locking your people and places up tight.”

I turned back to him. “So?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Innocent people don’t do that.”

“Stupid people don’t do that,” I scoffed. “I’m a necro. Witches have come after me simply because they don’t like what I am. I’m not going to get caught off guard again.”

“Again?” His eyes narrowed on mine. “Wait. Necro... Where did you move from?”

I didn’t say a word.

He raised an eyebrow. “Montana, by any chance?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I was in the middle of that mess.”

Understanding filled his eyes, along with sympathy. “And a picture forms. I’m getting a drink, have a seat.”

I eyed him warily. “Why?”

“‘Cause if half of what I’ve heard about Montana is true, you’ve just walked into the woods without a map.” His eyes sparkled. “I can at least give you the lay of the land.”

I thought about it then nodded. Anything to give me an idea of what the hell was going on and where I stood in this freaking city. I took a seat on one of the overstuffed chairs.

Magnar ducked behind the counter and came back around with a water bottle, a tumbler and a large bottle of scotch. He handed me the water. “I figure you’re underage.”

I nodded and took the bottle.

He poured himself a double, set the bottle down and sat across the small table from me. “So, you’re a necro. What’s the real story about Montana?”

“First, tell me what they’re saying,” I countered.

He set his glass on his knee. “They say a necromancer was meddling where they shouldn’t have. Some witches went after them and the necro wiped the floor with them. Then the story changed and no one can get a straight answer.”

I scoffed. “Wow. That’s the story that’s circulating?”

He nodded and took a drink. “So, what really happened?”

I took a sip then answered. “Someone decided to close the Veil, which caused all sorts of bullshit that could have ended the world. I started working to fix it by crossing the dead. Got some off-brand abilities in the process, and a group of witches—who were already trying to take over the country—didn’t like it. At the end, the leader allowed herself and her followers to become possessed by demons to try and stop me. They lost. The end.”

His grin was back as he leaned forward. “How did they lose?”

I half shrugged. “I may have blown up a mansion with all of us inside.

His eyebrows shot up. “Damn. That’s hardcore.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” I looked down at my bottle without really seeing it. “After that, I found the person who started it all. He’s dead now.”

“Wait, if you were inside, how did you survive?” he asked, his brow drawn down.

I met his gaze. "That's a different story. Look, you said you could give me the lay of the land?"

He finished his sip. "Okay, in Seattle there are several supernatural groups. Werewolves, the Coven, and the Templars."

"What about vamps?" I asked.

His eyes grew shadowed as he shook his head. "The Coven all but hunted them down and slaughtered them. If they're here, they're in hiding."

Interesting.... "Why did they take out the vampire nest? Were they killing people? Did they go psycho?"

He shook his head. "That's the thing; no one knows why. The vampire businesses were gaining ground in town. Personally, I think that might have been enough. The Coven does not like competition."

That didn't sound right. "The vamp nest was taken out by the Coven because of their businesses, and the Templars did nothing about it?"

He scoffed. "The Templars are... well, another issue in Seattle. At this point they're happy twirling their thumbs."

I leaned forward. "They don't do anything?"

He shook his head. "They do some of their shit. Take care of the humans who see something they shouldn't, deal with hauntings, possessions and such, but they stay away from everyone else while doing their job."

"So they're acting like just another group and not as the peacekeepers they're supposed to be?" I asked.

Magnar shrugged. "Pretty much. I don't know what their deal is. On the business side of Seattle you have the Coven. They have a huge influence here in the city. We're talking hospitals, medical clinics, fashion stores, they even have fingers in the universities. Most of it is all run by the Coven. And they use that leverage to get the outcomes they want. Mercilessly."

"They sound fun," I muttered before taking another drink.

"Don't they?" he quipped.

"The Coven seem to have a nice little kingdom here." I eyed the tapestry on the wall above his head. "So, why take on the responsibility and risk of training a necro?"

His eyes snapped to mine. "They're training you?"

"Lessons in energy manipulation, yeah," I said, refocusing on him.

"I've been here a long time and I've never seen them do anything without an agenda. They want something from you."

It looked that way. Then it hit me. “Do the Templars do much recruiting around here?”

He shook his head. “None.”

I cursed and stared at one of the bookcases. The guys were right, the Templars wanted something from me too.

“Watch your back with the Coven. They won’t hesitate to drive a knife into it.”

I nodded.

He eyed me. “And you also, somehow, have Cerberus’s attention.”

I began rubbing my suddenly throbbing temples. “Apparently.”

“Look, having Cerberus’s attention has rarely been a good thing.”

“I’ve heard,” I muttered.

“Alright, for a small thirty-dollar fee each trip,” he said. “if you need something from the market tell me and I’ll play delivery to keep you out of Cerberus’s eye as much as I can.”

I eyed him. “Why would you do that?”

His eyes grew dark. “Because the last person that captured his attention disappeared. You seem like you’re just trying to tread water at this point.”

I eyed him. “What’s the real reason?”

He frowned, then downed the rest of his scotch before answering. “I’m a golem, so if I see a chance to help a good person, I take it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “As in, made of clay, golem?” That at least explained the smear of clay on my arm instead of blood.

Magnar filled his glass again. “Doomed to walk the earth until I’m redeemed of doing the unthinkable.” He turned to me. “And that’s all you’re getting. At least for now, little necromancer.”

I nodded that I understood. It was his history; he didn’t have to share it. “I appreciate it, and I’ll take you up on your offer.”

He nodded.

“Thanks for the water,” I said, getting to my feet. “And the advice.”

He nodded then tossed back another drink as I headed out the door.

I WAS MUTTERING TO MYSELF AND LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER THE ENTIRE way home. By the time I reached the dorm, I was pretty sure I wasn’t followed. I closed the door, striding into the room and stopping dead. My bed was torn apart. The mattress was bare and hanging half off the box

spring. Everything that had been on my desk was now on the floor, including the electric kettle. Every drawer was pulled out, emptied, and thrown across the room.

“Motherfucker!” I shouted, setting the big blue bag and messenger bag on my bare mattress. I went straight to my locked boxes. Everything was fine, they were still locked, but dinged as if used them as a battering ram.

The door opened and closed as I got to my feet.

“What the hell happened?” Nova asked as she stopped at the end of my bed.

“You know about as much as I do.” I sighed wearily. I went to lift and shift my mattress back into place on the bed. “I walked in and found this.”

Nova helped. When we set it down on the frame her gaze was on the blue and gold bag. As she straightened, she asked, “What did you get at the market?”

I bent to pick up the bed sheets off the floor as her words sank in. Slowly, I straightened and met her gaze. “You’re a witch.”

Nova blinked and seemed to realize she’d blown it. She put her hand on her hip and tilted her head. “Yeah, I’m a witch.”

“Are you here to spy on me?” I asked, needing to know.

She scowled at me. “I’m here to go to college.”

I turned and faced her. “Did you get assigned to this room to spy on me for the Coven?”

Nova went to sit on her bed. “And to report everything you do.”

I turned my back on her and focused on picking up my stuff with trembling hands. Shock coursed through me. It wasn’t like I actually knew her, but the betrayal burned through my chest as I shoved my belongings back where they should have been.

“Did you really think the Council would let you loose in the city and not have someone watching you?” she asked.

I took several deep breaths as I tried to put stuff away, but I’d had about all I could take today with being watched and followed. I slammed my drawer closed and turned to face her. “You mean, did I think I’d be able to come to Seattle like a normal person and just live my life? Yeah. I’d kinda hoped. Stupid me, right?” I put on the fakest smile I had, picked up the bags off the bed and strode out of the dorm room, not even bothering to close it behind me.

I hadn’t calmed down by the time I was knocking on Ethan’s door.

He opened the door quickly, his scowl disappearing as he realized it was me. “What the hell, Lexie?”

I shoved the blue bag into his hands and walked past him. “Take one of the little wreaths and hang it on your door.” Then I flopped down onto his unmade bed, my face buried in the pillow, and proceeded to scream.

The door closed by the time I was done.

The bed shifted as he sat beside me, his warm hand going to my hip. “What’s up?”

I turned my head on the pillow so I could see him. “I’m a fucking idiot.”

He waited for me to continue. “You’re going to have to narrow it down for me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He smirked. “What happened?”

“I went to the market and Cerberus—the super-powerful, creepy owner of the market—was apparently watching me, so I got the hell out of there,” I muttered, staring at a plastic cup sitting on the desk beside the bed. “Then I went back to my trashed dorm and figured out that Nova is a plant from the Coven.”

“That bitch,” Ethan bit out.

Weariness washed over me. “I’m just really tired of being followed.”

His hand moved up my back, rubbing in a soothing circular motion. “I’m sorry, beautiful. It really sucks when people aren’t who they seem to be.”

I nodded as I began to relax under his hand. “And it looks like you guys were right. The Coven wants something from me, and the Templars do too, so they probably won’t go away.”

The bed shifted. Ethan’s warm, firm body pressed against my side. I scooted over but retained possession of the pillow.

“Think of it this way,” he said. “You’ve got leverage over both of them. For now, they’re playing nice.”

“I don’t want to play cat and mouse games anymore,” I muttered. “Been there, done that. I’ve had my fill.”

Ethan laid his head down next to mine. “Maybe this time, instead of just surviving, we can dominate.”

I opened an eye and met his. “I’m listening.”

He grinned. “What if you went on the offensive instead of always being on defense? Start digging into their business, their secrets, find their hidden

skeletons. Maybe we could find out what they're wanting before they're ready for you."

I rolled to my side and thought it over. The fight with Jadis had really been all defensive reactions just buying more and more time until I could open the Veil. There really was no reason I couldn't do what Ethan was saying. If the Templars had details from Boulder, if the Coven knew what happened in Montana, I could throw them off. "You think I should play dumb as a cover."

"It's always easier to find secrets when people think you're an idiot," he said. "My brother has had years of practice."

I rolled my eyes and really thought about it. "I'd need to bring it up at a meeting."

"We can do that Sunday." He quickly got out of bed and turned to me. "Tonight you and I are going out."

My eyebrows went up. "Out?"

"Out." Ethan reached down and took my hand. "Come on, beautiful."

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" I ASKED ETHAN AS WE WALKED OFF CAMPUS AND onto frat row.

"We're going to a party." He grinned down at me.

I smiled. "I have so much reading and homework already."

"You've been good all week, beautiful, be naughty for a while." He twitched his eyebrows at me.

I snorted.

His thumb ran over my ring finger as we walked. "So, you said yes."

I smiled. "You found the ring. I'd think you'd know what it means."

He chuckled. "Does this mean I'm going to get dumped soon?"

I shook my head as music began to get louder. "Nope."

His fingers squeezed mine as he pulled me toward one house that was bursting at the seams. Techno music poured out of the house. Colored lights flashed through the windows as groups of people hung out on the lawn. Ethan skipped the line waiting to get in and went straight toward the guy who seemed to be in charge.

"Hey, Ethan!" The big burly guy at the door smiled as he waved us up.

"Hey, Keith!" Ethan fist bumped the guy. "This is Lexie, man."

Keith turned to me with his brows up. "You're Lexie? I was starting to think you didn't exist."

I gave him a polite chuckle. "Oh, I exist."

Keith stepped out of the doorway. "Go on in, it's just the usual crowd tonight."

Usual crowd? Ethan had a usual crowd at parties? We'd been here a week! How often was he going to parties?

Ethan took my hand and led me past Keith into the house. The place was jam packed. The music was thumping, the beer was flowing, and we barely made it into the living room before someone recognized Ethan.

"Ethan! You made it!" a girl called as she emerged from the crowd. Pretty, blonde and carrying a red solo cup, her blue eyes went to his hand in mine.

I stiffened, expecting trouble.

Instead, she smiled a genuine smile. "And you must be Lexie."

It took me a second to answer. "Um, yeah. That's me."

"We've all heard so much about you." When she reached us, she pulled me into a hug.

My eyebrows shot up as I stiffened. "Oh!"

"Chelsey, you're right, this is my Lexie." Ethan wrapped his arm around my back and quickly pulled me back to his side.

She beamed at me. "Get your drinks and come out to the back porch, it's quieter." She turned to Ethan. "Desi brought her guitar tonight."

Ethan chuckled. "You ladies are just determined to hear me play."

Chelsey held her drink up. "Damn right!" She turned and headed deeper into the house.

I turned to Ethan. "You've made a lot of friends."

He shrugged as he started guiding me through the house. "Mostly the couples crowd. I try to stay away from the singles as much as possible."

I smiled to myself as I followed him through the living room and into the dining room. When we both had our own drinks we headed through the kitchen where Ethan was greeted again by several guys, one of whom pulled out a five and handed it to another when Ethan introduced me.

The winner of the bet stepped forward. "Come on out back. Desi brought her guitar, and she won't stop going on about you singing tonight."

Ethan chuckled as we followed him out the back door and onto a large screened porch. A group of people sitting on a couple of old couches

greeted Ethan. They waved us over.

“Hey, everyone, this is Lexie. Yes, she’s real.” Ethan gestured for me to take the seat while he settled himself on the arm of the couch. Everyone chuckled.

“Hi.” I gave a small wave before I sat down beside Ethan.

“I’m so glad you came tonight,” the blonde who hugged me earlier said as she set her hand on the blonde guy next to her. “I’m Chelsey, this is my man, Aaron.” His wide shoulders were muscled and screamed quarterback. His square jaw clean shaven, His gray-blue eyes were all for Chelsey.

Chelsey pointed to an Asian girl sitting beside another girl with mousy-brown hair. “That’s Desi and Samantha.”

The Asian girl raised her hand. Her short pixie cut was black with purple streaks through the thick mass. Her almond shaped eyes were warm as she introduced herself. “I’m Desi, I belong to Samantha.”

The girl chuckled as she looked at Desi with adoration on her pretty face. “I don’t think of you as property.”

“I do,” Desi countered with a wink that made Samantha blush prettily.

The two guys from the kitchen joined us.

“Eric is the one with the beer,” Ethan pointed out as they took the last couch together, “and the other is Jeremy.”

“Ah, so, Jeremy is the one who won the bet over whether I was real or not,” I teased.

The guys chuckled.

“Sorry about that,” Eric said, his tanned cheeks darkening. The guy was adorable in a puppy dog way; big brown eyes, round cheeks and an easy smile.

I waved his apology away. “Don’t worry about it, I don’t blame ya.”

“So, have you found a tattoo shop with an open spot for an internship?” Desi asked, turning back to me.

Surprised, I blinked before I answered. “Um, no, I haven’t had a chance to look yet.”

“There’s this wonderful artist on Bleeker Street,” Aaron said, pulling out his phone and bringing something up before handing it over to me. “His work with color is amazing.”

Taking the phone with a smile, it only took a glance to see that he was right. I looked up at him. “Are you an artist?”

Aaron finished sipping his beer and shook his head. "Just an enthusiast."

"He can't even draw a cat," Chelsey said, "but he still loves it."

"Sounds like Asher," Ethan and I said in unison. We turned to each other and chuckled.

"Asher?" Samantha asked.

"Oh, he's one of our friends," I hedged.

"He's one of Lexie's other boyfriends," Ethan said.

"Oh, yeah," Keith said. "You guys are trying polyandry. I remember now."

I turned to Ethan, my eyebrows raised. "You really have been sharing."

Ethan winked at me. "In more ways than one."

I snorted, my face burning as the others chuckled.

Ethan turned back to his friends. "She also happens to be wearing a specific piece of jewelry on a very special finger this evening."

The others gaped.

"Ohmygod," Samantha gasped. "You two are engaged?"

"Um-I-I," I stammered.

"Nope. Miles popped the question last night," Ethan all but gushed.

"Dammit, Snoopy," I squeaked, "I haven't even told the other guys. Let's not start telling the entire university."

"Oh, yeah." He turned to the others. "Don't tell anyone."

Everyone chuckled while I shook my head. "Get your own gossip, man."

Ethan shrugged before looking at his friends. "You guys are going to need to feed my addiction."

I chuckled and began to relax. Over the next couple hours I came to know his new friends. They were nice, funny and laid back. No one got wasted, or even tipsy, which was a nice change from the high school parties we left in Montana. Sure, there were questions about how the poly thing worked, and we answered as best we could, but mostly there was acceptance and normalcy.

After a couple more drinks, Desi reached down and opened her guitar case.

Ethan grinned as he handed me his cup, reaching for the guitar. I was smiling as he sat back down and checked the tuning on it. He made a slight

adjustment then strummed until he was satisfied. “Alright, what do you want to hear?”

“A love song,” Chelsey called out.

Ethan nodded and immediately began playing A Thousand Years. I smiled as Ethan’s smoky voice rolled over the group. While Ethan performing was always great to watch, it was even more fun to watch the people watching Ethan. Some reached to hold their significant other, some swayed, some sang quietly along, but all of them sat in the palm of his hand as he smoothly went from song to song. Finally he had to take a drink of his beer.

Ethan’s cheeks burned russet as he handed back his cup. “Any other requests?”

“I think we need a duet,” Desi said excitedly. “Lexie, do you sing?”

My heart leapt into my throat. The truth was, I used to sing with Ethan’s band in high school. Until my stalker tried to strangle me and damaged my voice. Since then... not a note in public. For the first time in years, I felt that urge again.

“Lexie?” Ethan asked softly. “You don’t have to.”

I turned back to him, pressed my lips together then nodded slowly.

Ethan met my gaze. “You know what I want to hear, Beautiful.”

I nodded and swallowed hard. Was I really going to do this? It was strange, a part of me was ready for this, the other part of me was terrified.

Ethan began playing the notes for We Go Down Together. It was a good song in my range. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I pushed everything else away, met his gaze and sang. Everything else but Ethan and the music faded into the background. I kept the beat with my foot as my voice came out clear and in key.

Ethan took the second verse, his voice unbelievably sweet to my ears. From then on we alternated verses but always sang together on the chorus. By the time our voices faded out my eyes burned. Applause filled the back porch. Apparently, we’d drawn a crowd. Ethan got to his feet then pulled me to mine. He hugged me tight, his lips at my ear. “Welcome back, beautiful.”

I buried my face in the crook of his neck and smiled.

Saturday - Early Morning

A rustle of fabric. A quick inhale. The thick scent of burnt sugar. Close. Too close. My eyes shot open. Plunging down towards me was the end of a sharp knife. Adrenaline burned through me, I brought my forearm up and knocked the knife to the side. It plunged down into my mattress by my shoulder. In that second, I looked up and met Elena's furious eyes.

"What the fucking hell!" I shouted as she tried to pull the knife out of my bed. I held on to it as I slammed my right knee into the side of head. She went down like a bag of rocks. I let my momentum bring me up then scrambled down the bed to create some distance while the others rushed out of bed. Dawn light glinted off the knife.

"What happened?" Nova asked as she moved to the middle of the room.

"She fucking tried to stab me!" I snapped.

Elena rose on unsteady legs, her body swaying back and forth.

"What did you do to her?" Nova demanded as she held Elena's arm.

I scowled at her. "I was fucking asleep!"

I met Elena's eyes again. They were wide, dark and... oddly empty. As if no one were home. "Cut her. Burn her. That'll make everything right again." Elena muttered as she stumbled a step forward.

Gemma and Nova both grabbed Elena as she tried to rush me. Elena screamed as they restrained her, her eyes wild as she fought against their hold.

"I'm calling the cops." I snagged my phone out of my sheets and backed up even further. Once I was out of Elena's eyesight she stopped screaming. There was a thump on the carpet as the operator answered.

"911, what's your emergency?" a woman's voice asked.

"Hi, yeah, my dormmate just tried to kill me," I said into the phone. "Gonna need the cops."

"And an ambulance!" Gemma shouted.

"And an ambulance," I repeated.

"She's the devil..." Elena rasped from the floor. "She's going to bring us to ruin... The whore..."

"Like, now." I went into the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind me. She wasn't trying to kill the others, just me. With me out of sight she wasn't even fighting them.

The woman on the phone was trying to get my address. I told her which university, which hall and room. I perched on the closed toilet lid and watched the door carefully.

"Campus security is already on their way, and we have several cars coming," she said in a calm voice, "along with an ambulance. Are you hurt?"

I took several breaths as her words finally got through. I looked down to find blood. Heart in my throat, I looked for source. "Yeah, um, just a cut on my forearm."

"Okay, you need to try to stop the bleeding," she said.

I reached over, grabbed my towel and applied pressure with a shaking hand.

Pounding on the outer door helped me focus on where I was and what I needed to do. "Security is here, I think."

Gemma's worried voice was muffled through the door as she let in two guards.

"Yeah, they're here. I'm, I'm fine. Thank you." I stopped pressing on the gash to hang up then picked the closest boyfriend.

"Too early, Red," Isaac muttered.

"Elena tried to kill me," I said, still almost not believing it myself.

“What?” Isaac suddenly sounded wide awake. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I’m currently locked in my bathroom waiting for the cops to show. Campus security are already in the room, so yeah, I guess I’m safe.”

A door slammed on his side of the line. He began to breathe deeper. “Are you hurt?”

I thought about it. “Um... I’m fine. It’s nothing new at this point.”

“I’m on my way, Red,” he promised.

I nodded even though he couldn’t see it. I hung up the phone and went back to trying to stop the blood dripping down my arm. Elena yelled again about how evil I was.

Several deep voices sounded outside and joined the others, but I couldn’t make out anything they were saying. No one asked for me, and they seemed to have it under control, so I stayed put.

Was this what my life was going to be like now? Constantly under surveillance? Threat of attack? Wondering who was a real friend and who was just pretending so they could spy on me? Am I going to be looking over my shoulder everywhere I go? I thought in my dorm, at least, I wouldn’t. That I could let down my guard, have some peace and still be safe. Apparently, that wasn’t the case. I was going to have to be suspicious of everyone new in my life. All the time. I checked to see if the bleeding had stopped. It had.

Weariness washed over me. I didn’t want to live my life that way, but it didn’t seem like I was going to be given a choice in the matter. That’s just the way it was going to be. The only thing I had a choice in was how to react. Accept it, deal and do what I had to do to be safe. *Or* fight it, be angry about it, and make myself miserable.

I sighed. It wasn’t much of a choice. I didn’t want to be miserable, so I’d deal with it.

Several male voices rose in the room. “Hey! You can’t come in here!”

“Get out of my way!” Isaac all but punched on the door. “Lexie! Open the door.”

I reached over and unlocked it. “It’s open.”

Isaac pushed the door open, his eyes raking over me. His blue hair was sticking out everywhere. He was only in a pair of sweats and, well, that was it. He hadn’t even stopped to put on shoes. Paired with the worried look on his face, it was kinda funny.

“Hey, Cookie Monster,” I said, my voice quiet.

His brow drew down as he moved to kneel in front of me. “Hey, Red.” He kept his voice just as soft as I did. “How you doing?”

I met his eyes and nodded. “Just having an epiphany.”

“In the bathroom?” He grinned a little. “Sitting on the toilet?”

“Best place for them,” I quipped.

Isaac took a look at my arm. “You stopped the bleeding.”

“Yep,” I chirped. “I don’t think I’ll need stitches.”

A man in a police uniform stepped into the doorway of the bathroom, his attention on us. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve needed stitches before,” I muttered, not bothering to even look at the guy.

Isaac got to his feet and rummaged in the medicine cabinet. He pulled out peroxide and bandages. “Put your arm in the sink, Red.”

I turned on the toilet lid and did as he asked.

He began cleaning my arm. “Sorry, Red.”

I hissed at the pain and counted in my head trying to distract myself.

The man shifted, drawing my attention to him. “Why don’t you tell me your version of what happened?”

I bit back a curse and turned to the guy. “I was asleep. I heard a noise. Woke up to Elena trying to drive a knife into my chest.”

The peroxide stopped getting fizzy. Isaac began rinsing it off.

“I deflected the knife to the mattress, and when she began to try to pull it out I kneed her in the head. Then I scrambled away.” I said, my voice matter of fact while Isaac dried my arm.

“Any reason why she would just attack you like that?” The officer asked.

“Not a clue,” I muttered as we began bandaging my arm. A couple of four-by-four gauze pads, some tape, and I was ready to go. “Thanks, Cookie Monster.”

“Anytime.” Isaac gave my hand a squeeze before he pulled his phone out of his sweats. “If you’re good, I’m going to call the others.”

I nodded.

He put his phone to his ear and squeezed out of the bathroom. “Miles, Lexie is okay but—” That was all I heard as he left my dorm room.

The officer turned back to me. “Did you interact with her at all yesterday?”

I sighed and answered his questions.

I was repeating the story for the fourth time when Miles appeared over the cop's shoulder.

His chestnut hair was tousled, his face pale enough that his emerald eyes almost glowed against his skin. Unlike Isaac, he took the time for jeans, a shirt, and sneakers. "How many times have you gone over what happened?"

The officer practically jumped out of his skin. He turned in the doorway so he could watch us both. "Sneaking up on an officer isn't a good idea."

Miles ignored him and waited for my answer.

"Four," I answered.

Miles' brow drew down. "Then that's enough. Come on out, we're taking you home."

My eyebrow shot up. "Zeke's here?" I hadn't heard any shouting or cursing. Did the cops taser him?

"Not yet, but he's on his way. I told him to meet us at the house." Miles stepped back away from the doorway.

I got to my feet and tried to get past the officer, but he didn't move.

"Excuse me," I said.

The cop shook his head. "We still have some questions for you."

Miles' face grew blank. "Is she under arrest?"

"No, she's free to go." The officer stepped out of the bathroom doorway.

I moved into the foyer. Miles held one of his faded green hoodies out for me to put on. Very aware of everyone was watching us, I slipped my arms into the hoodie and pulled it closed before turning to Miles. "Thanks."

A man in a wrinkled suit came out of the bedroom. "Miss Delaney, I'm Detective Abers, and we need to take your statement before you go anywhere." He wasn't overly tall, but his shoulders were wide. Greasy black hair shone in the light from the bathroom. The black scruff on his jaw said he hadn't shaved recently, and the mustard stain on his black tie was clearly not from this morning.

My eyes went to the officer beside him then back to him. "Isn't that what I've just repeated four times?"

Abhors glanced at the uniformed cop then back to me. "Who did you give your statement to?"

I pointed to the officer beside him. "He was questioning me in the bathroom."

The cop shifted on his feet.

The detective glared at the officer then turned back to me. "I'm sorry, but he's not in any position to be asking you any questions. He's a rookie."

The rookie officer stepped further into the room away from us. Abhors turned back to me. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to need to take your statement. Again."

I sighed. "I woke up, stopped her from stabbing me, kned her in the head. The others woke up and restrained her. I went into the bathroom and called you guys. You guys showed up. The end." My voice was getting raspier and raspier as I spoke, the old injury that still cropped up sometimes when I talked a lot.

The detective wrote down what I said. "Okay, did you have any contact with Elena yesterday?"

That's when I hit my wall. "You know what, no. I'm done." I turned to walk away.

"Miss, we need to know what happened here," he said politely.

I turned back to gesture at the cop. "Ask this fucker, he's asked all these questions already."

"And I'm sorry for that," Abhors said again.

I hung my head and sighed deeply. I knew he was just doing his job, but a... At that moment I had nothing left.

Miles pulled his wallet out of his pocket, handing a business card to the cop. "Any further questions will have to go through her lawyer. Later this afternoon."

The detective eyed me then nodded. "I can work with that."

I rested my forehead against Miles' chest and didn't even have the energy to thank him.

Miles tucked his wallet away. "Can we get some of her clothes before we leave?"

I opened my eyes and looked down at myself. Cotton shorts, a cami and Miles' hoodie. It didn't even occur to me.

"At this point it's a crime scene, so no," Abhors said apologetically, "but I think we might be able to clear the scene by this afternoon."

"Hmm," Miles murmured before he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and guided me out into the hallway. The hallway was crowded,

everyone in the building must have come to watch the action. Isaac moved in front of us clearing a path while Miles kept me close as we started for the stairwell.

Everyone stared, eyeing me from head to toe as we moved down the hall. No one said a word. It was odd. As if, somehow, I was guilty of something. I shoved that thought away before it could get its claws into me.

When we reached the lobby, I asked. "Where's Ethan?"

Miles and Isaac shared a look over my head.

"He didn't answer." Isaac said. "While you head over to Miles' I'll go find him."

I nodded. Isaac hurried ahead and out of the building.

"You're bare foot, let me carry you." Miles said, stopping me before I stepped outside.

I eyed the wet ground and thought about how far the parking lot was. "It's fine." I stepped outside.

He didn't push, but he was tapping his fingers on his keyring by the time we reached the SUV.

Miles was quiet most of the way to his house. After we crossed the bridge, he cleared his throat. "Lexie?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you consider moving into my house?" he asked in a rush.

I smiled to myself. His voice was tight, his fingers gripping the steering wheel till his knuckles were white. He hadn't even been that nervous when he'd asked me to marry him.

"I know you like your independence and your own space, but the house is large enough that you can have your own room and perhaps an art studio on the top—"

"Genius," I said softly as I turned to him, "I was already going to ask."

He glanced at me before focusing on the road again. "You were?"

"Uh-huh. I had a realization when I was trying to stop the bleeding." I leaned my head on the headrest and watched him drive. "I need a safe place, and my safe place is with you and the guys."

He reached over the console and took my hand. "I'll have furniture delivered by tomorrow morning."

"I'll pay you back in rent." I smiled. "Though, I do want the same mattress you have."

He chuckled as he pulled into his driveway. "You really liked that mattress."

"It is so comfy," I said with enthusiasm, "like sleeping on a supportive cloud."

Miles was grinning as he parked the SUV.

When I reached for the door it opened on its own.

Zeke was in the doorway, blocking out the sunrise as he began to examine me for injuries.

I simply sat and waited until he was satisfied that I was fine. I'd been through it before and, no doubt, would again. Zeke finally took a deep breath and met my eyes. "Did you get a good shot in?"

I snorted. "I kneed her in the head."

He nodded. "Good." Then he reached into the SUV and lifted me out of the car.

"Zeke. I can walk," I bit out while hanging over his shoulder.

"You're barefoot," he countered as he climbed the cement steps into the house, his big hand wrapping around the back of my upper thigh. "And why the hell are you out in your pjs?"

"They wouldn't let her take anything, it's a crime scene," Miles explained as he followed us into the house.

"There, we're inside," I said, "put me down."

Zeke ignored me as he carried me into the kitchen. He was muttering curses under his breath as he sat me on the counter and turned me to put my feet in the sink. "Wash your feet."

I met his eyes and waited.

He sighed. "Please? I want to make sure you didn't cut them up."

I grumbled about over-protective giants while I did as he asked. Miles left the room, leaving me in Zeke's care.

Once he'd satisfied himself that I was fine I took my feet out of the sink. His sky-blue eyes ran over me again. "Lexie, I think you should move in with Miles."

I grinned up at the giant of the North. "We already talked about it in the car on the way here. I'm moving in."

Zeke's shoulders relaxed. He eyed me with suspicion. "I was expecting more of a fight."

"I don't have it in me right now," I said. "Maybe later?"

He moved closer and wrapped his thick arms around me. I rested my head on his chest and melted against him. The warmth of safety wrapped around me. I breathed in the scent of leather and grease and simply was. He began to shift his arms.

“Not yet,” I whispered as I wrapped my arms around his wide waist. He moved his arms back and held me, his thumb rubbing back and forth between my shoulder blades. I wasn’t ashamed to admit it, I really needed it.

“SO, YOU HAD NO INTERACTIONS WITH ELENA YESTERDAY?” DETECTIVE Abers asked again.

I fought not to roll my eyes. I was sitting here braless, in too-big sweats, one of Miles’ shirts, a pair of his slip-on sandals, and the detective was asking me the same things over and over. “Nope.”

“No, you did have an interaction?” Abers asked.

“For fuck’s sake,” Zeke muttered. The guys were spread around the office. Zeke stood by the door, the twins sitting on the couch near it, Asher was sitting on the arm of the sofa while Miles sat next to me in his own chair. Detective Abers was leaning back against the front of the lawyer’s desk questioning me and taking notes. Something had changed since this morning, something that had Abhors frowning and a bit hostile.

I rubbed my temple as my head began to ache. “No, I did not see her yesterday.”

“Not in the morning?” Abers asked.

“When I left she was still in bed asleep,” I repeated. “She’s been feeling bad the last few days.”

Abers made another note. “And when you came back to the dorm?”

“It was late and she was, again, asleep in bed,” I stated.

“What were you doing last night?” the detective asked.

“That’s irrelevant,” Mr. Flores interjected before I could answer, “and has no bearing on the events of this morning.”

Abers watched me closely. “Did you provoke her at all this morning?”

I raised an eyebrow and met his gaze. “You mean while I was asleep?”

“Can you think of anything that she’d take offense to?” Abers asked.

I hesitated then glanced at Mr. Flores.

Mr. Flores nodded.

“She might not like who I’m dating.” I turned back to Abers.

“And that would be?” Abers gaze went to Miles.

“Miles.” I waited for a beat. “And Zeke. Isaac. Ethan. And Asher.”

Abers gestured around the room with the end of his pen. “You’re dating all of these guys?”

“Yeah.” I waited for him to process.

I met Miles’ gaze. He nodded. I turned back to Abers. “Actually, I’m engaged to Miles’.”

Tension filled the room as my words sunk in.

“When the hell did that happen?” Zeke snapped.

“On our date night,” Miles answered for me.

I met Zeke’s gaze. “We were waiting till the next meeting to tell everyone.”

Zeke sighed and nodded that he understood, though he was still frowning.

Abers’ brow drew down in confusion. “All right, why would this offend Elena?”

“She’s pretty religious,” I said, “but she seemed fine about it at first. Open minded even.”

Abers made a note in the notebook. “Was she open minded about the occult and satanic books you brought into the dorm?”

I tilted my head to the side and sat perfectly still. “You guys broke the locks on my lockboxes.”

Abers met my gaze and nodded. “It’s a crime scene, we have to be thorough.”

“By going through the victim’s locked possessions?” Mr. Flores leaned forward in his chair. “I think not. I’ll be filing a complaint with your department, and I’ll be pursuing compensation for the damage to Miss Delaney’s property.”

“I figured,” Abers said without taking his eyes from mine. “I still need an answer.”

“I do a lot of theological research. It’s a hobby,” I stated, “and as you said, the boxes were locked. Elena never knew about them.”

He looked down at his notepad. “From what it looks like, you do more than just research. There were several jars of substances found inside one of the boxes. They’re being tested now for narcotics.”

I sighed. “Don’t bother wasting your funding. There was tar water, holy water, some rosemary, a large amount of salt, and powdered angelica, if I remember correctly.”

“Oh, you found powdered angelica?” Miles turned to me, surprised.

I smiled at Miles and nodded. “Yep. I was going to bring it over to your house later. Oh, and I got an awesome wreath for your house, too. I left it at Ethan’s though.”

Miles gave me a small wink before turning to Abers. “Were her research and supplies confiscated by the police?”

Abers kept his gaze on me. “Yes.”

“My books in the other lockbox too?” I asked, my mind on my grandmother’s journals.

The detective nodded.

I scowled at him as my temper spiked.

“Those will need to be returned immediately,” Mr. Flores said to the man leaning on his desk.

“They’re evidence,” Abers countered.

“Of what? A hobby? Research?” Mr. Flores demanded. “Those items have no bearing on this case of attempted murder.”

Abers ignored him and focused on me. “Most of those things are for protection. Why would a normal nineteen-year-old university student need that much protection?”

I said nothing. The silence stretched into minutes. He wanted me to crack first, but I’d played this game with a demon. I could do this all day. And have.

He cracked first. “Does it have anything to do with a Clay Or—”

“That has no bearing on this incident”—Mr. Flores surged to his feet, jaw clenched—“and if you bring it up again this interview is over.”

How did this fucker know about Ordin? I eyed the detective. Wait, how did Mr. Flores know? I turned to Miles and met his gaze, the question in my eyes.

He nodded slightly. Fuck. There was nothing I could do about it now.

A phone chimed. Everyone reached to check their phones.

“It’s mine,” Abers announced as he frowned at his screen. When he looked up his face was blank again. “That’s all I need to know.” He pushed away from the desk and started for the door.

“What’s changed?” Mr. Flores asked as he sat back down in his chair.

Abers turned with his hand on the door handle. "Elena Daniels has been admitted to the psych ward."

My eyebrows shot up. "Is she okay?"

Abers eyed me. "I can't give you that information."

"She seemed fine earlier this week," I said. "She seemed solid. Down to earth..."

Abers gaze could have burned a hole through me.

I waited for him to continue but he didn't. He simply watched me.

"My client's possessions?" Mr. Flores demanded, drawing Abers attention. "Has the scene been processed enough for her to get her clothes?"

Abers turned after opening the door and met my eyes. "Yeah, we're done with the scene. You can get in there now. And you can pick up your tagged items from the station this afternoon." The door snapped shut behind him.

I stared at the desk and chewed on my thumbnail.

Miles reached over and took my hand, rescuing my nail. He didn't need to ask me what was wrong.

Miles turned to Mr. Flores. "Why would they take Lexie's things?"

For the first time, Mr. Flores looked stumped. "If they thought it had bearing in the case, was evidence maybe."

"Then wouldn't they keep them and not give them back?" Zeke asked.

Mr. Flores nodded. "This is not usually the way the police work."

"What about Ordin? That case was supposed to be sealed since she was underage," Zeke growled.

Mr. Flores sighed. "The record is sealed from the public, not the government or its agencies."

"So he put her name in a database and it just came up?" Ethan asked, his voice had an edge. He wasn't happy either.

Mr. Flores sighed and nodded. "This should be the end of it. Your attacker is in custody, and her fingerprints are on the knife. They won't have to bother you again."

"If they do, we'll call you," Miles said.

"Would you like me to retrieve your belongings from the precinct?" Mr. Flores asked.

"Thanks, but I'll pick them up this afternoon." I got to my feet. "Thanks for all your help." We filed out of the office.

It wasn't until we were all piled into Miles' SUV that anyone said anything.

"Anyone else think that detective was a little more knowledgeable about magic than he should be?" Ethan asked the group.

Zeke nodded from the front passenger seat. Asher growled in the seat to the right behind Zeke. Miles sighed from the driver's seat. I nodded.

"Yep," Isaac added from the back row.

"Oh, good," I muttered as I looked out the window. "I'm going crazy."

"Why did he bring up Ordin?" Asher asked.

I shook my head. "I get thinking that I was using magic to try to protect myself from Ordin, but we know his body was found last year. It's on record. He's dead in Montana."

"Isaac, did you get anything off him?" Zeke asked over his shoulder.

Isaac sighed. "Kind of. He was..."

I went to turn in my seat only to bang my knee on the console. "Was what?"

"I could see through his aura," Isaac said. "There was also a lot of grays, a muddy red, purple and black."

"Which means?" Miles asked as he pulled out into traffic.

"He's running himself ragged and getting close to burn out," Isaac explained. "Something recently hurt him. It broke something in him and he's furious about it."

I shook my head. That didn't help, but I put it in the back of my mind. "Ash, did you get anything?"

"The guy smokes too much, drank himself to sleep last night and skipped the shower this morning," Asher said. "Other than that, nothing except he wasn't lying about anything."

I turned to Asher. "You can tell when someone lies?"

Asher nodded. "There's a sour scent to it."

I made a mental note to never lie around Asher.

Miles passed the off ramp for his house.

"Where are we going?" Zeke asked.

"We're taking Lexie back to the dorms for some clothes, then we're going to the precinct to get her things back from the police," Miles said, his voice carefully neutral.

"Miles?" I leaned forward and put my hand on his shoulder.

His body was tense, his fingers tapping on the steering wheel. "Yes?"

“Thank you for hiring Mr. Flores,” I said softly.

“Of course. He’ll be useful if Abers decides to ask any more questions.” He sighed. “I’m more worried about why Abers took your supplies to begin with.”

Ah, that’s what he was worrying over. I leaned back in my seat. “It does seem a little strange. I mean, they were locked away, not out on the desk where they’d be evidence.”

“Exactly,” Miles said absently.

Zeke pulled out his phone and began doing something as the car fell silent.

Absently, I began to twirl my ring as I looked out the window and watched the city go by.

What else did I have in my dorm room? Textbooks, toiletries, research — Oh shit! “The file.”

“What file?” Isaac asked.

“The file from the Templars about that kid with the haunting.” I groaned as I rested my head back against the headrest. “It was on my desk.”

“I think it’s safe to say that Abers has it now,” Asher said.

I cursed again as Miles pulled into a parking spot near my dorm.

When I got out everyone got out of the SUV.

“Um, guys, I’m just heading up to my room to get changed and pack some clothes,” I pointed out. “I don’t need a security team for that.”

“Humor us,” Asher said.

I sighed as I headed for my dorm room. The walk was long and quiet. Tension slipped into the air as we were climbing the stairs. It was almost palpable as I pulled down the crime scene tape, opening the door.

When I stepped inside, I cursed. The room was a mess. Things were tossed here and there. Drawers left open and the contents spilled out onto the floor. Bedding was torn from the beds to sit in the middle of the room. Hell, even my pillow was out of the case.

“I know you’re not this messy.” Miles stepped up behind me. “Did the cops do this?”

“I have a feeling it was Abers.” I walked into the room and began separating my things from the other girls’.

“That would fit his aura when we met him at the lawyer.” Isaac muttered as he went to my desk and sat on the cluttered top. The others spread out around the room. Zeke picked up my bedding, tossed it on my

bed, then sat down. Asher moved some of the books out of the way then sat on Gemma's bed. Ethan leaned against the wall near the small foyer. Miles moved to look out the window between Elena and Nova's desks. My shoulders grew tense as the tension ratcheted up again. I started going through the pile of clothes in front of my drawers. It didn't take long to find out that it wasn't just the attack and Abers behind the mood.

"When did you two get engaged?" Isaac asked, his voice serious.

I went still. A serious Isaac didn't happen very often. I got to my feet with the pile of clothes in my arms and moved to the end of the bed. "Um, the other night." Instead of finding my clothes, I straightened my shoulders, turned around and faced the issue in the air. "On our date night."

Isaac gave me a small grin, letting me know he was okay. Some of the tension eased from my shoulders.

"So, you chose Miles," Zeke stated, his voice hard.

"No, I didn't choose anyone." I turned and met his rough ice-blue eyes. "This isn't going to change things."

He scowled at me. "The hell it isn't."

I shook my head. "Zeke—"

"He's right," Isaac said, drawing everyone's attention. "It's going to change things."

"Lexie and I have already talked about this," Miles said. "We agreed that nothing will change for the rest of you. She'll continue to date you just as before."

"You don't expect her to be monogamous?" Isaac asked.

"Of course not." Miles frowned at Isaac. "I'm not cruel enough to demand that she break it off with everyone else."

"Besides, she's already married to me," Asher reminded them.

My temples began to throb. I sorted my clothes into piles for me to pack while they continued to talk.

"Magically, yeah," Ethan said, "but not legally. With Miles we're talking legally."

"Yeah, it's a totally different type of marriage," Isaac added. "Shouldn't we have had a meeting about this first? To decide who she's going to legally marry?"

I stiffened. Were they really talking about this without asking me? I turned, crossed my arms over my chest, and waited.

“I didn’t realize I needed a committee meeting to decide if I could propose to my girlfriend.” Miles’ voice grew chilly along the edges. “Asher didn’t exactly ask permission.”

“Whoa.” Asher’s hands went up. “Ours was an accident, and it was almost a disaster for me.”

I narrowed my eyes at Asher. “Are you seriously saying you would have asked the others for permission to ask me to marry you if you knew you were going to bite me?”

Asher turned to me and shrugged. “I can see their point in wanting a heads-up. It knocks you sideways when it’s not you.”

I shook my head before turning to the others. “I thought everyone accepted that each relationship would move at its own pace. Isn’t this just that? Miles and my relationship progressing?”

“It would have been a good idea to decide as a group who will marry Lexie legally,” Zeke stated.

“Oh, come on,” Ethan said, spinning his rings. “Which one of us would be a better legal marriage prospect than Miles? The guy is a billionaire. Lexie is set for life.”

My temper snapped. “That’s why you helped him pick out the ring? Because he’s rich?”

Ethan turned to me. “I was being logical. He can take better care of you than the rest of us. The best healthcare, the best doctors, the best places to live. All of that.”

“I agree, that is a factor.” Miles’ brow drew down as he turned to Ethan. “But what about the rest of you? Where are your relationships heading?”

Holy shit.

“We all agreed not to talk about these things in a group,” I reminded them.

“I think that changed when you werewolf married Asher and got engaged to Miles,” Zeke said in a low voice.

“Not everyone is ready to have this conversation,” I countered.

“We need to have it, Ally,” Asher stated.

“Not everyone knows if they want to get married to me,” I shot back. “For fuck’s sake, we’re only eighteen. We can’t even legally drink yet.”

“I believe some of us know what we want already, Lexie,” Miles said gently.

My chest tightened as I looked around the room. Zeke was watching me closely, so was Isaac. Ethan had a shit-eating grin on his face while Asher and Miles shared a look. I took a deep breath and tried to keep from panicking. No. No. This was too much.

I turned to Ethan. "You don't know if you want to marry me, right?"

Ethan's grin grew bigger. "I can't picture getting married ever, but if I was going to, it'd be you."

I took a deep breath. And another. Then, not knowing what else to do, I turned, grabbed some clothes off the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck. I braced my hands on the sink and focused on breathing through the tightness in my chest. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. Why the fuck wasn't the breathing helping?

Because all of the guys out there were thinking about marriage!

Focusing on what I was doing, I quickly changed into a pair of cut off shorts and a y-back tank top. Once that was done, I was calmer. I continued taking slow deep breaths as I began to pull my mass of curly hair back into a braid.

Okay. No one was talking about getting married right away. No one else was proposing. They are just talking about how they feel about me so everyone can get on the same page. So there were no more surprises.

I washed my face in cold water then patted it dry as I continued talking to myself. No one was proposing today. No more big surprises would be good. It'd help keep everyone happy. They want to talk about this. So, we'll talk about it.

Who would I legally marry? I imagined walking down the aisle to Miles and smiled. Peace settled my nerves. The tightness in my chest eased a bit. Then I imagined replacing him with Ethan or Isaac. That peace in my heart tripled, joy slipping through me and my chest loosening even more. Then Zeke. Something inside me settled as the tightness finally went away and I could breathe freely again. It didn't matter who I legally married. I'd still love them all. They wanted this conversation. So, let's have it.

I picked up my clothes and opened the door to the dorm room. I tossed my stuff onto the bed then addressed them. "Alright. You guys want to talk about this, let's talk."

"You don't have to if you aren't ready," Miles reminded me.

I met those dazzling hazel eyes and smiled. “I know. but you guys are right. We need to talk about this, and if you are all ready to lay your cards on the table then I can do the same.”

They waited as I took a breath.

“I love each of you. Deeply,” I began, my voice soft. “I don’t care who I’m legally married to, I’m still going to be in love with all of you.” I shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

“I actually agree with Ethan,” Isaac said, taking the attention from me. “If we’re going to look at this logically and keep emotions out of it, then Miles would be the logical choice.”

Miles nodded, his face carefully blank.

“She wouldn’t have to worry about anything,” Asher muttered, clearly not liking to admit it. “She could focus on her artwork.”

“Fine. It’s Miles,” Zeke stated, his voice rough. “But who is she going to be married to for family?” He pointed at the twins. “Maria is not going to like the poly. She’ll need a beard for visits to your house.”

I shook my head. “No. No beards.”

Everyone turned to me.

I met each of their eyes. “No more hiding. I think we should tell them about our poly next time we go home.”

Silence fell.

One by one, each of them nodded their heads. Until I turned to Zeke.

Zeke was looking at me with awe in his eyes. “You really aren’t going to choose.”

I held his gaze and shook my head. “I can’t. And I won’t. Ever.”

He blinked several times before looking down at the floor. When he had control again, he lifted his head and looked at his friends. Then nodded.

“Great, now that that is settled”—I gestured to the clothes everywhere—“help me find enough of my clothes to pack a bag.”

It wasn't a long drive from the university to the precinct. We had all been in lobby for awhile waiting for my things. In fact... I checked my phone. We'd already been waiting in the lobby for almost half an hour.

"What the hell is taking so long?" I muttered.

"That's a good question." Miles got to his feet and went to the window.

"Excuse me, how long does it usually take to get someone's things back?"

"We're waiting for the investigating officer to sign off on the release," the desk sergeant said apologetically.

"Is Detective Abers not here?" Miles asked politely.

She typed on her computer before answering. "Yes, he's here. We just need him to sign the release. Sometimes they get pretty busy, or paperwork can get lost in the shuffle."

"Uh-huh," Isaac muttered from his spot against the wall.

"Let me run back there and remind him," she said as she got to her feet.

"Thank you, we'd really appreciate it," Miles replied before he stepped away from the window.

"Ash, can you listen in?" I asked quietly.

Asher nodded.

"So, when's the wedding?" Isaac asked.

I sighed. "When we feel ready, we'll decide."

Isaac gestured at Asher. "And technically, you're already married to Asher."

I fought not to squirm. "Uh-huh."

“What about a prenup? Are you two going to get one of those?” Ethan asked, leaning forward so he could look down the line of chairs to us.

“We’re not getting a prenup,” Miles announced with confidence.

“Oh yes we are,” I countered.

Miles didn’t say anything.

“It’s protection for you,” I reminded him.

“I don’t need to be protected from you, Lexie,” he reminded me.

“I didn’t say it was from me,” I shot back.

Isaac snickered, drawing our attention. “They haven’t even started planning a wedding and they’re already bickering.”

The guys chuckled.

“I guess we should have a ceremony too,” Asher said, turning to me.

My heart warmed at the idea. “Maybe. One day.”

Asher nodded that he understood. Then turned his attention to the wall with unfocused eyes. “She’s reminding him about the paperwork now.”

I shifted in the plastic seat. These things were not made for long visits.

“He said to let us wait,” Asher announced. “One of the others asked about Miles and his last name. If he’s *that* Huntington. Abers said yes.”

Miles pulled out his phone.

Asher’s eyebrows went up. “He said Miles is Ally’s sugar daddy and lawyered her up immediately. That they aren’t really engaged, not with that ring.”

Miles harrumphed. The others shook their heads.

“What’s wrong with my ring?” I looked down at the emerald and diamonds. Sure, they were small, but it was perfect.

“If you love it, then that’s all that matters,” Ethan reminded me.

Asher continued. “The others asked why he wasn’t releasing Ally’s things and he said innocent people don’t lawyer up that fast.”

Miles began talking to Mr. Flores on the phone.

I sighed and dropped my head back against the wall. “So, he’s being a dick.”

Asher’s eyes refocused as he turned to me. “Yep.”

“Being a petty bitch is more like it,” Isaac muttered.

I nodded in agreement as Miles hung up the phone.

Miles turned to us. “It should only be a few more minutes.”

We all waited in silence.

Until Asher’s stomach growled.

I grinned as we chuckled.

"We'll eat at the house," Miles promised. "The groceries should be delivered about now."

It wasn't long before the door across the lobby opened.

Abers met my gaze with a glower. "You need to go through your things and make sure nothing is missing."

Everyone got to their feet and started towards the door.

"Only Miss Delaney," the detective stated.

Zeke cursed, but they all stopped moving.

I didn't break my stride as I followed him into a small room with just a table and chairs. A box was sitting on the table, my name was followed by a bunch of numbers on the lid.

I pulled the lid off.

Abers closed the door then turned to me. "A hospital report shows that you brought in a girl that was about as disturbed as Miss Devens a couple days ago."

I stopped looking through the box and looked up at him. "Yeah, some girl named Kat. So?"

He gestured for me to sit down with the folder in his hand. "That's two people, that are suffering from unexplained circumstances that you have had contact with, Miss Delaney. Care to explain that?"

I didn't sit down. "I found her in the dorm stairwell talking to a *wall*. Was I supposed to leave her there?"

He opened the file and set a picture down in front of me on the desktop. "Recognize her?"

I eyed the picture. Diamond shaped face, nice green eyes, brown hair. I looked back to Abers and thought about not answering. I didn't have to answer him, but if he was going to get onto the right track I needed to help him get off the wrong one. "Never seen her before."

"She's another resident of your hall," he said. "She was also admitted to the psych ward an hour ago with the same symptoms as your dormmate."

I examined the photo again but nothing clicked. I shook my head. "Still don't know her." I went back to looking through the box to make sure everything was there. And it was. Shit. I was missing the file on the boy. I debated asking for it but decided against it. The Templars would have another copy.

Abers stepped away from the door and stood across the table from me. “What are the odds that three girls would all have the same issues and live in the same dorm hall?”

I went still while holding one of my books. When he put it that way...

“That none of them have a history of mental illness and only have two things in common: you, and the dorm.”

“I told you, I don’t know the last girl.” I set the book back down in the box. All within a week... burnt sugar... Kat smelled like burnt sugar when I took her to the hospital. I looked up at Abers. “Did the new one smell like burnt sugar?”

He blinked at me. “Why do you need to know?”

That was a major yes. “Look, I don’t know this girl.”

“So you say.” He eyed me again. “Is everything there?”

Burnt sugar, psychosis symptoms, all within a week... yeah. That wasn’t natural. I nodded.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice hard. “Not missing any henbane? Bindweed? Blackthorn thorns? Human bone?”

I kept my face blank as I put the lid on the box. “I don’t deal with that crap.”

“Then why the lawyer?” he asked. “If you’re just an average university student, why do you need the best defense lawyer in the city?”

He knew what I was. There was no doubt about it, which meant he was part of the Coven or a witch. And he was blaming me. I picked up my box, meeting his gaze. “And if you’re just a detective, why do you know so much about hex herbs and binding ingredients?”

Something sparked in his eyes which narrowed on me. His face remained blank.

I moved toward the door. “Don’t worry, I’ll fill the Coven in for you, give you one less report to write.” I jerked open the door and strode out into the lobby.

By the time we reached the car, I was sure something natural wasn’t the cause. I climbed in and pulled out my phone.

“What, Lexie?” Camille said.

“I think you’ve got a problem,” I bit out as I slammed the door shut beside me.

“What’s that?” she asked, smug.

“Three girls have apparently developed rapid onset psychosis on campus.” I shifted to get my seatbelt buckled as the others shut their doors.

“How is that—”

“All in the same dorm,” I snapped. “All within the week. And I’m willing to bet they all smell like burnt sugar.”

The silence on the other end was deafening.

“I’ll have our elders look into this,” Camille said before hanging up.

I shoved my phone into my bra and stewed.

“You think there’s a magical cause?” Asher asked as Miles pulled out of the parking space.

“Three girls, no connection between them other than the same dorm hall. All without mental health problems. And all three of them smelled like burnt sugar. Something might be going on.”

“It’s the Coven’s job to take care of it, Lexie,” Isaac reminded me. “This is their territory. Nothing else we can really do.”

I sighed. He was right. I gave them a heads up, I wasn’t responsible for anything else. This wasn’t an issue with the dead. It wasn’t my area of experience. I took a deep breath and tried to let it go.

It wasn’t long before we pulled into the driveway of Miles’ house. We were just in time to watch a couple of large men carrying a queen-sized mattress into the house, several other men moving around the property. A Korean woman was standing at the door directing everyone.

“Who the hell is that?” Zeke asked.

“That’s my new assistant.” Miles pulled into the driveway and shut off the car. “Ms. Yun has been acting as my go between for the pharmaceutical company here in Seattle.”

Everyone climbed out.

The woman turned toward us and pushed her glasses up on her face. She was pretty. Lovely almond shaped eyes, small cupid’s-bow lips and the clearest skin I’d ever seen in my life.

She hurried to the gate. “Mr. Huntington, they’re just bringing in the last bed now.” She pulled back a sheet on her clipboard and continued. “The furniture from the master bedroom has been moved into the room with the computer set up. The new bedding is already on the bed and the rest has been ordered. The groceries will be delivered this evening, and the security company is here installing the system update you requested. Cameras and motion activated lights.”

“Thank you. I sincerely appreciate you handling this. I know it’s not in your job description,” Miles said as he put his hand on the small of my back.

Ms. Yun waved his concern away. “Don’t worry about that. I enjoy taking care of people.”

“Ms. Yun, this is my fiancé, Lexie. If she ever calls and needs anything, I’d like you to take care of it immediately,” Miles said.

I waved awkwardly. “Hey.”

Ms. Yun tucked a stray hair back behind her ear and smiled a professional smile. “Of course.” She turned to Miles. “Is there anything else you need tonight?”

Miles shook his head. “That should be everything. Thank you very much, Ms. Yun.”

Ms. Yun smiled again. “It was my pleasure.” She waited until we walked past her to head out the gate. The delivery guys came out the door and did the same.

“She seemed nice,” I said as we went inside.

“She was highly recommended. She’s still finishing her MBA but has a great deal of experience in corporate offices.” Miles gestured toward the stairs. “Let’s put your clothes away.”

We left the others downstairs and headed upstairs. Miles led me into the master bedroom.

“Miles, why did she say you moved out of—” I followed him inside and stopped in my tracks. All the furniture was different. The queen bed was exactly where the old one had been, only it had a black cast iron headboard and footboard. The bedding was amazing. Cream background with gold koi, cherry blossoms and Geisha in tattoo style artwork. It was beautiful. And perfect. Miles’ end tables had been replaced with two black nightstands, one drawer each. The dresser across the room had been switched out with a solid black dresser. Another black framed mirror reflected the room back. The gray shades were half down over the windows, dimming the room. It was amazing.

Miles flipped the light switch. Two stained glass lamps came to life on the end tables keeping the room at a soft glow.

“It’s perfect.” I turned to Miles, smiling. “But why am I in the master bedroom?”

Miles gently closed the door to the hallway, turned back to me and lowered his voice. "I'm looking into the future and trying to make sure you have everything you need."

"I don't need my own bathroom," I said.

"What about when Asher has to move in after his time at the alpha house? How long do you think Zeke is going to last in the dorms?" he asked in an even softer voice.

I nodded. "The twins won't be too far behind, either."

Miles grinned. "Exactly. I want you to have your own space in our house, and this way I'm guaranteeing it."

I smiled warmly and stepped into him. His hands immediately went to my back as I pressed against him.

"Thank you," I whispered before pressing my lips against his. He kissed me gently, his arms holding me close. I made a small noise in the back of my throat as I melted into him.

"Hey guys! Groceries are here!" Asher shouted from the first floor.

I growled against his lips and pulled back. "You may need to invest in soundproofing."

He dropped his arms from me. "It's on the to-do list." He opened the door and guided me through it. At some point I was going to have to have a word with Asher about how to prevent him hearing everything going on in the house.

"WHY ARE WE BACK HERE?" ZEKE ASKED AS I LED HIM THROUGH THE walkways of Pike Place.

"It's that psychic." I hurried towards the shop where I'd had my tarot read. "She predicted death."

Zeke's calloused hand snagged my wrist and pulled me to a stop. "That doesn't mean you need to run."

I fought not to squirm in his grip but agreed that running through the market was a bit overkill. I took a deep breath and let it out as I slowed to a walk. It was only a minute or two later that we came to the doors of the store. The dark doors of the store. The lights were off. The sign said closed. I stepped away from Zeke and looked through the dark window. My heart dropped. The store was empty. Completely fucking empty. "What the hell?"

Zeke moved around me to look through the windows beside me. "Are you sure this is the place?"

I looked up at the sign still painted across the top of the store's entrance. "Yeah, this is the place. We were here just a few days ago and it was in business. There were no clearance signs, no going out of business signs or anything."

"Let's go talk to the store owner across the way. Maybe they'll know what the hell happened." Zeke stepped away from the window and walked straight across the walkway to the bookstore.

By the time I caught up to him, he was already talking to a clerk.

"No, no, no. There was no warning that anything was wrong. Miss Fairchild just packed up one night and was gone by morning. She even paid to get out of her lease early." The clerk shook his head. "It's damn strange, she's had a steady stream of clients since she opened that shop."

"She has?" I asked as I began twisting my ring.

The clerk nodded. "Whatever had her pulling out of the location, it wasn't bad business."

Without a word I turned and walked out of the bookstore, head reeling, I picked a direction without thought and began walking. It didn't take Zeke long to catch up to me. He slipped his hand around my upper arm and gently steered me out of the market to the waterfront picnic tables.

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip and tried not to jump to conclusions as I sat on an empty table. If it had been just my murder the psychic had seen she wouldn't have needed to leave town, which begged the question, what exactly did she see?

Zeke lifted one leg over the bench and sat down right in front of me. He leaned his head down and forced me to meet his eyes. "Breathe."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly while holding his gaze.

"The psychic closing shop suddenly doesn't automatically have to be connected to you," he tried.

"What are the odds of that being true in our world?" I asked, my voice edged with irritation.

He sighed, then gave me a small nod. "Alright, I tried. What the fuck did she see?"

I shook my head. "She just said she saw death. Then wished me luck."

Zeke stared over the water. "It must have been bad to scare her out of town."

“Town.” I sat up straighter and pulled out my cell phone. “She couldn’t have left completely yet. She lived here.” I hit the contact for Miles then put the phone to my ear.

“Angel?” Miles’ voice was that silky smooth timbre that slipped through my body.

“Hey, can you find someone for me. Iris Fairchild. She used to own Sisterly Secrets, the store Isaac and I visited in Pike Place,” I asked without beating around the bush.

“Used to?” he asked, his voice switching as his analytical brain took over.

“She closed up shop almost immediately after we left,” I said, “and the shop is totally cleared out now.”

“Hmm. ” Miles hemmed. “I’ll get on it right away. I could have it for you by morning.”

I smiled with relief. “Thanks, Miles.”

“Of course, Lexie,” Miles said the warmth back in his voice. “Enjoy your date with Zeke.” He hung up.

I tucked my phone away and looked up at Zeke. “He might be able to have it by morning.”

Zeke was still frowning as he looked down the waterfront at another table. “Let’s pick up something to take back to my place.”

My eyebrows rose as he quickly got to his feet and held his hand out to me without looking. Tension practically vibrated from him. Something was up.

Without a word, I took his hand and he led me back into the market. My tension level rocketed up even more. Zeke wasn’t big on public displays of affection and if he was holding my hand in public... “Do we have a follower?”

Zeke squeezed my hand once as we hurried through the crowd. “Not sure.” He tugged me into a small fish and chip shop. He watched the door while I quickly ordered two baskets to go.

It wasn’t long before I had the bag of takeout and we left in silence. Zeke hustled ahead of me and opened a waiting cab’s door outside of the market. I slid in immediately, all the way to the other side. Zeke was right behind me.

“Seattle Central College,” I told the driver. We were off as soon as Zeke closed the door.

The ride to Zeke's dorm was tense, Zeke often looking back over his shoulder out the window. We were both quiet as I paid for the cab before we hustled across campus to Zeke's dorm, still looking over our shoulders the entire time.

I didn't relax until we were in his residence hall.

Zeke, however, didn't. He wrapped his hand around my upper arm and urged me up the stairs. It wasn't until we reached the third floor that he let go.

"Zeke?" I looked up at him, worried. He should be calming down at this point. We were inside a locked building. But he hadn't.

He grunted as he led me down the dorm hall. Several guys moved out of Zeke's path and eyed me as I followed. I gave them a smile as I passed. By the time I reached Zeke, he had the door unlocked, open and was waiting for me. I went inside.

It was a small dorm room, as in tiny. The bed was on the wall across from the door with a mini fridge as a nightstand. The wardrobe was against the same wall by the foot of the bed. His desk was to the right of the door and stacked with books. There were only a few feet between the two. How was he living in this little space? Me, I could pull it off and be fine, but someone Zeke's size? I dropped my new messenger bag onto his bed. Where was his comforter? The bed only had the black bottom sheet on it. While Zeke closed and locked the door, I looked around for the rest of his bedding. I found his comforter and pillows in a pile just inside bathroom door.

I picked them up and waited until he finished with the chain and turned around.

Zeke went still, then ran his fingers through his hair.

"Why is your bedding on the floor, Zeke?" I asked softly.

Zeke took the bag from me and set our dinner on the desk. He moved to the mini fridge. "I don't have any malt vinegar for your fish. That okay?"

"Sure." I waited for an answer as the muffled noise from the common room came through the wall beside the hallway.

Zeke took the step to the desk and began pulling out food. He wasn't going to answer.

My heart clenched. Zeke never lied. He hated it. He'd tell you the truth even if it hurt. I was trying to think of what to say when I spotted the doorknob on the bathroom door. It was silver. All the other knobs in the

place had been the old brass. And it had a keyhole. Now, I didn't need him to answer my question. I knew exactly what he had been doing. I took a couple of steps into the cramped bathroom and flipped the switch. There, on the wall beside the door, was a brand-new chain lock. Propped against the wall was a security bar. My heart clenched as my worry for him quadrupled. Zeke was worse off than I had thought. Was there even someone following us tonight or was Zeke just being paranoid? Looking around his room, I was beginning to think the latter.

Without a word I turned in the doorway.

When Zeke turned from the desk his eyes found me in the doorway. He simply stood, waiting for me to say something about it.

Instead, I gave him a small, understanding smile then took his bedding to the bed and threw the comforter and pillows on it. I took off my shoes and sat down with my back against the wall, my feet tucked under me. I wasn't going to bring it up now. He knew I saw, he knew I understood. That was enough for tonight.

Zeke's shoulders relaxed.

I leaned forward and opened the mini fridge door from the bed. "Do you have ketchup in here?"

"Yeah," his voice was the soft one he used with me once in awhile. The one that pretty much melted me into a pile of goo.

I snagged the bottle, shut the little door then sat back up, flipping my hair back in the process.

Zeke held out a cardboard takeout box to me. He sat down beside me, his shoulder brushing mine as we opened our dinner.

As I was squirting ketchup on my fries he leaned over and pressed a small kiss on top of my head. I grinned to myself. Zeke wasn't big on affection, mostly in public, but it still made me smile.

He set his box on the bed, got up and opened his laptop on the desk. "What do you want to watch?"

"What will put you to sleep?" I sent back.

"You," he muttered under his breath as he put on a newly released movie and sat back down beside me. It had action and comedy, an overall good choice considering the day we'd had.

We ate while we watched the movie.

The silence wasn't uncomfortable. It never was with Zeke. There was no pressure to make conversation. Sometimes you didn't need to talk, you

just needed to be there. And it seemed to be one of those nights for both of us.

It wasn't long before I was laying against his chest with his arm around my waist as we watched the movie.

Zeke's body began to relax around mine. I smiled as I heard him rest his head back against the wall. His arm grew heavier around my waist. It wouldn't be long now before he started snoring.

There was a loud thump on from the other side of the wall. I jumped. Zeke jerked awake.

What sounded like a crowd started laughing on the other side of the wall. Zeke's body was practically vibrating with tension.

Fucking shit. "What the hell was that?"

"People in the fucking common room," Zeke growled wearily.

There was another thump. Zeke and I both jumped.

Zeke then cursed between his teeth. More laughter from the common room.

"What the hell are they doing out there?" I asked as I sat up and looked up at him.

"A few guys put a little hoop up on the wall and are having a tournament." He sighed. "Every day I go out there and tell them to knock it off, I've talked to the RA, but every night they're back doing this. And I can't just beat the shit out of them."

Another thump. We both jumped again.

"Since when?" I eyed Zeke as if I'd never seen him before. "Who are you and what have you done with my Tough Guy?"

The corner of Zeke's lips raised a little. "I can't afford to get kicked out of the dorm. I do that and I don't get my money back."

Well, that made sense...

Zeke rubbed his hand down his face, weariness clear in every line. Zeke needed to get some sleep. Hell, his shoulders were tenser than I'd ever seen them.

Thump. We both jumped.

Oh, hell no. I shoved off his bed and went to the door.

"Lexie," Zeke called, moving to follow, "don't hit anyone."

I had the door unlocked and unchained before he managed to get to his feet. I slammed the door open and strode around the corner into the common room.

It was a basic common room. Cheap, tough furniture with a group of guys laughing around a small basketball hoop on the wall. On Zeke's bedroom wall.

"Excuse me," I stepped up to their group, getting all their attention at once. "Are you guys aware there's a dorm room on the other side of that wall?"

They glanced at each other then back to me.

"Yeah?" said a tall blonde boy with a frown. "So, what?"

"Oh," I said, as if just realizing, "you're being assholes on purpose."

Several other people spread around the common room chuckled.

Blondie opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes went over my head and the words never made it out. Zeke had clearly stepped into the room.

I ignored the sudden tension in the room. "Look, I've got PTSD, and every time you hit that wall with the ball or shout at each other in here, I jump. The walls are fucking thin, so could you guys knock it off for tonight?"

"You don't need to tell them shit," Zeke growled. He hated when I felt like I needed to tell people about my history, but Zeke needed a good night's sleep.

"You don't even live in this dorm," Blondie snapped then looked above my head again. "Dude, control your girl."

Zeke's face grew hard as he met Blondie's eyes. "What the fuck did you —"

"No, I don't," I admitted then pointed up at Zeke without looking, "but I'm staying with him tonight and I'd like to not be triggered a bunch before I try to sleep. My nightmares suck. As in waking up screaming suck."

"That's not our problem." Blondie turned to go back to shooting the small ball.

"They asked you nicely to stop and even explained why," a girl from one of the tables said. "Stop being dicks."

Several others spoke up from around the common room agreeing with the first girl.

Blondie took in the room now telling them to stop. One of his buddies went to the hoop and took it down.

I smiled. "Thanks, I really appreciate it." I turned around and gave Zeke a little shove toward the door.

“You should know, he had his boyfriend over the other night,” Blondie shot across the room as we reached the door.

I turned around to find him smirking.

“Thought you’d like to know you’re a beard,” Blondie said with a smug look on his face.

“Oh, good. They’ve made up,” I said happily. Blondie scowled at me as I turned back around and headed into Zeke’s room.

“At least we’ll get some quiet now,” I said as he locked the door. “Do you want the bathroom to change?”

“Yeah.” He straightened then slipped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I took the opportunity to change into my Zeke pajamas. Zeke liked skin to skin contact when we were sleeping, so I’d finally found a pair of pjs that wouldn’t get in the way of his skin time. The thin gray cotton cami was cropped, showing the claw scars on my side. The shorts were barely more than booty shorts, showing off the scars on my thigh, but they were soft, comfortable and wouldn’t bunch up under me while sleeping next to Zeke. I set my bag on the desk, sat on the edge of the bed and pulled out my small bottle of lotion.

The bathroom door opened, Zeke shut off the light then . He stepped one foot into the room and stopped. “You know you didn’t have to tell them shit.”

“I know, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell them about your past.” I focused on rubbing lotion into my legs. “Besides, I don’t care, we got the result we needed.”

Zeke fell silent.

Rosemary tickled my nose as I moved my hands to my elbows. When the silence continued I looked up, met his gaze, and froze. He was looking at me in a way I’d only seen on his face once. Warmth and longing filled his eyes. My heartbeat picked up. “What?”

He shook his head a little, his eyes never leaving mine. “Do you need to use the bathroom?”

For some reason, I didn’t think that was what he wanted to say. I finished rubbing in the lotion on my legs and got to my feet. “Yeah.” I snagged my toothbrush as I went by my bag and slid by him into the bathroom.

I went about brushing my teeth as he moved around the bedroom. When I was done, I used his towel on the rack to wipe my mouth then shut off the

light and stepped out of the bathroom. Zeke had shut off the overhead light but turned on his desk lamp and twisted it around to face the wall. In the dim light I could see that he was sitting at the head of the bed with his back against the wall.

His warm gaze was on me as I walked toward the end of the bed. “You’re staring.” I wrapped my arms around my waist, covering some of my scars. “Does it look that bad?”

He scowled at me. “You’re asking *me* if your scars look bad?”

I gave him a half grin. Zeke had worse, and far more, scars on his back from his father than I had on my entire body. “You’re staring, so...” I half shrugged.

He hesitated only a heartbeat. “I was thinking about how incredible you are.”

The blood rushed to my face as I dropped my gaze to the comforter. “I’m nothing special.”

“Yes, Baby, you are.” His voice was soft enough to make me look up and meet his eyes again. Those sky-blue eyes were practically glowing in his striking face. “And the fact that you don’t know it? That’s my fault.”

I tilted my head my head to the side, my hair sliding off my shoulder. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t tell you enough,” he said, his voice rough. “I don’t tell you how amazing you are. How much you mean to me. Not nearly enough.”

My heart ached and melted at the same time. “You do.”

He shook his head, those blue eyes rough.

I crawled onto the bed, making my way up it on my hands and knees until I could kneel beside him, facing him. Holding his gaze, I reached over and placed my hand on his chest. Right over the tattooed sigil that allowed him to see what I could. All of the guys had gotten them, but it had been Zeke’s idea. “You don’t need to tell me. You show me every single day.”

His hand moved over mine and held it to his chest.

“You show me every time you check on me,” I said softly. “Every time you lecture me. Argue with me. Remind me to be safe. Every day, you show me you love me.”

“It’s not the same,” he muttered, meeting my eyes. “I know you like to hear it.”

I smiled softly and shook my head. “Showing is better. It’s easy to lie with words, but actions...” I slid my hand down his chest to the hem of his

sleeveless shirt and pulled the hem up slowly.

Zeke didn't stop me, his tattoo eventually showing on his large right pec. The tattoo was still stark against his skin and sprinkling of chest hair. Love for him washed over me, filling me as I brushed my fingers along the sigil. "You changed your entire life for me that day."

His calloused fingers wrapped around mine, holding my hand to his skin. "I wasn't the only one."

"But it was your idea." I met his eyes and smiled. "You saw how alone I was, the toll it took, and you set out to change that without a care as to how it'd change your life." I shook my head. "You had only known me a few months."

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes as I breathed in leather and engine grease.

"I've been yours since that first shitty joke," he said, his voice gravelly and low.

I opened my eyes and pulled back a little to smile at him. "I've been yours just as long."

His eyes were glowing as I held his gaze. His hand moved to hold my face gently, his fingers careful as his thumb brushed my cheekbone. His eyes dropped to my lips. I met him as he leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. He kissed me softly, as if I was made of glass that could shatter at any moment. Desire sparked as I pressed a little more against his lips, my hands sliding up to hold his neck gently. My heartbeat picked up as he pressed his kiss a little deeper. His arms slid around my shoulders and lower back, pulling me against his almost naked chest. The hair on his face tickled my skin as he brushed his tongue against my lower lip. Zeke always asked, no matter how many times he'd kissed me before. I opened to him and he swept in and filled my senses. He kissed me deliberately, carefully, as if he'd thought about it for a very long time and had a plan for how he wanted to kiss me. Warmth filled me as I kissed him back, meeting him stroke for stroke, each contact a little more heated.

He pulled back far enough to catch his breath while pressing his forehead against mine.

Breathing heavily, I brushed my nose against his. "Touch me."

His eyes were burning as they met mine. Dark and light warred within them. Desire and fear duking it out inside him. I wanted desire to win, I needed him, but that didn't mean it was the right time for him. He kissed

me again, this time sweeping in without asking and shoving the world away. I kissed him with need, the need I'd been holding back for so fucking long. He shifted his arms, he moved towards me, lifting me up off the bed to lay me down gently on my back. His lips left mine to trail a line of burning kisses to my throat, every kiss building the heat more. I pulled the straps of my top down my arms. My nipples pebbled as soon as they touched air, my breath catching. He pulled back to look down at me. The fight was still there in his eyes, but the light was winning for now. He reached up to touch my breast only to stop just before making contact. The darkness was edging back into his eyes.

I wrapped my hand around his wrist. "You're not going to hurt me."

His eyes held mine as his fingertips gently traced the curve of my breast. I drew in a sharp breath and groaned as sparks shot between my legs. My core clenched as his calloused fingers began to explore. Heart pounding, I found his lips and kissed him again and again.

His fingers stroked my breast, all hesitation gone. I whimpered as desire curled through me, my skin growing tight with need. His mouth moved down my collarbone and danced across my upper chest, his tongue tasting my skin with every kiss, every motion, until finally his lips brushed the across the top of my breast. Gasping, I arched into him, giving him better access. His scalding mouth closed over one nipple, making me groan in the back of my throat. I dug my fingers into his shirt to hold on as his mouth made my hips move on their own. I don't know how long he played at my breasts, molding them, stroking them, tasting them, but by the time his fingers moved down my side to my shorts I was all but burning.

He lifted his head and met my eyes, his question clear on his face.

I nodded. Fuck yes. He moved back a little, hooked his fingers into the sides of my shorts and panties, then slid them down my legs and dropped them off the side of the bed. His hands caressed my thighs as he moved back to me, callouses sending sparks through me. He held his weight off me with one arm and ran his fingertips over my skin with the other while kissing me again and again. His lips moved down my body again, lower and lower until he was right below my belly button, his fingertips tracing through my trimmed curls. His question was clear.

"Don't stop, Zeke," I whispered.

Light filled his eyes as he carefully moved his hand lower, then gently stroked a thick finger between my folds. He brushed my clit at the end of

his stroke.

“Right there,” I groaned as my hips moved of their own accord.

“Like that?” He smiled down at me as he stroked me again.

Trembling, I nodded. So, he did it again and again. Heat built with every stroke. He kissed me with hunger as his fingers carefully explored me.

My hand moved down his chest to his waistband. There, I stopped. His breathing was heavy as his hand left me and took mine. He slipped my fingers along his skin inside the band.

Oh, commando...

Heart racing, I held his gaze as I pushed his mesh shorts down as far as I could. He pulled back, stood by the bed and all but tore his shorts off, ripping his shirt off and dropping it as his blazing blue eyes raked over me.

I drew in a sharp breath. His cock was exactly like the rest of him, thick, unyielding, and holy... I had guessed Zeke was big from the feel of him, but seeing it was another matter entirely. He had width and length, and I honestly didn't know what I was going to do with that thing. “Holy shit.”

His eyes met mine as his cheeks tinted pink.

I smiled. Oh yeah, who was I kidding, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it. I reached out and took his hand, pulling him to me. He moved over me, kneeling between my legs. He slowly lowered his weight onto me.

I stiffened. For a moment, I wasn't in Zeke's dorm room. I was back in the cabin with Clay hitting me.

Zeke immediately lifted his weight off. “Lexie?”

“I'm fine. Just a flash.” I opened my eyes and met his. “But I think I better be on top.”

We shifted until Zeke was sitting up with his back against the wall.

I straddled his hips, rested my hands on his chest and met his eyes. The shadows were back, and it showed in how soft he'd become. That was so very much not what I wanted. I leaned forward and kissed him gently, coaxing him back to me and this moment. No past. No future. No worries. Just us, just now.

It wasn't long until his hands were moving over my body, cupping, caressing, stroking. The heat inside me burned hotter with each touch. I ran my slit over the length of him, covering him in me and rubbing my clit against him. Soon he was hard beneath me again, his hips moving in time to

mine. By the time I was ready I was breathing heavily, electricity running down my nerves.

I looked up at him. "Are you ready?"

He nodded.

I stopped moving. "I need to hear you say it, Tough Guy."

His eyes filled with warmth as he brushed his lips against mine. "Yeah."

I smiled between kisses as I reached down between us and wrapped my fingers around him. Rising as high as I could on my knees, I positioned him exactly where I ached for him.

His hands went to my hips and stopped me before I could lower myself. "Go slow, Baby. You're tiny and I'm not."

I nodded then met his eyes. Slowly, carefully, I sank down onto him. He stretched me slowly, more and more. By the time I got as much of him inside me as I could he was pressing against the end of me, hitting every single nerve I had. I took slow deep breaths as I stayed still, relaxing my body around his size.

"Baby?" His hands tightened on my hips, his eyes were worried.

Panting, I nodded. "I'm okay. I'm just adjusting to you. Give me a minute."

He pressed his forehead to mine. "If you can't, we can stop."

Oh, fuck no. In answer, I moved my hips slowly. He gasped while I groaned as his length brushed over my g-spot and nudged harder against the end of me.

"Holy shit," he growled as his fingers gripped my hips tighter then eased up again. "Fuck, you feel amazing."

I nodded in agreement, trembling too much to speak. I pressed my forehead against his, my hands moved to his chest as I began to move carefully. My body coiled tighter and tighter around his as I made sure to brush my clit against him with every stroke. His hands moved from my hips to slide over my skin, up my back, down my thighs and back again. Stroking, touching, exploring, moving me closer and closer to that edge. Need clawed at me. I moved faster, harder. More. I needed more. More of his touch, his body pressing against mine. Just... more. Sweat rolled between my breasts as Zeke's hips began to carefully move with mine.

"Zeke..." I whimpered as the edge came up fast.

His hand held my face and brought my eyes to his. I swam in ice-blue pools as he kissed me gently while moving with me. Somehow, I was even more naked than before. My body coiled tighter and tighter until finally the pressure was too much. I cried out as lights danced across my vision. Surge after surge of pleasure crashed over me. My body clenched down, milking his as I continued to move. His arms held me to his chest, our hips in sync as his eyes grew wider. His breathing grew ragged. His rhythm changed. One thrust. Two. A third, deeper than ever before. His entire body stiffened against me as his arms held me to him. His head was thrown back as he groaned between his teeth. His muscles flexed around me, but he was still careful of his grip. My body went boneless as I lay against his chest. One of his arms moved around my back to hold me to his chest, the other holding the back of my head. I rested my forehead against his shoulder and tried to remember my name as my body shivered around him with aftershocks.

When I was finally capable of speech, I muttered, "Holy shit."

"You can say that again," he answered.

"Holy shit." I grinned, still only half aware.

He pressed a kiss to my hair. "I love you. Ya hear me?"

I smiled against his skin. "I hear ya."

SUNDAY

I woke up slowly, warm and softly cradled against a hard body. Zeke. His thick arms were around me, his face buried in my neck while his thigh was between mine, flush against my naked body. I smiled a little. Zeke had a thing about preventing me from scooting down in my sleep. I floated in happiness, at least until my bladder made its demands known. I slid his arm around my waist off then shifted away from him.

He lifted his head and barely opened his eyes. "Baby?"

"Bathroom. Go back to sleep," I whispered, running my fingers over his scruffy jaw.

Zeke shifted and let me go. When I sat up I pressed my lips together and fought not to make a sound. My body ached from last night, from Zeke. Not an 'I'm hurt' type of ache but that 'you know you did something' kind. Lube. Definitely using lube or coming first next time with Zeke. Another twinge went through me. Or both. Definitely both.

I took the time to clean up in the bathroom since I hadn't last night. Zeke had held on to me tightly afterwards and I hadn't wanted to pull away. Thankfully, there was no blood on my toilet paper. After washing my hands, I slipped on his shirt from last night from the floor and looked in the mirror. My hair was everywhere. Shit. I'd left my good conditioner back at Miles' house. I was going to pay for that later. Grumbling, I put toothpaste on my toothbrush.

By the time I'd finished in the bathroom, his eyes were closed again. I smiled at the mountain in bed while I went to my bag on the desk. I pulled out my birth control pack and popped out my morning pill. After using my

leftover soda from last night to wash it down, one of his textbooks caught my eye. Introduction to Business. What? No. I opened the textbook and found several post-its bookmarks throughout the first chapter. Zeke was taking business classes?

“You’re snooping.” Zeke’s gruff voice made me jump.

I closed the book and turned around. He sat up and moved to the side of the bed. He was still gloriously naked except for the comforter across his lap. I eyed that lap, now knowing what was underneath. “Yes, but I’m almost-naked snooping.”

“That does make it better,” he admitted with a wry half grin.

I began twisting my ring. “You’re taking business classes?”

When he finished rubbing his eyes his gaze met mine. “Yeah.”

I tilted my head a little. “I didn’t know you were interested in business.”

“I know how a shop runs on the mechanical side,” he said as he began stretching his left arm. “I need to learn how to run it on the business end if I’m ever going to own one.”

“Good idea.” I gave him a warm smile.

He reached out, snagged me around my waist and pulled me to stand between his legs.

I smiled as I slid my hands up his shoulders to wrap around the back of his neck. I met his eyes. “Good morning.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, the shadows back in his eyes.

My cheeks warmed as I got what he was asking. “I’m fine, a little sore, but not an injured kind of sore. More like the sore you get after working out without stretching first. It’ll be gone in a day or so.”

He held my gaze. “Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I just need to come first or use some lube. Or both. That should prevent it next time.”

His eyes held mine. “Are you lying?”

I shot him a look.

The corner of his lips twitched. “Okay, you’re not lying.”

My hands moved to his neck, my thumbs running over his prickly jaw. “Are you okay?”

His hands flexed against my back then moved to my hips.

“I didn’t think you wanted to talk about it last night,” I said softly, “but I still want to check in and see how you’re doing.”

He nodded. “I’m okay. All I knew last night was you.”

Warmth and happiness bubbled up inside my chest. “You have no idea how happy that makes me.”

His eyes held mine. “What about you?”

I smiled again. “All you, Tough Guy.”

He smiled a big smile, one with teeth, and my heart soared. Until his smile began to fade along the edges. “We didn’t use a condom, Baby.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry, I’m on the pill.”

“That’s not always effective,” he countered.

“Most of the time it is,” I replied, “and I just took it.”

The shadows in his eyes grew thicker. “I don’t want to get you pregnant.”

Something in his voice had me asking, “Now, or as in, ever?”

He looked down at my lips. “I’m thinking of getting a vasectomy.”

My eyebrows shot up as my hands dropped from his neck. “Oh, wow.”

“I don’t think my genes need to be passed on, so I’m talking to a doc about it next week.” Zeke dropped his eyes to my hands. “I’m sorry.”

I blinked down at him. “Wait, hold up.”

He lifted his head and met my gaze.

“Why don’t you want your genes to be passed on?” I asked.

He gave me a ‘seriously’ look.

“Your father,” I surmised.

He nodded. Zeke’s father was an abusive piece of shit that liked to torture him. In the end he murdered Zeke’s mother then committed suicide, leaving only a note wishing he’d taken Zeke out too.

I shook my head. “Zeke. Your father made choices. Horrible, evil, fucked-up choices, but he made choices. You have made different choices.”

“Lexie, I don’t think I should have biological kids,” he said again, his voice growing harder.

“And that’s okay,” I said instantly.

He blinked at me.

“If you don’t want kids, that’s fine. That’s your business,” I said. “I’ll support you a hundred percent. I’ll even hold your hand during the procedure. That’s not what worries me.”

His thumbs began to make circles on my hips. “What does?”

“Your motivation,” I said. “Do you not want bio kids because of your father, or because you don’t want them?”

He sighed, closed his eyes, then dropped onto his back on the mattress. “Why are you poking at this?”

I smiled, leaned over him and brushed my fingers through the small patch of hair in the middle of his chest. “Because I want you to make an informed decision.”

He reached up and stopped me from playing with his chest hair before sitting back up. “I’ll think about my reasons. See what they are.”

I lifted my hands up in surrender. “That’s all I’m asking.” My smile faded. It was time to talk about the dorm room. I looked around the room then back to him. “Zeke.”

He dropped his head and avoided meeting my eyes. “I’m managing.”

I held his chin with my fingers and forced him to meet my gaze. “No, Tough Guy. You’re not.”

“I slept last night. Eventually I’ll get tired enough to sleep and it’ll be easier after that,” he said adamantly, and I’ll admit, a bit desperately.

I didn’t want to bring it up, but... “Zeke, how sure are you that we were followed last night?”

Zeke cursed under his breath before he answered. “Last night I was sure, but this morning, not so much.”

“This is not a restful place for you.” I brushed my fingertips along his jaw. “You’re on high alert when you’re here.”

“It’s not that bad,” he growled, still refusing to look at me.

“You’ve been trying to sleep on the floor in the bathroom,” I reminded him.

He clenched his jaw and focused on the wall over my shoulder.

“You can’t keep going like this,” I said softly.

“I don’t know what the hell I was thinking,” he bit out between his teeth. “As soon as I saw my room I fucking knew it wasn’t going to work.”

“It’s tiny. The walls are too thin. Too close to the common room, and you don’t even have a window.” I listed off the issues without thinking.

“It’s behind the wardrobe,” Zeke said.

I shook my head and looked up at him again. “All that stuff adds up to one fact. You don’t feel safe here.”

Zeke’s sky-blue eyes met mine. The pain was clear, the sense of failure obvious on his face. “I think I need to move into Miles’ place.”

“He already has a bed for you,” I said with a small smile.

He snorted once then shook his head. “Of course he does.”

“It’s not failure, Zeke,” I said, my voice firm.

He ran his hand through his hair, mussing it even more. “It sure as fuck isn’t being normal.”

My heart sank. “We’re not normal, Tough Guy.”

Something in my voice had him meeting my eyes.

I brushed some of his hair off his forehead. “Fucked up shit happened in our lives, more so yours than mine, but still...” I tried to say what I meant. “Knowing how it affected us and planning our lives to work with it, that isn’t weakness. It’s taking care of ourselves. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Ya hear me?”

His hand moved to hold mine to his jaw. He nodded. “I hear ya.”

I smiled at him and moved in for a kiss. My phone rang. It was Camille.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Come to UW Medical Center Northwest. Now,” Camille ordered before hanging up.

I pulled the phone from my ear and scowled. “Sure, bitch.”

“The Coven?” Zeke didn’t really need to ask.

I nodded. “They want me at a hospital. I guess they finally looked at the girls that were taken in.”

“Get dressed, we’ll grab food on the way,” Zeke said.

I shook my head. “No, you’ll pack your stuff and get the guys to help you move to Miles’ house today. I’ll grab breakfast on the way.”

He eyed me. “Fine. You shower, I get dressed and get breakfast to go. Bring it back, eat. Then I shower and you go to the hospital. Then I pack my shit up.”

I smiled up at him. “Deal.” My hand went to my rat’s nest of hair. “This is going to take a while.”

“Look in the shower,” he said, a playful light in his eyes.

Intrigued, I raised an eyebrow then stepped back to do just that. I pulled back the shower curtain and smiled. Two big bottles of the same products that Miles bought me for his—our place. “Now, that’s an awesome surprise.”

“Miles gave all of us a set for our places, just in case,” Zeke explained from the bed.

I turned the water on in the shower to warm up. “Thank you, Miles!”

Zeke chuckled as fabric rustled in the bedroom.

When the water was warm enough, I pulled off Zeke's shirt and hopped in. Hot water poured over my body, soothing aches and loosening muscles. "Hot water good."

Zeke chuckled again from the doorway of the bathroom. "I'm heading down to pick up food and coffee, I'm locking the outside door and bathroom door. You good with that?"

I gave him a thumbs up out of the curtain then dived back under the spray and tried not to groan in happiness.

The bathroom door clicked shut, then the outer door. Okay, I couldn't use all his hot water, but it was really tempting. I cursed under my breath before I grabbed the shampoo bottle.

I WAS JUST FINISHING THE LAST OF MY COFFEE AS I GOT TO THE HOSPITAL. After I drank down the last dregs, I headed inside and looked around for a recycling bin to put my cup in.

"What took you so long?" Camille's voice rang through the foyer of the lobby of the hospital.

"I needed a shower, breakfast and coffee." I tossed my cup then turned back to her. "Which you would have known if you didn't hang up on me."

Camille was in another pair of black slacks and a purple silk blouse. She crossed the foyer, her heels clicking on the tiles. "When I say now, I mean now."

"I'm here now," I stated calmly. "So, why am I here?"

She straightened her posture and headed into the lobby of the guest entrance. I followed at a less hurried pace. By the time I caught up to her at the elevators the doors were opening.

We got in and she punched the button for the top floor.

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?" I asked, starting to get irritated.

"The elders want to talk to you," she stated, her shoulders practically rigid.

"Your Coven elders?" I asked.

She nodded once.

"I'm guessing they found something," I muttered.

"They did indeed," she said in an oddly satisfied voice.

The doors opened and she led me out of the elevator and down the hallway to the stairwell. She started up the stairs to the roof access.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight. Why the hell were we going to the roof? Why was Camille being so closed lipped about what was going on? I bent down and pretended to fix my shoelace while Camille opened the door at the top of the last staircase. I speed dialed the first guy listed and put the phone on speaker, then tucked it into my bra. Asher picked up after one ring. "So, why are we going to the roof?" I asked before Asher could say anything.

Camille was tapping her high heel by the time I got to the door. "The elders are meeting up here."

"On the roof of UW Hospital? Wouldn't a conference room work better?" I asked innocently as I stepped through the door.

"Not for this," she muttered as she led me across the gravel roof to a small group of people I'd never met, except for Nova.

The wind ruffled my hair as I stepped outside. The hospital was the highest building nearby, so I had a clear view of the campus in the distance. The group were waiting for me on the northern side of the roof. Three men stood in various styles of suits. They practically surrounded a bird-like woman. Her blonde hair was up in a French twist and seemingly impervious to the breeze moving through campus. She held herself regally even while standing on the gravel roof in high heels. Judging by the wrinkles on her face and hands, I would have to guess she was in her sixties at least.

As soon as I stepped into ear-shot all conversation died. French Twist turned to me with sharp gray eyes. They were cold, calculating. An icy chill ran down my spine.

I stopped a good eight feet from them to give myself room to maneuver. Was French Twist a human? Or something else?

Camille moved to bird woman's side and turned back to face me. An odd gleam shone in her eyes. "This is Alexis Delaney."

The bird woman had thin fingers that ended in sharp nails, and she eyed me from head to toe. "This is the necro?"

"That's me," I chirped. "And you are?"

She looked down at me with disdain. "I'm a Coven Elder."

"Your parents named you Coven Elder?" I asked seriously. "Talk about cruel."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You know Nova."

I turned to the only other face I recognized. Nova stood on the right end of their little curved row. She crossed her arms and glared at me as if I were a bug. Yeah, well, right back at ya, bitch. I ignored my future ex-dormmate and focused on the elder. "Where's Abby?"

"She's been held up by Coven business," the elder replied. "We've examined the girls who have been affected."

"They found something," Camille said with a smirk.

I ignored Camille and focused on the elder. "What did you guys find?"

The bird lady shifted and met my gaze. "Their souls have been removed."

It took me a good ten seconds for her words to sink in. "Wait, how are they even still alive?"

"The body can live without the soul," Camille stated, her face growing hard. "The mind, however, will shatter."

That I hadn't known. I was still wrapping my head around it when Camille spoke next.

"Why did you do it, Lexie?"

My gaze shot to hers. "What?"

Camille held my gaze, her jaw hard. "Where are their souls?"

Two of the larger suits moved towards me.

"I didn't. I'm the one who brought it to your attention." My fists clenched as I dropped a foot back into a defensive stance. I eyed the two men and warned them in a hard voice. "I wouldn't if I were you."

They stopped in their tracks and eyed me.

"If you give us their souls back in good condition, we might be able to repair the damage," Camille stated. "The punishment, however, is the same whether someone dies or not."

"Death," one of the men said.

"It wasn't me," I said again, my temper beginning to rise.

"There's no point in denying it, Lexie," Camille scoffed. "Help us fix it before the damage is permanent."

Nova watched Camille and the elder with wide eyes and a slack jaw.

The bird woman sighed. "Let's just get this over with." She held up her hand and snapped. Force wrapped around me, pinning my arms to my sides. My heart slammed as I tried to open my barriers to pull from the crystal in my pocket. They opened only a crack, but the crystal wouldn't respond. I

couldn't pull from it, the force around me cutting it off. "Let me go," I growled as fear coursed through me.

Camille shook her head with a fake sad face. "I'm sorry, Lexie, but it's the price for this kind of crime."

Bird woman gestured her finger toward the edge of the hospital. My body moved following her direction, my sandals filling with gravel as my toes were dragged over the roof towards the edge.

"Wait!" Nova shouted. "You didn't say this was an execution. You said trial!"

"What did you think would happen when a necro came here?" elder bitch snapped.

The edge came closer, I could see the parking structure across the street now. Heart pounding, adrenaline filled me as I struggled against the bonds that held me, but it was no use. Only energy could break these bonds and the bitch had cut me off. Fear licked my heart as the street came into view. My pulse thundered in my ears. Energy, I needed energy. Veil? No. Not unless I had no other choice. What are my talents? I fought back panic as I ran through my skills. Then I grinned. I reached through that tiny crack and pulled the energy from the air around me. It took time, time I didn't have.

"Wait!" Nova shouted, surprising me. "Why would she bring attention to something she did?"

I pulled and pulled at the energy around me. Almost there... The edge was only a couple feet away now. Fuck, fuck.

"To throw us off the scent, no doubt," elder bitch muttered. My toes were almost at the edge of the roof.

"I don't think she's responsible!" Nova shouted at the elder.

There! I had enough. I pushed that energy through my skin out into the force surrounding me. The energy mixed, mine soon overpowering hers. The bonds holding me shattered like fireworks sparking in the air. My energy shot out like a heat seeking missile, following the energy that had held me back to its source. Elder bitch went down hard to the gravel.

I threw my barrier open wide and threw up a shield as I scrambled away from the edge of the roof.

The others gasped as I swung my arm across the front of my body. Gold energy shot out and wrapped around each of them, pinning them in place. Camille opened her mouth to cast. I wrapped a ribbon of my will around her throat, silencing her. Her eyes grew wide as she focused on breathing.

Rage boiled through me. I had come to them to learn, and they accused me of this shit? They had tried to kill me! No. No more bullshit. I pulled my control tight over my temper. Each of them tried to pull energy or break the hold I had on them, but it was pointless. I waited a couple of minutes, watching them as they figured it out. When they stopped struggling, I met each of their gazes. “Apparently you are forgetting who I am. I’m not a novice who is just learning how to pull energy. I’m the fucking person who saved your fucking world while you sat on your asses and did nothing. I’ve connected to the Veil, I’ve crossed the dead at the risk of my life and my fucking sanity, and I have never abused my abilities, even if it meant the deaths of the people I love.” I met Camille’s eyes. “Now let me make this extremely clear. When I take someone’s soul and move them on while they are alive, the body dies. This was not me.”

“I think she’s telling the truth,” Nova spoke up, her voice a bit strained as she still struggled against the bonds. “She’d have to have been alone with Elena and I know she hasn’t been. Elena was wary of her since move-in day.”

“You’re only mentioning this now?” One of the suits scowled.

“You didn’t ask,” Nova shot back, her eyes glowing a little. “You told me I was here to be a witness at a trial, not an execution.”

My death. She was here as a witness? Not now, later. I pushed all that rage back and took a slow breath.

A phone rang. I crossed the roof and followed the sound to Camille’s pocket. I reached in and pulled it out. It was Abby.

I answered the call on speaker.

“Is she dead?” Abby asked, her voice hard.

“No, she’s not,” I answered.

Silence was my answer. “Let me sum up for you. Your elder is on the ground unconscious after trying to throw me off the roof. Your witches and bodyguards are incapacitated. Now, I’m going to tell you what I told them,” I said, my voice hard. “I didn’t do this, and Nova agrees that I never had a chance to do it.”

It was a long, tense silence before Abby answered. “Well, it looks like we didn’t have all the information.”

“You mean you didn’t bother to go looking for it,” I said, my voice cold. “I’m a necromancer so I’m evil, right? A liability.”

I looked at the witches on the roof, each of them looking back at me with disgust and fear. It hurt. I never wanted to admit it, let alone feel it, but their rejection hurt. It always did. I was done. “I’m done with organized witches. No more hoops, no more lessons, no more spies. Keep your people away from me and mine, and we’ll all have nice happy lives.”

“You’re going to have to leave our territory. The city—”

“No.” My voice had a sharp edge. “No, I really don’t. This is where I am building a life. If you don’t like being this close to a necro, *you leave*. Understand?”

Abby took a breath. “Yes.”

“Good,” I said. “Now that we have that straightened out, what can steal a person’s soul?”

“It’s a magic our elders haven’t seen before. They’ve seen almost all types of magic in existence, so if it wasn’t you then it’s not a witch,” Abby stated.

“And not our responsibility,” one of the male elders added.

Not completely surprised, I turned to him. “Not your responsibility?”

“We police our members of the Coven, and this wasn’t us,” Abby said.

I couldn’t help but look at them as if they had lost their minds. “There is someone, or something, out there stealing the souls of the living—ruining lives—and you aren’t going to do anything?”

“That’s the Templars’ job,” stated one of the other men.

“That’s a bullshit excuse. It only takes someone willing to care about others”—I raked them all with a sneer—“which, clearly, none of you selfish pricks do.” I hung up the phone, dropped it to the roof, then turned and walked away from them.

Once I stepped into the stairwell I dug my cell phone out of my bra. “How much of that did you get?”

“All of it,” Asher growled in my ear. “Everyone is on their way to you now.”

“I’m heading over to the Templars to see if they’ve got an idea who or what could be doing this.” I shoved the door open. It bounced off the wall, echoing down the hall. Ignoring the looks, I went straight to the elevator and hit the button harder than it needed.

“Ally...” Asher’s voice rough. I got in and watched the doors close.

“They were going to kill me, Ash,” I bit out between my teeth. Rage and terror coursed through me, my hands shaking. “I need to get more

protection.”

“I know, Ally girl.” Asher’s voice had warmed a little, but it wasn’t much. He was just as furious as I was. “We’ll meet you there.”

A part of me wanted to crumble and just feel the shock, but I didn’t have time for it. Not now. I took a deep, shaky breath as the elevator stopped on the main floor.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

“Later,” I promised. “I can break down later.” The doors opened and I finally released the witches on the roof as I hurried to my Blazer.

“Zeke will reach the church first,” Asher said.

“I’m fine, Ash,” I muttered.

“No, Ally, you’re not.” Asher hung up the phone so I couldn’t argue. I pushed it back into my bra again as I hurried to my car.

Before taking off, I pulled the card Perez gave me out from behind the visor and punched in the address on my phone.

It was about fifteen minutes later when I pulled up in front of the red brick church. And yes, I had fumed the entire drive. The mid-morning light glinted off stained-glass windows that would normally make me smile. Not today. Today, I was hunting for someone.

As I made my way up the church steps, I noticed that half of the block was red brick buildings. Separate or a part of the church? My money was on the church. You couldn’t exactly hide a group of Templars in the church or rectory at all times, could you?

I pushed the question out of my mind, opened the door and walked straight through the small foyer into the church itself. It was rather pretty. Dark wood everywhere, red brick, and lots of windows. Even the pendant lights hanging from the ceiling were neat. I started walking towards the sanctuary door near the altar. I was almost there when a priest stepped out and pulled up short.

“Oh, can I help you?” he asked.

I eyed him. He was skinny and wiry in a runner kind of way. Had to be mid-twenties, but still had a baby face. Definitely not in charge. “I’m here to see Perez.”

He blinked at me. “We... don’t have a Father Perez at this church.”

“I never said he was a priest.” I moved past him and through the door while he gaped at me.

“Hold on!” He hustled around me to force me to stop. “You aren’t allowed back—”

“Father.” My voice had a bite to it that I didn’t mean. “I’m sure you’re a great priest, but I’m guessing this is above your pay grade. I need you to take me to Head Templar Perez. Now.”

He went a little white around the gills as he gaped like a fish for several heartbeats, but eventually he pulled it together. “I’ll take you there immediately.”

He led me out the back of the church to the property beyond. The set up wasn’t very different from Boulder’s church. It seemed to be divided into sections by courtyards. The priest led me through two courtyards before bringing me to a gymnasium. A weight-lifting area, fight training, weapons... it was all here. Later, I’d be impressed. I spotted Perez at the mats working on hand-to-hand with a similar sized man about the same size as he was. Another man with black and bronze tattoos. Templars. The gym was full of them.

I didn’t bother waiting for the priest. I strode past him and the other men, quiet falling as I walked by. Templars stared as I passed, work-outs stopping altogether. Frankly, I didn’t care, but someone else apparently did.

A large man with curly blonde hair stepped in front of me when I was ten feet from the mats. “Miss, you aren’t allowed back—”

“I’m here for Perez,” I bit out as I came to a stop.

He blinked down at me. “Only authorized persone—”

I met his gaze and shouted, “Perez, get your flunky out of my face before I blast him into the brick hard enough to leave a body impression!”

Curly giant chuckled softly. “Now, miss, it’s cute that you think—”

“Brady.” Perez’s voice drew everyone’s attention.

He looked over his shoulder at Perez.

“She can do what she said,” Perez warned as he picked up a gym towel and wiped the sweat from his neck.

Brady turned back to me, eyed me, then shot a confused look over his shoulder at his boss. “You’re messing with me.”

Perez draped the towel over his shoulder and glared at Brady. “She can do that and a lot worse. Let her by.”

Brady still didn’t seem to believe him as I stepped around him and met Perez at the edge of the mat.

“Miss Delaney, have you changed your mind about my offer?” Perez asked with a grin.

“You have something or someone stealing the souls of students on the UW campus,” I stated simply.

Perez’s brow furrowed as he gave me his full attention. “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t think it, I know it,” I stated. “The Coven just confirmed it this morning before trying to execute my ass for it.”

Silence echoed through the gym.

Perez narrowed his eyes at me. “They tried to execute you for it?”

“Yep. About fifteen minutes ago,” I chirped. I was holding on by a thread and something in the way he was watching me made me think he knew.

He nodded. “Let’s go to my office.”

Perez’s office was a lot like the church. Red brick and dark wood, on the small side, but the window made up for it by filling the room with light.

Perez gestured to one of the armchairs facing his desk as he walked by it. “Please, have a seat.”

I shut the door then dropped down into the cushioned seat.

Perez sat behind his desk and wiped the rest of the sweat off his face before dropping the towel and turning to give me his full attention. “Is there anything I can get you?”

I scoffed. “Someone tried to kill me today. Again. Think tea is going to cut it?”

He half-grinned at me before leaning over and pulling out a bottle of amber liquid and two tumblers. “I was thinking more along the lines of this bottle of bourbon.”

I didn’t hesitate. “Hit me.”

He opened the bottle and began pouring me a glass. “So, someone’s tried to kill you twice now?”

“Yep.” Then I thought about it. “Wait, three times—no, five times in the last two years.” Damn, that was depressing. I took the tumbler he offered, hoping I managed to hide my trembling fingers.

“Five times?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yep.” I took a sip and enjoyed the barely-there burn down my throat.

He shook his head. “As a Templar, I must say, that’s impressive.”

I shook my head a little as I looked down at the light glinting through the alcohol. "That's me, super popular."

"Anyone else ever get hit in the process of them coming after you?" he asked.

A newly healed scar in my heart broke open again and ached. Riley. If she hadn't met me for that talk, she'd still be human right now. I lifted my head and met his gaze. "You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine."

His eyes grew haunted as he finished pouring his glass then put the cap back on the bottle. "Ignore that question."

"Gladly." I took another sip.

He swallowed his sip then met my gaze. "So, explain what's going on."

I proceeded to do just that, leaving nothing out. The strange psychosis that seemed to be running through my dorm hall. The interest Cerberus seemed to have in me, and of course, the latest attempt to kill me. When I was done he wrapped a worn flannel throw around my shoulders. I didn't even realize I was shivering. When did he get out of his chair? "Thanks," I muttered.

Perez went back to his desk and picked up the phone. "We need some warm soup, and tea. Thanks." He hung up the phone then leaned back against the front of his desk as he considered me. "You need protection."

I said nothing, just stared into the mostly full glass.

"You can't go in there!" a male voice shouted. "I need to announce you!"

The door slammed open. Perez got to his feet, his hand going to the gun in his shoulder holster. He didn't draw. Zeke was suddenly on his knees in front of me, his hot hand cupping my cheek. "Lexie?"

I met his raging eyes and tried not to break. "I'm not hurt."

He did a quick once over and scowled at the alcohol in my hand. He took the glass and replaced it with a tall to-go cup that smelled of cocoa. "There are marshmallows."

I gave him a small smile before lifting it to my lips and taking a drink. We'd been through this too many times for him not to know what I needed.

"She's in shock," Perez said. "I have some soup coming for her."

Zeke ignored him. "The others are on their way."

I nodded, then sat up and buried my face in his neck. His arms closed around me and held me tight. I took a deep breath of leather and engine grease. A tear leaked out of the corner of my eye as I burrowed closer.

Zeke kissed the top of my head and breathed in my scent too. It wasn't long before running footsteps sounded outside. The door slammed open, bouncing hard off the wall.

Asher was suddenly there, his hand in my hair, his other arm around Zeke. "Ally."

"She's not hurt," Zeke said for me as I turned in his arms and reached for Asher. Zeke released me and I was wrapped up again in muscular arms. Asher lifted me off Zeke and sat with me in his lap.

Zeke got to his feet and turned to Perez. "What did she tell you?"

"Everything," I mumbled from my cocoon of Asher's body.

"She needs protection from the witches," Perez repeated. "More than you and yours can provide."

"We'll handle the witches," Asher growled deep in his chest, vibrations running through me. "They tried to kill my mate, a pack member. There will be repercussions."

I reached up and placed my hand on Asher's chest above his heart. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before ignoring the others and focusing completely on me. "What do you need?"

I shook my head, not knowing the answer. Before I could think it out, there was a ruckus in the hallway. The twins and Miles hurried into the office and swarmed around the chair Asher and I were in. Voices rose and clashed as they talked over each other again and again. I simply closed my eyes and let them fuss. I must have slept, because the next thing I knew Asher was standing with me still in his arms.

"We'll start looking for commonalities between the girls," Perez assured the guys. "If we find anything we'll inform you at once."

Zeke growled as he moved to Asher and held out his arms. Asher handed me over to him without argument.

"I can help with that," Miles volunteered. "I'm a bit of a computer geek."

"Understatement," Isaac coughed with a grin.

Miles ignored it, and so did Perez.

"Let's go, Asher," Zeke demanded.

"We'll help you guys out with questioning their roommates," Ethan announced.

Isaac nodded in agreement. "They won't stop going after her unless we hand them someone who is actually responsible."

Asher gestured for us to go. They hustled me out of the building and into the parking lot to an SUV. Nolan was waiting, holding the door open for us. Zeke and Asher both moved into the back bench with me in Zeke's lap.

Nolan shut the door and got us out of there.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The alpha house," Asher answered as Nolan hit the accelerator. He moved to face me and pulled out a pen light, examining my eyes. "It's the safest place we have at the moment."

"I don't think they're going to come after me," I said as he finished what he was doing and clicked the little flashlight off.

"How sure are you of that?" Asher countered as he moved back to his side of the bench seat.

"Touché." I closed my eyes.

"Rest, Baby," Zeke ordered. For once, I didn't fight with him. It had already been one hell of a day.

LATE SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Lexie

I don't know what woke me up, but once I was awake, I was amazed that I hadn't been woken up already. Voices floated through the cabin walls from the living room and outside. Asher's bedroom sounded as if it was oddly surrounded by people.

"If they don't shut up they're going to wake her," Zeke muttered from the corner of the room.

"They can hear you," Asher reminded him.

"He knows," I said before opening my eyes and rolling to my side. Zeke was in a worn armchair in the corner, Asher sitting on the beat-up dresser on the other side of the window. "It's his form of subtle."

The corner of Zeke's lips lifted a little as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his legs. "How're you feeling?"

I sat up and leaned back against the wall behind the twin bed. I half shrugged.

"Sounds about right," Asher said quietly. "You kind of went into shock."

"They tried to throw me off the roof of the hospital," I finally said out loud as my eyes burned. "Just for being..."

Zeke scowled. Asher growled deep in his chest.

“But first they wrapped power around me and... cut me off from my crystal.” I shook my head, seeing it all again, feeling it all again. “I was helpless. If I wasn’t a necro, if I didn’t know how to pull energy, I would be dead.”

A couple of tears slipped out. The guys were there instantly, Asher beside me on the bed with his arm around my shoulders, Zeke standing at my side with his hand on the back of my neck. I wiped my face as I tried to pull myself back together.

“They’ll fucking pay for it,” Asher promised.

“Bet your ass,” Zeke added.

I wiped my face again. “I’m so tired of this ‘Necros are bad’ bullshit.”

I shook my head as I looked down at my hands. “I just need to accept it. Witches aren’t going to tolerate me. They’re going to continually look down on me and try to drive me out of town.”

“No, they’re not,” Tilly said from the open door.

Asher got off the bed.

Tilly sat in his spot and took my hand in hers. Her blue eyes were piercing as they met mine. “Tell me everything that happened on that roof.”

I repeated to her exactly what happened. Her face didn’t change, but something in her energy did. She didn’t seem like the wife next door anymore, more like a predator looking for a meal. Alpha.

“So, they didn’t know you were part of the pack?” Tilly asked.

I shook my head.

She seemed to lose a little steam. “Damn,” Tilly muttered then turned back to me. “That will save their lives at least.” She held my gaze. “You are Asher’s mate. As such, you have protection from any group that tries to harm you.”

My eyebrows went up. “I thought that was only in the pack?”

Tilly shook her head as Zeke’s fingers dropped from my neck. “To be honest, you should have come to us instead of the Templars. We’re here to protect you.”

I shook my head, still processing. I had people here besides the guys to back me up? “I didn’t want the human critics to say I cause trouble.”

“You didn’t cause it. They did.” Brendon joined us in the quickly shrinking bedroom. “And they’ll pay for it.”

“How?” Zeke asked.

“What do you want?” Brendon asked. “After today you could tell them all to leave the city and they’ll be contract bound to do it.”

My eyebrows went up again. “How does that work?”

“There are some rules to sharing a city with other supernatural species. Centuries ago, our species figured out that if we all played nice then we didn’t get wiped out by humans. They leave our people alone, we leave theirs alone. If one of us violates that rule they are bound to offer a boon.”

“Since you are mated to Asher, you are a part of our pack,” Tilly explained, “which means you are protected.”

“And since they tried to kill you, you can ask for whatever you want,” Brendon added.

“So, she could make them leave the city?” Asher asked, a grin forming. Tilly nodded.

“We’ve already informed the Coven of their mistake. Now they wait for you to decide what your boon will be,” Brendon explained. “Money, cars, property, their fuck-up has given you an enormous opportunity.”

Stunned, I looked down at my hands.

“Not that big,” Asher said. “She’s engaged to a billionaire.”

Tilly’s eyebrow shot up to her hairline. “Miles?”

I nodded.

She smiled a huge smile and practically glowed. “Congratulations!” She hugged me then pulled my hand out of my lap. “And this ring is so sweet.”

My face burned. “Thanks.” That’s when I realized. This was the first time someone had congratulated me on my engagement to Miles. The others had mostly been worried about how it was going to affect my relationships. Not for the first time, my heart ached. I missed Jake and Riley. I shoved it away and focused on the now. “Honestly, all I want is to never have to deal with them again. I don’t want them near my people. If they see us on the street, I want them walking away. I never want them to approach us again. Me or mine.”

Tilly and Brendon shared a look.

“That can be arranged.” Tilly looked back at me. “But this was a huge infraction. You’re owed more.”

I thought about what else I could want. I looked up at Tilly. “Does the pack need anything?”

Tilly grinned. “Oh, Lexie. I like you.”

I grinned back.

“If you trust us, we’ll make your wants known along with a boon that will be good for the pack,” Brendon said. “Is that okay with you?”

I nodded. “That works. Make it hurt the Coven. I don’t want to deal with them at all.”

“Done.” Brendon headed out the door. Tilly quickly followed him.

Zeke got up and shut the door behind them. He took Tilly’s spot on the bed and looked at me. “You don’t look up to dealing with a crowd.”

“Is the whole pack out there?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Asher admitted. “When wolves circle the wagons, well, everyone comes running.”

“That’s sweet, but…” I shook my head.

“You don’t want to deal with anyone,” Asher finished for me.

I nodded.

“Don’t worry, we’ll hide out in here for the night.” Zeke shifted until his back was against the wall too.

“Tonight?” I turned to Asher. “Can’t we go home?”

“Not until the Coven knows who the real person is behind this,” Asher said.

I rested my head against Zeke’s shoulder and stared off into space. Zeke and Asher exchanged a worried glance that I pretended not to notice.

“Anything sound good to eat?” Asher asked, worried.

One thing did sound good. “Your Cajun pasta?”

Asher grinned. “On it.” He headed out and closed the door softly behind him.

Silence fell in the bedroom. That’s not to say it was quiet, since everyone’s voices still came through the wall. What had happened on that roof ran through my mind again. Being held in place, not being able to protect myself. It brought back memories of Ordin all over again and knocked me off balance. Time. I needed time to get that balance back. I took a deep breath and pressed my face into Zeke’s shoulder. Zeke’s hand moved to hold my inner knee for the first time without hesitation.

I’d come so close to the edge. My toes were right over the roofline. I was looking down at the sidewalk again in my head, so I squeezed my eyes tighter, finding something else to think about.

“I think I’ll join you in the seats away from the window next time we fly,” I muttered.

“We’ll make shirts,” Zeke said in a deadpan voice.

I grinned. "Hoodies. The Hating Heights Crew."

Zeke nodded. "You're right, that's better."

There was a knock on the door half a heartbeat before it opened. Ethan walked into the bedroom and made a beeline for me while Isaac came in behind him.

"Why isn't she out here?" Reagan's voice shot through the hallway. "The entire pack is here to support her, and she can't even be bothered to show her face?"

"She lost something up there, Reagan," Tilly all but snapped. "Now stow it."

Isaac's eyebrows shot up as he closed the door.

I sighed. I really did not like Reagan right now. "I should go out there and let people know I appreciate them showing up."

"In a minute," Ethan said before he dropped to a knee in front of me and met my eyes. "Are you okay?"

I gave him my newly patented half shrug. "I feel kinda numb at this point."

Isaac moved from the door to stand behind his brother. "No, you don't."

I looked up and met those amber eyes.

"You're feeling a lot all at once," Isaac said softly. "You're just struggling to pick one emotion out of the chaos."

I nodded. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Isaac knelt his brother out of the way and bent down to kiss the top of my head. "I'm sorry."

My eyes burned as the weight of what Tilly said hit. I really had lost something up there, and it left me shaken.

"I'm going to see about that pasta and maybe check out their gym," Zeke said before he got up and went out the door.

Ethan took his spot and my hand. "Well, we managed to get some juicy gossip."

I gave him a weak smile. "Snoopy, normally I love your gossip, but not today."

"Oh, this you're going to want to hear," Isaac confirmed as he sat down on the floor in front of my feet.

I turned back to Ethan, curious now.

"Both that girl Kat and the new one, Amy, just recently had their first kisses," Ethan announced.

I waited for the bombshell. It didn't come. "So?"

"Elena had her first kiss the first night on campus, right?" Isaac asked.

I nodded. "I'm not seeing how this is significant."

"Neither did we," Isaac said, "but the Templars went ape shit over that info."

"Apparently," Ethan continued, "there's something about a first kiss that is different to any other. A person is open, vulnerable to magic."

It clicked. "Someone used the girls' first kisses to steal their souls?"

Ethan nodded. "That's what the Templars think."

"So, are they saying creature or person?" I asked.

"They're leaning toward person," Isaac replied.

I shook my head. "Hope they find him soon."

"Miles was going through security footage of the dorm when we left, so it might lead somewhere," Ethan said.

"A lead would be great right now." I sighed. "I guess I'd better go out there."

Isaac got to his feet so I could stand up. Ethan took my hand and led me out of the bedroom into the family room of the cabin. A group of cubs were watching a Pixar movie on the TV near the fireplace. Several adults were around the room in small groups. All talking stopped as soon as I appeared. Most sent me smiles of support while others just went back to their conversation, but no one said anything as Ethan led me into the kitchen and I sat at the island.

The twins took stools to my right and left. Asher was at the stove tossing pasta into sauce while talking to Brendon.

"You do realize once the pack smells that you'll be making it for everyone," Brendon pointed out.

Asher nodded. "And I'll be happy to, but this is for Ally first. She's being a bit sluggish coming out of shock."

Brendon frowned. "It's disturbing that you know her recovery speed for shock."

"It's happened enough." Asher sighed, then poured the pasta into a big bowl. He brought it straight to me, confirming that he knew I was there.

"It's not easy loving a necro." I gave him a warm smile.

"Who doesn't like a challenge?" Asher grinned back before setting a fork in my hand. "Eat."

"Yes, sir." I happily dug in.

Asher grinned as he leaned on the other side of the counter.

My phone rang in my bra. Sighing, I pulled it out. It was Uma. "You are majorly late to the game."

"Don't get pissy, necro. I was out of range for a few days," Uma stated. "Wrangling a bunch of witch-kids isn't my idea of a good time. Besides, I figured Abby would answer your question."

"The Coven tried to kill me," I said, my voice dry.

"Already?" Uma sighed. "What happened?"

I gave her a summary of the situation here in Seattle. When I was done, Uma was furious.

"That two-faced bitch!" Uma snapped. "When I get done with her, her Coven will be lucky to have any funds at all."

"Go for it," I muttered before taking another bite of pasta.

"Are you okay?" Uma asked.

I finished my bite. "I'm done with organized witches. I want nothing to do with them from now on."

She sighed. "I can understand that. I'm going to make them pay for this, Lexie."

"I hope so."

"I'm going to call the Council," Uma said. "Call me if anything else happens."

"Will do." I hung up and set my phone on the counter. Asher reached out and took it. He tucked it into his back pocket before moving back to the stove.

"There's enough pasta for one more, who wants it?"

"Dibs!" Isaac's hand shot into the air diffusing the tension in the kitchen. Chuckles ran around the house as Asher made a bowl and handed it to him.

"I'm sorry to ask, Asher." A woman, carrying a toddler currently drooling on her fist joined us in the kitchen. "Could you whip something up for the cubs? It's getting late."

"Happy to." Asher turned away and began putting together something for the kids.

WE ENDED UP SPENDING MOST OF THE NIGHT AT THE BREAKFAST COUNTER while Asher cooked for anyone who asked. We played the wide array of

boardgames that Tilly and Brendon had stashed around the house. The guys concentrated on keeping me occupied so not to fall back into my slump from earlier. Eventually Zeke arrived, sweaty from his workout in the weight room. He joined us as he ate.

“Anyone want the last of this fish, veggies and rice?” Asher asked.

“I could eat it,” Zeke admitted.

“Oh, I was hoping to get it.” Miles’ voice sent me spinning on my stool.

His hair was mussed, eyes tired and body hunched. He was clearly exhausted. His emerald eyes met mine as he moved into the kitchen. Isaac got up and gave him his stool.

“What did you find?” Zeke demanded from his corner of the breakfast counter.

“Let him get something to eat,” I told Zeke while Miles settled himself. I turned to him. “You look exhausted.”

“Well, I’ve been doing a lot of hacking for the Templars today,” Miles explained as Asher set the food in front of him. He wearily picked up the fork and looked down at the food. “We got into the hospital files and went through footage from the dorm security cameras.”

“What did you find?” Ethan asked.

“Nothing new from the hospital.” He sighed then turned to me. “But we think we found him.”

“Who the hell is it?” I asked.

Miles met my gaze.

My heart sank.

“A resident advisor on the second floor. Sunny Malcom,” he said, clearly not happy about telling me.

My stomach dropped. “Sunny?”

Miles nodded. “We saw him on camera with all three girls. So far, he’s the only lead.”

Stunned, I shook my head. “Son of a bitch.”

“Beautiful?” Ethan asked from beside me.

“I know the fucker. He helped me take Kat to the emergency room.” I got to my feet and started for the door. “She fucking looked at him like he was a god, and I didn’t fucking see it.”

“Lexie.” Miles’ voice stopped me. “They don’t know what he is yet.”

I stopped at the door then turned back. “Isn’t he some witch or something?”

“That’s what they’re looking into now.” Miles turned to face me. “No one can go after him until they know what he is. It’s suicide.”

“So we’re supposed to wait here while he’s out on a Saturday night looking for his next victim?” I asked, hoping I was wrong.

“Yes, unfortunately.” Miles sighed with weariness. “The Templars are working on it with everyone they have. They should find something by morning, but even then... It’s not our fight anymore.”

I frowned at him. “But—”

“He’s right,” Asher said, backing Miles. “The Templars have it handled. It’s their job to take care of it, not ours. We need to let them handle it.”

I lost all the steam I had. They were right. We weren’t the only good guys around anymore. We didn’t need to handle every supernatural problem ourselves. A weight I hadn’t even noticed lifted from my shoulders. “Huh.”

“Red?” Isaac said.

“Just letting it sink in that we don’t have to deal with it.” I shook my head. “It feels weird.”

“Come sit down and I’ll make you some cocoa,” Asher offered.

I was on my stool not long after that, still adjusting to this revelation. I didn’t need to go out and fight. I had my guys, and we were all safe. It wasn’t our job.

MONDAY

Lexie

I was tapping my fingers on the table. We'd been waiting for fifteen minutes in a meeting room at the Templar church and I was about at the end of my rope. Perez had called around six in the morning saying that they did, in fact, need my help and now we were just sitting here.

"He's got three more minutes before I go hunt him down," I muttered under my breath.

Miles reached out and stopped my tapping. "Count your breaths."

I closed my eyes and did as he suggested. One. Two. Three... Fuck this. I opened my eyes and got to my feet.

The door opened before I left the table.

Perez walked in with a laptop and several other Templars. "Sorry to keep you waiting, my coffee hadn't kicked in yet." He moved to the head of the table while the others took empty seats along the other side.

I sat back down. "What did you find?"

Perez hit a couple buttons then whacked a small projector that sat in the middle of the table. It clicked on, projecting a grainy security camera image of Sunny onto the screen. Perez turned back to me. "He's a soul eater."

"That makes sense," Zeke muttered.

“This kind of supernatural parasite is tricky,” Perez explained. “It’s not the actual person who is doing the damage and killing. It’s the parasite.”

“There are supernatural parasites?” Ethan asked, looking a bit green around the gills.

Perez nodded. “Think of it like an extreme tapeworm that takes over the body and personality of its host.”

“So this guy, Sunny, is innocent?” Asher asked.

Perez nodded. “Sadly, yes.”

“How do we stop it?” I wasn’t going to beat around the bush.

“We have to starve him out.” Perez turned back to me. “It’ll kill the parasite, returning control to the person.”

“So we lock him up,” Zeke said.

“Yes and no,” Perez replied. “A normal cell won’t do what we need it to do. He’ll die before the one hundred and sixty-eight days it takes for the parasite to die. We’ll need to use Pandora’s Tears.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What is that?”

“After Pandora opened the box introducing misery and evil into the world, she cried tears of grief and regret for her actions,” the priest explained from his seat next to Perez. “Those tears turned into metal orbs and became mystical prison cells that can hold unique creatures.”

Miles leaned forward. “And you have one of them?”

“A few.” Perez turned to me. “The only problem we have with taking this soul eater on is that Pandora’s Tears are triggered by magic. And we don’t have any.”

“You don’t have any witches on staff?” Asher asked.

“We occasionally contract with the Coven, however they aren’t cooperating today.” Perez turned back and met my gaze.

“They’re probably angry over the loss of their most profitable businesses,” Asher explained. “They had to give them up as a boon for trying to kill Ally.”

Perez frowned then turned back to me. “We need your help.”

Shit. “I take it a Tear will keep this guy alive but kill the parasite?”

“If we’re in time. It’s this kid’s only shot at this point,” one of the other Templars answered.

“Well, then let’s go get him,” I said.

“Thank you,” Perez said with a sincerity that surprised me. “This kid’s soul is being slowly eaten away, and you’re his only shot.” He hit a button

on the laptop. The projection changed. “Soul eaters like dark and humid environments. They tend to make a nest to digest in, and it probably won’t be far from his dorm room.”

“Probably the utility tunnels under the dorm hall,” another Templar added. “Those tend to be humid and hot as hell.”

Perez nodded. “We’ll need to bring flame throwers for the nest itself, but the tricky part is getting the host out of the nest without killing him.”

“Bait,” I said without hesitation.

“Lexie.” Zeke’s voice warned me he wasn’t happy.

“It’s the fastest way,” I countered without looking at him. “This thing uses a first kiss to hit his victims when they’re vulnerable, right? Is there a way to make myself vulnerable without the whole first romantic kiss thing?”

“Our files say that the last time a Templar dealt with one of these, the witch lowered her barriers until they weren’t detectable at all,” the priest said.

“Shit.” I sighed. That wouldn’t be fun. It’d leave me completely vulnerable to attack and possession. Well, my tattoo down my back would prevent possession at least, so... “I can do that.”

“Lexie.” This time it was Isaac.

“The tattoo down my spine prevents me being possessed,” I explained to the Templars, “so the only danger is letting him get too close to me before I trigger the Tear.”

“The logic is sound,” Miles thought out loud.

“What are our chances of restoring the victims’ souls?” Asher asked.

Perez suddenly looked older than his years. “We won’t know until he’s in the Tear. Their souls—what’s left of them—will automatically return to their owners, however the damage could be permanent.”

“So we’re on a clock?” Zeke asked.

Perez nodded.

“Personally, I’d rather you not go down into a cramped space with flame throwers,” Miles stated.

“Me either.” I turned back to Perez. “Leave the flame throwers out. I can torch the nest with more control than you guys, and I won’t set the building on fire.”

“So you’re willing to go on this operation?” Respect lit Perez’s eyes.

I nodded. “I’ll come along; you’re going to need me.”

“The team here have the best skill-set for this type of mission. Close combat skills, all of them experienced. You’ll be in good hands,” Perez promised.

I looked at each of them in the eyes. “If any of you have a problem working with a necro and can’t stow it away for this field trip, speak up now.”

No one got to their feet, but several seemed to look at me with a bit more respect than I expected.

I turned back to Perez. “Let’s stop wasting time. Load up your gear so we can get this guy in a Tear.”

The Templars grunted in agreement. Everyone got to their feet and moved.

Perez gestured for me to come over. “I’ll take you to the vault where we store the Tears.”

I left the guys with the team and followed. Silently, he led me down a set of stairs into a basement. Then down another set into a sub-basement.

We stopped on the polished cement in front of a large seamless steel door with a small electric panel. Perez walked up to the panel, punched in a code, then put his hand on the screen. The metal wall parted. As I got a glimpse inside, my mouth dropped.

“Holy shit,” I muttered as I joined him at his side. Row upon row of softball-sized metal orbs lay out before me. I stepped into the vault and went to the first row. Each row had several shelves. A metal orb sat on a stand every two inches. With how long this vault was, there were hundreds, if not a thousand. I turned to Perez. “Only a few?”

Perez grinned. “I’m not one to brag.”

I shook my head as I took in the rows of mystical cells.

Perez moved to the first row and picked one up. “If they’re occupied they glow a different color depending on what’s inside. That’s how we’ll know the parasite is dead when the time comes.” Perez held out the carved metal orb to me.

I hesitated only a heartbeat. I plucked it from his hand, surprised at how light it was. “How do I open it?”

“See that sharp point on the top?” Perez pointed out the small protrusion. “It’s powered by blood. You prick your finger and say the incantation while pressing it against the skin of the one you need to capture.”

I nodded and met his gaze. "What's the incantation?"

"*In carcerem*," Perez said. "Imprison in Latin. You must repeat it three times."

I eyed the metal ball again. "Seems a bit too user friendly. Are you sure a witch didn't come up with this?"

"Positive." Perez turned and started out of the vault.

I shrugged as I put it out of my mind and followed him up the stairs into the armory.

"This is bullshit." Zeke's snarl reached me before I even stepped into the room. My guys were on one side of the weapon storage room, the Templars on the other.

Perez sighed. "What's the matter?"

"These guys aren't letting us go," Asher growled.

I moved between my guys and the Templars. "Why not?"

"None of them have weapons training," one of the Templars shot across the room.

"That you know of," Ethan countered.

"Stop." I told my guys. They all turned their attention to me. "I'm not in charge of this trip, so if they say you don't go, there's literally nothing I can do." I shrugged and turned to the Templars. "However, Asher and Ethan aren't human. They should be allowed to go."

Zeke, Isaac and Miles bristled.

"Lexie," Zeke growled.

"Red!" Isaac warned.

"Angel..." Miles met my gaze and shook his head. "I'm going with you."

"You guys are too easy to kill," I reminded them. "Asher can heal almost anything, and Ethan..."

"Death is my bitch," Ethan added.

I met Zeke's, Miles', then Isaac's eyes. "We can't risk you guys down there this time."

They all nodded eventually, but not one of them liked it. Zeke shook his head and left without a word.

I closed my eyes and hoped he would calm down by the time we left. I turned to Perez. "If they don't go, I don't go."

Perez nodded. "They can go."

I went over to the vehicle they were loading and climbed into the front seat to wait. I fidgeted with the orb, looking at the carving until a large shadow blocked out the light.

I looked up and met sky-blue eyes and a pissed-off boyfriend.

Zeke clenched and unclenched his jaw. "I don't like not going."

I got out of the van and looked up at him. "I'm not thrilled about it either, but I think it's the safest thing to do."

Zeke glanced at the Templars as they began to load into the van. He bent down and whispered, "Don't trust them."

I nodded. "I'm not an idiot."

Zeke clenched and unclenched his fist before bending down and brushing a kiss on my forehead. "Stay safe."

Stunned, I watched as he walked away to talk to Ethan. More PDA from Zeke? Whoa... That was new.

Isaac came over, his brow furrowed as he frowned. "I don't like this either."

"Love you too." I grinned at him.

He sighed then shook his head. "Go kick this guy's ass so you can come home."

I nodded.

Miles made his way over to me. He took my left hand and hugged me tightly. "Stay safe. And don't take any big risks."

I nodded. "I promise."

He brushed a kiss along my cheek before letting me go and joining the others. By now the team was waiting on me. I took one more look at the guys staying behind, hating that we were splitting up for this, then I forced myself to get into the car.

I was tapping my engagement ring on the Tear as we drove towards the university.

"So, what's the plan?" Asher asked from the first row of seats.

"He'll probably be in the tunnels this time of day, especially if he fed last night. He'll have a nest somewhere." The driver turned to me. "I'm Hudson. I'm team leader on this op. What I say goes. Understand?"

I nodded. "So, what are you thinking plan wise?"

Hudson pulled onto the freeway and sped up. "I'm thinking you go first, your guys and mine hang back. Is there a magical way to make yourself look tempting as hell?"

“You want to use her as bait?” Asher scowled.

I ignored him. “I can drop my barriers and up my energy level to melty-ice-cream-sundae to pull him out of whatever nest he has made.”

Hudson nodded. “When he goes for you, you trap his ass, burn his nest to the ground, and then we’re out of there.”

“And what if he just attacks?” Ethan asked from the seat behind me.

“That’s when I start throwing magic around and Asher knocks him out,” I suggested as I looked over my shoulder at them.

Ethan dropped his face into his hand as the plan came out.

“My guys will be good for crowd control, but firing guns down there is a risk I’d like not to take,” Hudson added.

“I get it.”

We pulled up in the parking lot near the hall but Hudson didn’t stop there. He drove up onto the sidewalk until we were right in front of my dorm hall. Everyone piled out.

“Asher, Ethan and Lexie with me,” Hudson announced. “Calvin, you’re in charge of crowd control. Get that building empty.”

Calvin nodded once before moving to his men. The four of us took off at a run towards the building.

“Where is the access to the utility tunnels?” Asher asked.

“The laundry room in the basement,” Hudson said as he jerked the door open and hurried for the stairs. Asher moved ahead of us and pulled the fire alarm.

We slowed once we were in the laundry room which, thankfully, was empty this early on a Sunday morning.

“There’s got to be an access around here,” Hudson said as he took the right. I went straight ahead while Asher and Ethan took the left. Heart pounding, I found it in a corner behind a vending machine. “It’s here.” I unplugged the vending machine and began pulling it out of the way. Luckily, it was on wheels. When I tried to open the access door, it was locked.

“Here.” Asher gestured for me to move. He grabbed the door handle and jerked the door clear off the hinges with a screech. He dropped it to the floor.

Hudson looked at the door then to Asher. “Guess having a werewolf around is pretty handy.”

I grinned as Hudson started through the dark doorway. He must have found a switch because a dim light flipped on. Asher blinked several times before following him down the cement stairs.

“Shouldn’t I go first?” I asked in a hushed voice.

“Can you see in the dark?” Asher asked, his voice dry. “Have a flashlight?”

“Touché,” I muttered as I followed him.

Ethan was right behind me. “Anyone else getting horror movie vibes?”

“Well, we *are* going into the utility tunnels to hunt down a monster parasite who is destroying the minds of several people,” I pointed out as my heart began to pound.

“Too bad none of us are virgins,” Ethan said. “We’d be sure to survive.”

I bit back a snort and it eased the tension in my shoulders, which was exactly what he wanted. We moved down the dimly lit tunnel as silently as we could. It wasn’t long before Hudson led us to a branching section.

Asher’s hand went to his nose. “Oh, that’s rank.”

“You can smell him?” I asked as I stopped behind him.

He nodded. “It’s like burnt sugar and rotting garbage.”

I took a deep sniff but couldn’t smell anything.

Hudson turned his flashlight to point at the ceiling. “Can you find him that way?”

Asher nodded. “Unfortunately, I can.” He gestured down the left tunnel. “He’s that way, and not too far. Maybe eight hundred feet.”

“Switch with me,” I whispered.

Asher’s eyes were rough seas when they met mine, the silver vein thick through them. He didn’t want to let me go first.

“It’s the only way,” I reminded him.

Asher frowned but made room for me. I slid by him, my body brushing his. His hands stopped me from passing.

I met his eyes.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to my ear. “Be careful.”

“I will.” I grinned up at him before continuing past Hudson. “Hang back a bit.” I stood in front of the guys in extremely dim light and peered down the corridor. My pulse picked up as I dropped my barriers completely. Asher and Ethan glowed in my head, light blue and red fireflies as I felt the dead. The school had a rat problem and they were using poison to deal with it. There was a dead nest not far from here. Hmm. Maybe I could use them

if I needed to, but I doubted it. It'd have to be a huge nest to work. I gripped the cool metal orb in my hand as I pulled some energy just in case. Then I moved forward.

Hudson shifted his feet but stayed put.

Adrenaline burned through my veins as I moved through the dim tunnel. My chest tightened as I caught a whiff of what Asher had described. Oh yeah, rotting garbage with burnt sugar was right. I ignored it and focused on moving closer to the big form filling the side tunnel. The nest.

It took up the entire wall. Twigs were twisted round and round to create a hole just big enough for a human to climb through. Holding it together was black goop which looked like tar and was probably just as sticky.

I stepped closer with my heart in my throat and a death grip on the damn orb. My breathing picked up. When I was about twelve feet from the nest, glowing yellow eyes peered out of the opening at me.

I stopped moving. "Sunny?"

I didn't recognize what crawled out of the opening on all fours. Naked as the day he was born, covered in patches of black goop and dirt, Sunny eyed me. His head tilted completely on its side. He eyed me and licked his lips.

Okay, that was fucking unnerving. "Sunny, you're sick. I can help you." Maybe he was still aware in there, maybe not, but it didn't feel right attacking right off the bat without giving him a chance to fight the thing holding onto him.

His oddly long fingernails tapped on the cement floor. That's when I realized they weren't his fingernails. They were claws. Dirty, black, filthy claws. Fuck.

"Sunny," I said, "if you can, help me trap it."

Sunny opened his mouth and cackled dryly. My ears ached from the sound as it echoed down the tunnel. "Tasty-tasty morsel," it said, its eyes running over me. "You're like a little treat." He lifted his head and opened his mouth. His tongue flicked out, tasting the air like a snake. His eyes opened wider. "You have power."

His sudden interest gave me an edge. I pulled even more power from my stone. "I do."

His eyes lit with glee. "Oh, what a host you'll make." He moved to a crouch. "Better than poor, empty Sunny." He leapt.

I threw out a bolt of force, knocking him to his back. He hit the floor. Before I could take a step he scrambled back in a crouch, already moving. He hit me full in the chest with both hands and feet. I hit the ground hard, the air knocked out of my lungs. He was on me in under a heartbeat, his bodyweight straddling my waist. I brought up my arms to cover my face just before the first blow as I struggled to get air into my lungs. After the second blow a growl sounded before the weight was knocked off me. I dragged in a deep breath.

Hands pulled me up.

“Stupid, stupid idea,” I gasped as Asher grappled with a snarling Sunny. “I’m an idiot.” I searched for the orb in the tunnel as warm liquid poured down the side of my head.

“Here.” Ethan shoved the orb into my hands then moved between me and the fight in a ready stance. Hudson moved towards the fighting pair with two extended metal batons in his hands. Hudson saw his moment and moved in, striking Sunny across the back of the head. He hit the floor for only a second. Asher yelped from the far side of the tunnel as Sunny slammed him into the wall.

“I gotta touch him, guys!” I got to my feet and ran for the fight. Asher heard me. He tackled Sunny to the ground on his stomach. I jumped onto Sunny’s back, adding my weight to Asher’s. Hudson went for his legs. Sunny snarled, clawing at the ground and doing his best to unseat us. I positioned myself in a strong grip and pressed my finger against the sharp needle on the orb. “Let go!”

Hudson was thrown from Sunny’s legs. Asher only hesitated a moment, then he let go.

I clung to Sunny as he burst to his feet and began twisting, trying to get me off his back. I focused completely on Sunny in that moment. “*In carcerem!*”

The metal orb warmed in my hand as Sunny slammed me back onto a large metal pipe. I cried out as pain racked me, but I tightened my grip and focused. “*In carcerem!*”

Energy crackled from the orb and into Sunny. He dropped to the ground, limp.

I didn’t hesitate. “*In carcerem!*” The orb vibrated in my hand as a white light shone from the orb, quickly brightening. I clung to the orb as I shut my eyes against the burning light. It was there only a second and then gone.

I blinked several times, trying to get my vision back. I couldn't feel Sunny under me anymore. The next thing I knew, I was on my back looking up at the ceiling as it spun.

Ethan was there in a heartbeat. "Lexie!"

I shook my head, that I was fine, only I wasn't so sure. Things were... kinda fuzzy.

Ethan's hands went to the side of my head and pressed down. "Asher!"

I blinked and Asher was there, bloody and covered in black goop but whole and alive. "Ally, you're hurt." His hands took the place of Ethan's. "Get the Templar medic, now!"

"You get 'em," I quipped.

"Hudson already went for them," Ethan snapped.

Asher's face was worried as he examined my head. "You're bleeding a lot, but it's a scalp wound. They do that. What else hurts?"

I didn't answer as I was trying to take stock. The adrenaline was fading and leaving pain. "Back. Dizzy." My vision began to darken along the edges. "Gonna pass out."

"Ally, stay with me," Asher growled. "I want us to have kids."

My eyes shot open. "What?"

His eyes were desperate. "I made up my mind, I want kids."

I scowled up at him. "And you think now is the time for this?"

"Better than never," he countered. "Four of them. Two sets of twins."

I gaped up at him, my temper sparking. "We just started talking about this and you've got a number?"

Asher nodded, humor filling his eyes. "You bet I do."

"Fuck, Ash!" I snapped, energy coursing through me. "I don't know if my vagina can take that."

Running footsteps came towards us.

"We could use a surrogate," Asher countered.

What the hell was wrong with him? I was on the floor losing blood and he wanted to talk about having kids? "I'm not talking about this now!"

The templars arrived en masse, one of them working on me as I stared at Asher like he was insane. It wasn't until they started bandaging me up that I realized what he had done. The cheeky ass winked at me over the medic's shoulder. I simply let them work on me.

EPILOGUE

A few days later

I looked into the mirror of my dorm bathroom and almost had to do a double take. Again. Due to the claw wounds half my head had been buzzed down to my scalp while the rest curled down to mid arm. Four long lacerations were stitched closed in rough lines from the back of my head up towards my temple. I looked so much like my True Self that it was eerie. I was in one of Zeke's big black shirts, a pair of Miles' black jeans, Ethan's red hoodie, and I'm pretty sure they were Isaac's Harry Potter socks I was rocking in my new sneakers. None of my clothes had been loose enough for my bruised and battered body, though Miles' jeans were tight as hell. I needed to get back to the gym.

It had been two days since the utility tunnel, and the word from Perez was that the orb was locked in the vault and he'd be checking it's status every week until Sunny could be released. But I didn't really care about that right now. Today was moving day. I finished putting my toiletries and towel into the box on the sink then left the bathroom.

The guys were already making trips down to the car with my stuff. Gemma was in class and Elena, well, she was still in the hospital. Heart heavy, I stepped into the small foyer.

“This is the last of it.” Miles was carrying my large suitcase to the door.
“Would you like me to wait for you?”

I nodded. “Just give me a minute.”

Miles’ eyes were full of understanding as he headed out to wait in the hallway.

I walked further into the room. My corner was completely empty, the drawers on my desk left open. I didn’t bother closing them. I took one last look at the dream of normality that I’d once had. That’s all it had been. A dream. It was time for me to live the life that worked for me. With a heavy heart, I turned to Nova.

She was leaning against her desk, arms crossed over her chest while she watched me closely. “You got everything?”

I nodded. “Any word on Elena and the others?”

“Elena’s damage is permanent. She’ll be in a psych ward the rest of her life.” Nova sighed and dropped her arms. “The others look like they’ll recover, just very slowly. The Coven is going to help.”

I nodded. “I wish we got there in time for Elena.”

Her eyes were haunted as she nodded. “Me too.”

I met her gaze. “Thanks for putting your neck out for me on the roof.”

She gave me a small nod. “Thanks for not throwing me off the roof.”

I gave her a nod in return and walked out of the dorm room. I had a life to get to.

SNEAK PEAK

(If you don't want a cliffhanger, do not read until next book is out! You have been warned...)

Running. I was running through the bloody woods again, only instead of sinking into the muck I stayed close to the trees to help pull me out of the sinking earth.

"Where are you?" the voice called through the trees. He was getting closer. Heart pounding, I jerked my foot out of the mud and onto firm land for the first time. Breathing heavily, I got to my feet. The earth cracked, knocking me back down to the ground.

A rough rockface shot up before me like a rocket then stood solid. I scowled as the cliff stretched as far as I could see in both directions.

"Call to me and this'll be all over," the voice promised. He was closer still. Every instinct I had told me to run.

Fear shot through me like ice. Fine. Can't go to the side then I'll fucking go up. I reached out, found a hold, and began to climb. The rock cut into my hands, my nails ripping as I pulled myself higher.

Heart slamming in my chest, I focused on each hold. Each movement. It seemed like I climbed all night, but eventually my hand found the edge of the cliff.

A hand clasped around my forearm.

My head snapped up. The dark figure stood there, chuckling. "There you are."

“Fuck you.” I braced my feet against the cliff face and used everything I had to jerk my hand from his grasp. The air whooshed by me as I fell away from him.

I jerked awake, sitting up covered in sweat. Gasping, I wiped the drops from my face as I looked around the bedroom. My room. Miles’ house. Seattle. I was safe.

“I found you,” a male voice whispered in my right ear.

I rolled away off the bed and flipped the switch for my lamp. Nothing. No one was there. My hand trembled as I brought my fingers to my mouth. Nothing was there, but I *had* heard a voice. What the hell was that?

OceanofPDF.com