

GRAVE CALLS

B.L. BRUNNEMER

WHEN THE GRAVE CALLS

B. L. BRUNNEMER

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For my readers. Thank you for sticking it out this long.

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CHAPTER 1

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scream ripped from my throat as I hurled my phone across the room. It hit the wall, shattering on impact. The Templars were useless.

"We have our own plans for the necromancer. And they don't concern you," the last Templar had said.

Plans! They had plans that didn't involve killing that abomination! I shoved the pile of books off my desk to the floor before I began pacing the length of my study. If that girl and the Templars teamed up it'd be a disaster for any witch out there. It could be the end of witchcraft as we know it.

I stopped on the worn rug, my heart sinking. If the Templars got ahold of the power that girl had it wouldn't just be witches who had to worry, it'd be a disaster for the whole supernatural world. The Templars would go from an annoyance to a full threat.

I shook my head. That couldn't happen. She couldn't be allowed to team up with them. Right now, the Templars were low in numbers and not enormously effective since the gargoyles were concentrating on their own survival, but if that changed, if she grew stronger with that energy ... Oh Goddess.

We had to stop her. It had to end. Anchors. Necromancers needed anchors. Let's start there.

Lexie

"Your mom's going to be home soon." I laughed as I shoved at Isaac's arm around my waist.

Isaac's naked body wrapped around my back, his arms stopping me from breaking free. "I like you better naked."

My face burned as I managed to detangle myself from his arms and the sheets. I rolled off the bed and landed on my feet.

He groaned as I picked up my underwear off the pile of clothes next to his bed. "Red, come on. We've got like half an hour."

Laughing, I shook my head as I pulled up my panties and looked down at him. "And your brother could come home any minute."

"He's playing at Vegabond tonight." Isaac lay on his back, the white sheet draped low on his hips. Oh my ... lines of definition. The pull to him was strong enough that I almost took a step towards him. That was how the last time started.

Clothes. I needed clothes. I found my bra and began to pull it on. "I forgot."

He rolled to his side and propped his chin up on his fist. "Come closer and I'll make you forget even more."

I snorted as he rubbed the rumpled bed sheet in an over the top seductive way. "Not a chance." I bent down and began pulling on my jeans. "You better get dressed too. If your mom comes home and we're in your bedroom she's going to come looking to find out why."

He groaned again and shoved back the sheet. "Fine. You win."

I watched his muscular backside as he bent over and found his shorts. His ass disappeared into the blue mesh

before he turned back around to grin at me. The shit knew I had been watching. Ugh! Focusing on what I was doing, I finished getting dressed.

He slipped his arm around me and brought me in against his chest. I looked up at his face. High cheekbones, slightly pouty lips ... Isaac was sexy. There was no denying it. Even the blue hair dye suited him. He grinned down at me as warmth washed through me.

I shook my head. "You are going to get us caught one day."

He leaned his head down and brushed his lips over my throat. "Maybe, but it'll be fun."

I giggled as I pulled away from him and took several steps back. "You're too good at this."

"Only with you, Red." He sighed and sat back down onto the bed. "So, are you going back to Miles' house tonight?"

I nodded as I adjusted the hem of my sweater. "Yeah, I'm still staying there. After that whole mess with Jadis compelling Rory? It just seemed to be what's best for everyone right now."

He nodded. "In your room?"

My shoulders grew tense. It was the first time in a month that he had asked about my staying at Miles'. "Most nights, yeah."

He clenched his jaw and let out a breath. "Are you and Miles ...?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Rule one." The biggest rule we had established was that what happens in a couple stays within the couple.

He blew a raspberry. "I'm not getting jealous of Miles. I'm just wondering if you're sleeping with him too."

"I sleep next to him when or if he sleeps," I answered. "So, yes."

He shot me a look. "You know what I was asking."

"And you know that you shouldn't be asking."

"Lexie ..."

"Don't Lexie me," I countered as I put my hands on my hips. "We have rules, and we need to follow them to keep the peace."

He reached out, hooking his long fingers in the loops of my jeans and pulling me to stand between his knees. "I'm not jealous." His amber eyes met mine. "Honestly, I was kinda hoping the answer was yes. Then I wouldn't need to worry about him quite so much right now."

Miles had developed tunnel vision over the last month. He was obsessed with building some staff that he was sure would help us in our fight against Jadis. The guys had begun to worry about him. Well, not just the guys.

"Isaac."

He shrugged. "Can't blame a guy for being curious."

I smiled and shook my head. Curious my foot, he was being nosey. "I better get going before your mom gets home."

The corners of his mouth curled upwards into a warm impish grin. "I'll walk you out."

My face warmed as I slipped my feet into my boots and headed out of his bedroom. Isaac's walking me out did tend to have more to do with his fingers caressing my backside than with politeness. After several long goodbye kisses at the door, I pulled my Blazer away from the curb and headed back to Miles' house.

I smiled to myself as I drove down the freeway. The crisp autumn air had me pulling my hoodie closed against the chill. Things were tense in town and getting worse, but things with the guys were going well. My smile dropped as worry ate at me. It had been a month since we learned that Miles' dad died. It had been over a month since Miles acted, well, like Miles. And I missed him. I blew out my cheeks as I pushed the thought to the back of my mind.

Ethan

"WILL YOU GUYS HURRY UP?" I shouted towards the back door of the club. "I wanna get home before midnight!" Last time I called this late Lexie was already asleep. I wasn't missing my goodnight phone call for these clowns.

"We're hurrying, Michael is still taking down his drum set," Ollie called from the door.

I hung my head and cursed. Ryan had quit after Riley went missing. He'd been spending all his time posting missing flyers around town. Fuck it. I should call her now. I pulled out my phone and turned around, eyes widening. Three men were standing there in the shadows. What the fu—

* * *

Miles

"FIND THE WITCH," I bit out between clenched teeth, frustration bleeding into my words. "I want results, not excuses." I hung up my phone and barely resisted the urge to slam it into the desktop. How hard could it be to find a witch in Spring Mountain? Why were they taking so long? Were they not looking hard enough or just screwing around? Maybe they really were searching and Jadis was just that well-hidden.

"Miles!" Lexie's sweet voice came from the hallway, the sound a soothing balm to my anger. My jaw and shoulders began to relax.

Taking deep breaths, I was almost back in control by the time there was a small knock on the study door.

"Come in," I called, trying to use the voice I knew she liked.

The door opened and Lexie's head popped inside. Her copper hair was down in damp curls around her shoulders as she stepped into the room with a smile. "Hey."

"What can I do for you?" I asked, rolling my neck as the last bit of tension seeped away.

"Nothing, I just wanted to see you." She walked through the study to stand across the desk from me. "It's not often you're not working at the forge." She began to slightly chew at the corner of her lip as she shifted her weight.

Guilt ate at me. "I'm sorry, Angel." I eyed her black V-neck and black flannel bottoms. "You're in your pajamas?"

She looked down as she fingered the hem of her shirt. "Yeah."

Wait ... I remembered setting an alarm this morning. Didn't I? "Don't we have a date tonight?"

She wrung her fingers as she looked up at me. "I figured you'd be busy with your project."

Her words drove a blade into my chest. She was planning on letting me work on our date night? No. Just no. That would not stand. I walked around the desk and took her hand. "Not again, Angel."

* * *

Lexie

Warmth washed through me as Miles led me through the house, pausing in the kitchen only long enough to turn off the lights at the back of the house and outside before he held the back door open for me.

Guided only by the soft glow from the pool, Miles took me to the chaise lounge at the end of the patio. "Here." He picked up a folded blanket and handed it to me. "I thought we could do a bit of stargazing tonight. There is supposed to be a meteor shower." I smiled. "And you put a blanket out this morning?"

The tips of his ears turned pink. "I remembered a few hours ago," he said before gesturing to the lounge.

I sat down, checking that there would still be room for him. Miles joined me, and I rested my head against his shoulder as his warmth wrapped around me. Curling up against him, I spread the blanket out over us as I took in that wintergreen scent. We looked up at the sky. Dry leaves rustled in the breeze. An owl hooted from somewhere in the distance.

I looked up at him. "Are you okay?"

His eyes were half closed as his gaze swept across the night sky. "Sure."

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw the number. It was a text from an unknown number. Fuck that. I didn't even look at it as I shut off my phone and tucked it back into my pocket.

"Who was that?"

"No one worth interrupting my time with you over," I muttered before looking up at him again. "Sorry."

He brushed his thumb across my jawline, sending my heart racing. "What's wrong?"

I leaned more into his touch, savoring the warmth. "I miss you, Nemo."

His thumb moved to my cheek and began to stroke it gently. "I miss you too, but this is something I have to do. If I can get enough staffs made, maybe I can turn the tide of a fight when it comes."

I nodded, still holding his hand to me. "I understand that, but I ... I've never seen you like this."

"I know. But I'm still me. You're still important to me." His face softened along the edges. I took the opportunity to really look at him. His chestnut brown hair was starting to curl around his ears again. The bags under his eyes were a slight purple above his high cheekbones and angled jaw. He was still handsome, but anyone could see that he needed sleep, and certainly more than the few hours he could manage every now and then.

"You have to promise to go to bed at a decent hour tonight," I said.

"I will." His eyes warmed as they met mine. "How are we doing?"

I smiled. After I got jealous of Lucy last month, Miles and I had checked in with each other daily. If Miles wasn't being attentive enough I could tell him before it ate at me too long, and it guaranteed that I could get his complete attention when I needed it. He was trying to make sure I felt loved. It was sweet and seemed to be working pretty well so far. "I'm worried you're not sleeping enough."

He nodded as if he expected it. "To be honest, I'm not. But I'll try to go to bed at a decent hour tonight."

I looked down at his chest. "My room or yours?"

He reached up and tucked a stray hair behind my ear. "Mine."

I smiled and met his eyes. "Will you set an alarm so you come to bed at a decent hour?"

His cheeks tinted pink as he shifted, pulled out his phone and set an alarm.

"There." He tucked the phone back into his pocket. "I'll come to bed at eleven tonight."

"Thanks, Nemo." I reached up and brushed my fingers along his jaw. "Are you okay?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

"You're not really talking to anyone," I whispered.

He moved to face me. "There's a lot going on. With Jadis, her witches in town—"

"With your father," I couldn't stop myself from adding.

He shook his head, his face falling into that blank-wall look he'd perfected at some point. I'd come to know that look well; it was his 'I'm done talking about this, please change the subject' face. He looked back up at the sky. "That doesn't factor."

"Of course it factors."

"No. It doesn't," he said, his voice sharp. "The fate of the supernatural world hangs in the balance at the moment. Hangs on our moves, our decisions. There's no reason for it to even be a blip on the radar."

Oh, sweetie. He was focusing on the big monster so he wouldn't see the one sneaking up on him. Even I could see it. My chest grew warm. "But it is."

He licked his lips and swallowed hard. "It shouldn't be."

"Miles." Something in his gaze made my words freeze in my throat.

"Could ... could I just hold you for a while?" he whispered.

My throat tightened at the need in his voice. I nodded before settling back down into his embrace, relaxing in the warmth and scent of wintergreen as his arms tightened around me.

he bed dipped as something shifted. Groaning, I managed to crack open one eye as Miles got to his feet and headed to his closet. I rolled over and looked at the clock on the nightstand on my side of his bed.

He hadn't come to bed until four a.m., and that was only after I went down and made him come to bed with me. He couldn't seriously be getting up now, it was only ten in the morning. "Miles?" I rasped.

Shirtless, he turned away from the closet to find me awake. His ears tinted pink. "I slept."

I frowned at him. I doubted it was formidable given the fact that I was still half asleep. "Miles ... you promised eight hours of rest."

His fingers began tapping on his thigh. "I know, I just ... I can't sleep anymore. And being here, doing nothing, when there is still so much that needs to be worked on ..." He crossed the room and sat back on the bed, facing me.

Those emerald eyes met mine. "Would it upset you if I went back to work?"

I sighed. "You really can't sleep?"

He shook his head.

"You have to promise to go to bed at a decent hour tonight," I said. "And no putting the phone down somewhere again, you have to keep it on you at all times."

"I will." He reached over and took my fingers in his warm hand. "How are we doing?"

"I was irritated that you came to bed so late, but I understand time just got away from you."

"I am sorry about that." He squeezed my hand gently. "Next time, I won't set my phone down. And I'll set another alarm."

"Tonight? For your bedtime?" I asked, just to make sure.

"Yes. I promise." His eyes softened. "You should go back to sleep."

My phone chose that moment for my alarm to go off. Groaning, I rolled over and shut off the annoying beeping. "I've got to go to work today."

"I'll see you tonight at dinner?" Miles pulled a shirt on over his lean muscled frame.

He slipped out the door as I yawned and nodded my response.

Using Miles' bathroom, I got dressed and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Coffee. Needed coffee.

I was about to take my first glorious sip when my phone rang. Cursing, I pulled it out of my pocket. So help me, if it was that stupid blocked number again they were going to get an earful.

"Hey, Rory." I blew on my coffee as some of my annoyance melted away.

"Ordin is missing." Rory's hard voice froze me down to the bone.

"What do you mean he's missing?" I set the coffee mug down and quickly looked out the back window, half expecting Ordin to be there coming toward the house.

"I mean he's gone missing from his room at the psychiatric hospital," Rory reiterated.

Heart pounding, I hurried to the back door and checked the lock. "How the hell is that possible? Isn't that place locked down?" "It is, but somehow he got out," Rory said.

I rushed through the house to the front door and threw the lock with shaking fingers.

"Lexie, you need to calm down."

"Calm down, my ass."

"The police are all over it, combing the area around the hospital. We'll find him," Rory promised.

I went to the house alarm and found it off. I jabbed my fingers over the buttons, turning it back on. Who the hell went to bed last night without turning on the alarm? This couldn't be fucking happening. Not again.

"They're calling all officers in along with borrowing a few officers from the next county for the search," Rory said, gaining my attention again. "We'll find him."

"Call me when you do." I hung up the phone then leaned back against the wall beside the alarm panel and sunk to the floor, my insides shaking as memories washed through my head. The abduction, the beating, his touch ... No! No! I wasn't going to hide from this fucker. But I sure as hell wasn't going anywhere alone. Fuck, I had work today. What the hell was I going to do?

Hades' tall, lithe frame came into the foyer, his blue eyes landing on me. He quickened his pace to kneel beside me. "What's wrong?"

"Ordin is missing." I looked up at him. I'd never been so happy to see him in my life.

His eyes met mine. "He's not missing. He's dead."

My breath left my lungs as everything grew sharper. The light coming through the sheer white curtain. The chill of the floor under my palms. The pounding of my heartbeat. "What?"

"The police just haven't found his body yet."

Relief swamped me so quickly that I was almost dizzy from it. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths as nausea rolled through me.

"He deserved it, Stellina."

Deserved it? I got to my feet and stepped away from him. "Who are you to play judge, jury, and executioner?"

He straightened to his full height. "Your familiar. And when it comes to your safety, there is no other way."

I shook my head and stepped back from him again. "No, you're not. You're officially not."

"He was sick. It was only a matter of time before he came after you again or killed someone else." Hades' eyes ran over me then back to my face. "You're upset."

"You think?" I snapped. "You don't kill the sick, you treat them."

"I don't understand," Hades said as his brow drew down. "You hated him."

"That doesn't mean he should have died," I countered.

"He was dangerous."

I ran my fingers through my tangle of curls, pulling sightly as I tried to see things from his point of view. "I know."

"Some people do not belong in this world," he countered in a hard voice. "And I don't just answer to you."

"Who else do you answer to?" I asked, weariness dripping from my words.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he seemed to weigh some unknown choice in his head. "Your Reaper."

I didn't know what I was expecting as a reply, but my Reaper was definitely not it. "You know my Reaper?"

He nodded.

"Then get their ass over here, I have a few questions of my own I'd like answered," I bit out between my teeth.

With a raise of his eyebrow, he shook his head ruefully. "I can't do that."

I shook my head. "Of course not. You just kill people." Hades reeled back as if I had hit him.

Guilt ate at my gut. I shouldn't have said that. He didn't deserve that. But I didn't have it in me to apologize. Not when he had seen ... My stomach knotted even more. He

had violated my privacy, he had lied to me for a year, he was never my dog.

His shoulders were rigid as he clenched his fists. "I'm sorry you don't approve, but it's my job to protect you."

I scoffed as I jabbed the code into the panel. "That shouldn't mean killing people."

"Sometimes it does."

I shook my head and headed for the door.

"He was going to come after you again," he called after me.

I opened the door then shot over my shoulder. "I guess we'll never know if that is true or not." I slammed the door behind me and headed to my Blazer, already tired of today.

* * *

Tara

I was sitting in Jessica's living room working on a design sketch when I finally had to ask. "So, which one of the guys is Lexie dating?"

Jessica and Lucy lifted their heads from their own books and turned to me.

"I think she's dating my brother," Jess said, closing the book while using her finger as a bookmark.

Lucy shook her head. "It's Miles."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why do you think that?"

Lucy shrugged. "The fact I was staying with Miles seemed to bring up some problems between them."

That did make sense, but ... "I think it's Zeke. He's so protective of her."

"What about the twins?" Lucy countered. "They have no problem touching her."

"Yeah, but they've always been that way," Jess said. "Ever since we were kids."

Lucy tucked a stray hair behind her ear in a sweet way. "Are there any rumors at your school?"

Jess sighed. "A ton. Everything from people claiming she's dating each of them to her dating all of them."

"Well, that's just ridiculous," I muttered as I went back to my sketch. There was no way she was dating all of them. Though ... I ran over some of the scenes I'd seen over the last few weeks. Walking into the living room to find Lexie pulling away from one of the twins. I just thought they were cuddling as friends, maybe it was something more? "Oh well. I was curious."

"It's all the gossip lately, who she's dating. Which one of the guys? It's gotten worse since they all went on home study."

"It doesn't help that Lexie is living there now," I muttered.

Jess's head snapped around. "She's living at Miles' now?"

I nodded. "Ever since Dad got compelled things have been, I don't know, weird between them."

Jess shook her head, worry filling her eyes. "It seems dangerous to be friends with Lexie."

I huffed. "With all the crazy supernatural stuff, yeah."

Jess went back to her textbook. "It's not good for the powerless around her."

"Asher's hardly powerless," Lucy added. "He's a werewolf."

Jess scoffed and sent her a look. "Yeah, and whose fault was that?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You're blaming Lexie for that? He let a werewolf use him as a pacifier."

Jess's face softened. "Okay, yeah, that was stupid." She closed the book and turned to face us fully. "But Lexie is the reason he was there in the first place."

I took a breath and tried to be reasonable. "I don't think we can blame Lexie for that. Asher probably wanted to go."

Jess got to her feet. "Yeah, my brother is stupidly loyal like that." She headed through the pass through and down the hall to the kitchen.

I went back to my drawing.

"What are you working on?" Lucy leaned over from the chair. Her floral perfume filling my nose.

I quickly covered my sketch, my face burning. "Nothing. Just doodling."

She grinned, her eyes lighting up. Before I knew what she was doing, she reached out and snagged the sketch pad out from under my homework.

I tried to snatch it back but she held it out of my reach and flipped it over.

She looked at the sketch of a long, flowing pink gown I had been designing for myself.

My heart slammed against my ribs. "I-i-it's just a doodle."

She smiled and looked over at me. "A doodle my butt. This is a design, and a damn good one."

My cheeks warmed. "A good one?"

She nodded. "It's beautiful. What would you make it out of?"

I squirmed in my seat as I looked down at my colored pencils. "A satin bodice with a tulle or lace skirt."

A smile slipped across her face making it almost glow. "Delicate and feminine. That would be perfect for you."

A flutter filled my chest. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah." The tip of her tongue peeked out as she licked her lips.

Quickly, I looked down at my textbook and tried to get my wits back. I couldn't be thinking like this. "Thanks."

"Are you thinking about going into fashion design?"

I lifted my head and glanced at her before looking at my notebook. "Yeah, I'm actually hoping to get into Pratt next year, in Brooklyn." Instantly I wished I could take the words back. I had never told anyone my plans. Not really. Not

about fashion. Why the hell had it been so easy to tell Lucy about it?

"Have you designed anything else?" Her head dipped low to try and catch my gaze again.

I fiddled with my pencil for a moment as I tried to focus on just making a new friend of Lucy. As I settled into the familiar falsehood, I looked right at her. "A few costumes for the drama department."

Lucy's smile faltered a little as she cocked her head slightly. "Got any photos?"

I'd never shown anyone but Mrs. Archer my designs, and that was simply to get better at drawing them. I leaned against the side of the couch and brought up the photos. "I did design an Elizabethan gown for Romeo and Juliet last fall." I showed her the red and white dress with gold embroidery.

Her jaw dropped as she took the phone from me. "Are those fake jewels in the embroidery?"

I could feel the smile as it stretched across my face "Yeah, I thought it would help emphasize that Juliet was higher in social stature. It was her ballgown when she met Romeo."

She turned to me. "Did you do anything else?"

I nodded and swiped to the right. "This was her costume for the rest of the play. I went with a more middle class, underwhelming look to emphasize what she actually felt was important."

"Love." She turned and met my eyes. "You brought her character out so clearly without even needing her to say a word. That's incredible."

My heartbeat thundered in my ears as I met her sparkling eyes. Her eyes held mine as silence descended.

My gaze moved to her lips. The urge filled me enough to make me pull back. I blinked several times as my face burned. I took my phone back. "That's all for last year." I busied myself with getting my textbook in order so I could get back to my homework.

"Well," she said, her voice noticeably quieter. "They're beautiful."

Could she be as disappointed as I was? Shoot.

* * *

Lexie

On the way home from work, I couldn't help but savor my alone time. It was getting harder and harder to have a moment to myself in the house, especially with everyone on home school and the guys hanging around Miles' house. I simply took slow, deep breaths and focused on the now as I drove past the pine trees. The leaves on the birch trees were a stunning golden sprinkled in among the green. A low-lying fog was creeping out from the trees toward the road. The whole scene was stunning. It was life. And it reminded me it was important.

When I walked into the foyer at Miles' house I spotted Zeke in the living room.

The large mountain of muscle was hunched over, typing away on a laptop on the coffee table. Those ice blue eyes met mine. Genetics had given Zeke rather frightening looks, with his wide jaw and cheekbones. The leather jacket and semi-permanent scowl that he usually wore didn't help any, however the black-haired guy was a big teddy bear on the inside. Hell, he even growled once in a while. I smiled to myself as I crossed the living room to his side.

His hand went to my hip and squeezed. "I heard you had a fight with Hades this morning."

"What? No, hi, how was your day? Just straight to it?" I slid my hand over his hard shoulder to the back of his neck as I leaned into him. "I'll tell everyone about it at dinner."

His hand tightened on my hip. "Baby?"

"I'm okay," I promised, knowing exactly where his fears took him. "It's just ... there's news from town."

His grip eased. "You don't need to wait until dinner, Ethan wanted to call a family meeting as soon as you got home."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? What about?" Ethan was one of the most easy-going of our group. If he needed to call a meeting it was serious.

Zeke shrugged.

"How was Miles today?" I asked as I slipped my fingers through the thick mass of hair.

"You mean, is he still ignoring everyone but you?" he asked, his eyes closed as he hung his head.

I began to rub the tension out of his neck. "Yeah, that."

"Yeah, he is." He groaned, his arm slipping around my waist and pulling me to stand between his knees. His forehead rested on my belly as he relaxed under my kneading hand.

"I'm sorry, Tough Guy," I said softly.

He shook his head. "If he's talking to you then it's better than usual when he gets like this."

"You mean his tunnel vision?"

He nodded.

A knot gave.

He squeezed me gently before lifting his head and meeting my gaze. "Just, see what you can do about getting him to eat dinner today. He missed lunch again."

I let my hand drop from his neck. "I'll try."

"Thanks, Baby."

"Did you pick up the mail from your house?" I trailed my fingers over his shoulder.

"And checked the locks." He let me go.

I stepped out from between his legs. He picked up the laptop and got to his feet, towering over me. "Everyone's in the dining room doing schoolwork."

A small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth and heart. "Is that why you're out here?"

His hand went to the small of my back as we started towards the door to the long hallway. "They wouldn't stop yapping," he said as he guided me to the dining room.

Asher was the first to look up. Classically handsome, his sandy blond head came up before we even reached the doorway, his ocean eyes anchoring to me. And I do mean ocean. Flecks of white, light blue and dark blue were warm as they met mine. My heart fluttered.

"Hey, Ally."

I stepped through the doorway then met Ethan's gaze.

His jaw length black hair was tucked back behind his ears, showing the five silver hoops that ran up his earlobe. Where his twin wore a lot of colors, Ethan almost always chose black and army boots. "Hey, Beautiful."

"Hey, Ash. Hey, Snoopy," I said as I sat down in the empty seat beside Isaac. "I heard you were calling a meeting?"

"Yeah." Ethan's chocolate eyes darkened. "But Zeke said you had a fight with Hades this morning, what's up with that?"

I sighed. I might as well tell them now. "So, I heard some news."

"What kind of news?" Asher asked.

"Ordin's dead," I announced.

Everyone turned to me, stunned.

"What?" Isaac asked.

I leaned my elbows on the table. "The police think he's missing, but Hades told me he was dead."

Zeke held up his hand. "Hades told you he was dead?"

I nodded. "He said he killed him."

The guys all shared a look.

Zeke dropped his hand. "Can we throw a parade?"

I scowled at him. "What? No!"

"I'll make him dinner tonight," Asher murmured to Zeke.

Zeke nodded. "Steak."

"Guys, this isn't funny," I snapped, my stomach knotting.
"He killed someone."

"Yeah, Ordin," Ethan said. "Someone who hurt you. I say we throw a party."

"Yeah, he only killed a person who was locked in a psych ward. Yeah, we should celebrate." Enough sarcasm dripped from my words that the guys all turned back to look at me.

"Ally, we're not going to feel bad for this guy," Asher said. "He hurt you."

"No, it's just ..." I buried my face in my hands. "Complicated."

"How do you feel about it?" Miles asked carefully.

I dropped my hands. "I'm pissed Hades killed—"

"No." Miles' emerald eyes were calculating as they met mine. "Not that. How do you feel about Ordin being dead, not about who killed him."

"I ... I don't like that he's dead." I shrugged, not sure how to put what I was feeling into words. Everything was a jumble inside my stomach, swirling around until I was nauseous.

"Lexie." Zeke's voice brought my attention to him. "How do you feel about Ordin's death?"

I looked down at the table and thought about it. Ordin was gone. He couldn't hurt me again. He couldn't stalk me. He couldn't find me. Relief flooded me. Guilt ate at me. My stomach clenched and un-clenched as emotions rose and fell.

"You feel safer, don't you?" Zeke asked using his gentle voice. I met his gaze to find a knowing look crossing his face. Yeah, if anyone could understand this, it would be Zeke.

I didn't like myself for it, but I nodded.

"That's a very standard human reaction," Miles added, his timbre soft and soothing.

I dug my nails into my palm. "Then why do I feel bad for feeling better?"

"Because you're a good person," Zeke said as I turned my gaze back to his sky-blue eyes. "It's perfectly normal to feel that way about someone who hurt you."

I held Zeke's gaze. "But it was Hades."

"Did he say why he did it?" Isaac asked, frowning.

I drummed my fingers on the table. "He said that Ordin was going to come after me again."

Dense silence fell over the table.

"Was there proof?" Isaac asked.

I shrugged. "I didn't stay long enough to ask, but he can't keep killing people."

Miles sighed. "I agree with Lexie. It might be a matter of time before he kills an innocent person."

"Mmm." Asher shook his head as he set his water glass down. "His job is to protect Ally, no one else. Ordin hurt Ally. And if he was planning to hurt her again ..."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling a headache come on. There was the clink of a glass. The rustle of someone shifting in their seat.

"Where is he?" Zeke asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. He doesn't tell me where he goes. Only, now I'm wondering if he's out killing someone else."

"I doubt he did it without a reason or proof," Zeke said carefully. "If he said that Ordin was planning something again, then I'd bet money he was certain of it."

I searched Zeke's gaze. "Have you two been talking a lot?"

He tried for a nonchalant shrug, but I didn't buy it. "Not a lot."

"What do you guys talk about?" Isaac asked, leaning forward to look down the table at Zeke.

"Mostly he keeps me updated about how little Lexie is sleeping. Or if he ran into problems in town," Zeke said.

That piqued my interest. I turned to the others. "Does he talk to anyone else?"

One by one the others shook their heads.

"Once in a while I'll make him something to eat for dinner when he gets back late at night," Asher admitted, suddenly finding his plate very fascinating.

"I've played some video games with him a couple of times," Ethan said. "When I couldn't sleep."

I looked at each of them. "So, Zeke's the only one he talks to."

"And you," Isaac reminded me.

I shook my head. "We don't exactly talk."

"You guys have been fighting a lot lately," Ethan said.

I stared straight at him. "I don't think I can get past the deception that he wasn't human the whole time."

"Honey, he's not human." Asher closed his laptop. "He's a familiar."

"What is that?" I all but hissed. "Is it a title? Is it a species?"

"You need to ask him," Ethan said.

"You guys really need to sit down and talk," Isaac added. "Get the answers you're looking for."

I sighed and looked down at the table. "Any time we get in the same room we just end up fighting."

"It works for you and Zeke," Ethan chimed.

I smiled as Zeke snorted.

"We're not that bad." Zeke raised his head and pinned Ethan with a glare.

"They have been doing pretty well lately," Miles admitted.

"Don't jinx us," Zeke and I said in unison. We shared a small smile.

Ethan exhaled hard and leaned his elbows onto the table. "Well, I was going to call a meeting, but my shit seems trivial now."

"What shit?" Isaac asked as he closed his laptop.

"I was jumped last night outside Vegabond," Ethan announced.

My heart dropped. "Are you okay?" I scanned his face and didn't find a mark.

"Who the hell jumped you?" Zeke sat up straighter, his jaw clenched.

"Why the hell didn't you say anything last night?" Isaac snapped.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I had a few bruises but by the time I got home they were gone," Ethan said. "I didn't say anything because I was fine."

"You still should have told me," Isaac snapped. I reached over and took Isaac's hand.

"I didn't get a good look at the guys." Ethan held his hands out palms up. "We were putting the instruments into the back of Ollie's van when they just showed up. Once some guy outside the bar jumped in to help me out they bolted."

"You think they were trying to rob you?" Miles asked.

Ethan shook his head. "They kept trying to put me into holds but I was too fast for them."

"If they were trying to put you in a hold, they wanted to take you somewhere." Isaac's fingers tightened on mine.

"Could Jadis have been behind this?" Miles pushed his glasses up his nose.

Everyone exchanged looks as we all considered the possibility.

"She did abduct him once before, why not a second time?" Asher shifted in his seat.

"I'll talk to the committee about it tonight. See what Uma thinks." I slid my hand from Isaac's. "Maybe it really was random."

Ethan shrugged.

"I'm just glad you're okay." I gave him a smile.

He grinned back. "I am. But they aren't. I'm pretty sure I broke at least a few of their bones."

"Good," Zeke muttered.

Miles got to his feet. "If that's everything, I've got to get back to work."

"Miles, take the night off." I knew it was pointless, but I gave it a shot anyway.

"There's too much to do," he said before he disappeared out the doorway.

"And there's another thing," I muttered. "Miles."

"Yeah, I've never seen him this bad before." Asher said. "Something is eating at him."

"Something besides his dad dying?" Ethan asked.

Zeke was still watching the door when he answered. "I think so."

"Did he tell anyone how he died?" I asked.

Everyone answered with a no.

I shook my head. "What did the paper say?"

"Heart attack," Ethan answered.

"At least we know what didn't kill him," Zeke muttered before he opened his laptop.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and checked my text messages.

Unknown: Lexie, answer the phone. It's Mom.

Oh, hell no. I deleted the message and tucked the phone back into my pocket. There was no way in hell that I was going to text her back. What the hell could she want anyway?

What could she have to say that she hadn't said before? Nothing, right? I slumped a little in my chair. The sad part was that a teeny, tiny piece of me wanted to know. To hear her voice. To hear her say that everything would be okay.

No. That way led to pain.

I sat up straighter in my chair. I was just going to ignore her until she stopped texting. I sat with a heavy heart as the conversation turned lighter around me. "Where is she?" Uma sighed. The stunning head of our witches leaned back in her chair gracefully.

"She's usually on time." Brody, the head of the local shapeshifters, paced in the study at Miles' house. The walls were lined with built-in bookcases, a small fireplace with a marble mantle the only break in the rows of shelves. It was kinda peaceful. Well, when I wasn't in a committee meeting.

With so many shifters and witches around, problems between the two were bound to crop up. And they had been, in abundance, so a committee had been created to handle interspecies issues and act as leadership for all of the people on our side, which included me in an honorary seat. The eighteen-year-old. Yeah, I thought it was crazy too, but it kept the committee up to date on the Veil and me up to date on what they were planning.

"Maybe she got a lead," I offered.

My statement was met only with doubtful looks around the table. To be honest, we could really use a lead right now. We had no idea where Jadis was and we needed to find a way to end this stalemate.

The fourth member of the committee was late, and it was odd enough that we hadn't even started the meeting. In fact ... "What is this meeting about anyway?"

"Miles has finished his project." Uma turned to me. "He is going to demonstrate it for us."

Finally. Maybe now Miles could get some sleep and get back to normal again. "Anything new about Jadis?"

"They've infiltrated several spots in the local government." Uma relaxed in her seat, the picture of cool elegance. "Probably through compulsion."

"It's the same throughout the town. They haven't gotten any vital positions in the town yet, but it's become clear that it's what they're working on." Brody turned and crossed the room again.

I shook my head. "So, why?"

"They did the same in Florida, according to Luca," Uma said. "Then they used the town to add pressure."

"We need some of our people in place," I muttered. "With some sort of protection against compulsion."

Brody and Uma nodded their heads in agreement.

"And what about Ethan's attack last night?" I asked again.

Uma sighed patiently. "There's no proof that Jadis was involved in that. It could have been teenagers or a botched mugging, Lexie."

"But we don't know that it *wasn't* Jadis trying to get her hands on him again," I countered.

"Lexie, all we can do is have him be more aware of his surroundings for the time being," Brody said in his lecturing tone.

I was about to debate that when the door swung open. A pale, dark-haired woman slipped through the study door and softly shut it behind her. Her slim, short figure gave the impression she was young, but in truth she had been converted over fifty years ago. The vampire walked into the room with an air of dignity. "I'm terribly sorry, I had a message from my Master."

"Can you share it?" I asked, leaning forward.

Those silver eyes met mine. Briony nodded. "Your worst fear is realized. Riley has been converted and entrenched in the nest for the time being. My Master is going to remain and work to preserve any free will she has left." She paused. "We won't be able to contact him again until he gets her out of the Domus Mortis, which could take some time depending on her level of control."

My heart sunk. Riley had been turned. Oh God. Her human life was over. Guilt hit me hard, eating away at my control. And not just for Riley. Briony had explained the history of Samuel and the Domus Mortis. How he abandoned their nest and struck out on his own. His former Master was still furious over it. The things she told me about that house were enough to give me nightmares. Well, more nightmares.

I was going to owe Samuel big time for this. He had been right; I hadn't known what I was asking when I asked him to go. I got to my feet and began to pace. What was happening to Riley? Was she okay? What about Samuel?

Brody stopped pacing. "I assume you'll remain his proxy?"

Briony turned her attention to the shifter. "I am. I've been his second for almost a century now. I'll handle his affairs until his death or return."

Uma nodded.

I forced my emotions back and focused on what I could do now. "Thank you."

"Which, unfortunately, leads me to my first decision." Briony met my gaze. "My Master needs us to remove ourselves from Spring Mountain."

Everyone turned back to her.

"Why is that?" Uma asked.

"It needs to look like our Master deserted us," Briony said. "We need to look scattered, unorganized, and in such a state we wouldn't be in this fight."

The vamps were leaving. Shit.

"Are you sure that's necessary?" Uma asked.

Briony nodded. "Unfortunately. The head of the Domus Mortis has punished Samuel for leaving him, but he is still suspicious of his motives. We need to do everything we can to back up our Master. Even if it means leaving."

"It's understandable," Brody said. "Since Jadis is in a holding pattern, it might not be as detrimental if you go

now rather than later."

Briony bowed her head to him.

"Though, perhaps we should make the first move," Brody thought out loud.

Everyone turned to him.

"She's trying to build her power base," Brody said. "Maybe we shouldn't let her."

"That means attacking. Without the vampires, we have maybe fifty able bodies on our side, and last we knew Jadis had about the same." Uma lifted a piece of paper to check her information. "We have more shifters, she has more witches, but we might be able to even the playing field a bit."

"How?" Brody asked.

Witches had a natural advantage over shifters; they had long range capabilities while shifters were built for close range, hand to hand combat. Anything to overcome that advantage could be a game changer.

Uma turned to me. "The witches and I have been working on a spell that would cause an area to become an energy null for a period of time."

I raised an eyebrow. "A what?"

She smiled. "A space where magic would be useless."

My eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

She nodded. "It'd basically work as a ground wire. Any energy cast would go directly into the ground, making it useless to them."

"What about alchemy?" I asked, thinking of the guys' shields. They worked on clockwork and herbs.

Uma grinned. "They would work. The trick would be setting up the spell without getting caught and bringing them into it."

"Like a trap," Brody surmised.

Uma nodded. "And from what I understand from Mr. Huntington, he has developed the weapons for our side."

Brody shifted on his feet. "The demonstration is ready in the basement when we are done here."

"This is where I will leave you," Briony announced.

"Thank you for your help," I said.

Briony nodded, her stony expression easing slightly. "You're very welcome, I only wish we could stay until the end."

With that Briony moved swiftly and silently out of the library.

Brody cleared his throat. "Let's get on with the demonstration, then."

The two of us followed Brody through the house and down to the basement where my guys and a group of shifters were all waiting in their gym clothes.

Surprised, I moved to Isaac's side. "What have you guys been doing?"

Isaac smirked and tilted his head towards Miles. "Miles is finally ready to show us what he's been working on."

"Hmm."

Miles fiddled with a long bronze rod with several vials embedded along the middle of the shaft. One end was tapered into a blade.

"Miles. Show us what the staff can do," Brody said.

Miles stopped fiddling and moved away from the others towards a dummy. "First, the blade is made of bronze." He simply swung the end, slicing into the plastic of the dummy. "They are sharp enough to do some damage on their own, but it's when you press a vial button in the middle that you get to the interesting part." Miles swung again. This time, the dummy burst into flames.

Surprised, I stood there while the dummy began to melt. One of the shifters used an extinguisher to put out the flames. The stench of burnt rubber and smoke filled the room.

"What does it use?" Uma moved to Miles and took the staff from him, examining it closely.

"One of Lucy's spark potions, water, and magnesium," Miles answered.

"So, it'll burn hotter when you try to put it out," Zeke muttered, his face dark.

"That seems a bit overkill," I said as I joined Uma and Miles.

Miles met my gaze. "They're shifters and witches. It'll take a lot of power to make a dent."

A part of me still didn't like it, but he wasn't wrong.

"That's exactly what it'll take." Brody joined us. "That'll work for the humans, but what about long range?"

Miles turned to Brody. "Hold the button and you'll shoot a stream of flame a good thirty feet. It's the vial you choose that will make the difference." He pointed to the next vials. "Blue for ice. Purple is a one-shot electrical hit."

"Only one?" Brody asked as he examined the staff.

Miles nodded. "It takes a lot to manage even one. Any more weight and the staff will become unbalanced."

"Good." Brody turned to Miles. "Any other type of weapons?"

Miles nodded. "We could use the same design for blades, swords ... arrows would be difficult."

"What about bullets?" Brody asked.

Miles shook his head. "The vials would either smash on firing or not smash at all."

"We have the runed bullets anyway," I reminded him.

Uma nodded. "Yeah, but traditionally, witches don't fight with them. That would bring in the gargoyles."

"And Jadis doesn't want that," I muttered. Heaven forbid Jadis does anything to help our side.

Brody nodded and turned to Miles. "Let's start training right away."

Brody and Miles started towards the guys with the staff, with me moving to follow them only for Uma to stop me. "We have our own training to do."

My heart sank. Great. I started back out of the room and up the stairs, barely resisting the urge to stomp my feet like a toddler. Fucking training.

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pring Mountain Cemetery was the same as any other cemetery I'd ever seen. The only real differences between here and a city park were the rows of tombstones and stillness of the area.

Uma led me to the far back corner of the cemetery where the stones and mausoleums were overgrown from neglect. Weeds had overrun the graves years ago, while blackberry bushes crowded between the tombstones.

"Here," Uma said as she set the electric lamp down on a tombstone.

"Why are we in the oldest part of the cemetery?" I asked as I knelt in the dead grass and dried leaves at the foot of the grave.

"No visitors. Their family is all dead by now," she said as she moved down by me. "These are the kinds of things you need to be thinking about as a necromancer."

I sighed. She was right, which reminded me. "I read something new in that book last night."

"Oh?" She continued to clear the grave of leaves and dead twigs. It was something I'd noticed since we began doing this. She always cleaned the graves of those we raised. Was it like when I sketched the souls that came to me over the years? All those names and faces eventually

became a blur. Was this her way of thanking the person for the use of their body?

"I found instructions on how to look through a zombie's eyes. How to speak through one."

She turned to me, curiosity sparkling in her chocolate eyes. "Really? Perhaps it's time I take a look at these books."

I nodded. "It seemed pretty easy, just ... putting more of me in there. My consciousness, really."

Her brow furrowed as she sat. While she thought it over, I continued cleaning the grave. By the time I was done clearing it, I did feel better about what I was about to do to this person's body.

No. Not a person. They were gone. It's just their shell.

"Let's give it a try. You never know, it might be true." Uma sat in the grass beside me. "Let's begin."

True or not, it was a creepy idea.

I settled into a comfortable position and looked at the grass in front of me. I took several deep breaths, letting them out slowly as I focused on slowing my heart rate and clearing my mind before I dropped my barriers.

My energy spilled from me as if leaving a container that was too small, soaking into the dead grass around me. I focused on the ground in front of me. Normally, I'd hold back a little. Hesitate. But not this time. I followed the tendril of energy going down into the earth, feeling the brush of white roots under the grass. The worms in the dirt. Then the hard surface of the coffin. That was another reason to always go to this part of the cemetery. No cement vaults. My energy found an opening in the wood. I crept through the crevice, hitting the surface of the body. Hard, dry, cracked.

Bones grated together as it started to move.

"More will, Lexie," Uma reminded me.

"Rise," I ordered. The sensation of wood ghosted under my fingertips as the casket gave way under my searching hands, cold dirt slipping through my fingers as I climbed.

A skeletal hand burst through the grass and clawed at the air. The zombie slowly pulled free of its grave. First the head, then the shoulders, then the ribs. Eventually, a full skeleton on all fours in the grass.

"Now, try to see through it," Uma instructed.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, a tendril of consciousness moving through the grass. The grass became my skin. The bugs crawling through it made me shiver as that coil of energy finally reached the bony hand. My energy saturated the bones. They absorbed me like a sponge, hungry and empty.

My bones ached as if the skeleton's body were mine. The more energy that seeped from me to the zombie, the further away my body seemed. The more this rotten carcass became my own. I closed my eyes, breathing heavily. There. I saw the grass beneath me. I lifted my head. Uma and my own body came into sight. In front of me.

My lungs seemed to be made of rock. Breathing became harder.

"Uma ..." I gasped as I watched my body fall forward to the grass, but it was the skeleton that spoke.

"Pull back!" Uma ordered, her hands going to the shoulders of my body, shaking me hard.

Pull back? Pull back to where? My lungs seized. Icy fear cascaded through me.

Uma pulled her arm back and brought her hand down on my back with a dull thud. The sting forced me to inhale. I was suddenly in my own body, trying to remember how to breathe.

Gasping, I stayed on the ground as the world spun around me.

Uma rubbed my back roughly. "That's it, breathe."

When the dizziness faded, I sat up slowly, my body still aching. "What the hell?"

"You put too much of your consciousness into the zombie," Uma stated. "It's a risk when you share any kind of connection. I didn't think you'd have that problem."

"I didn't hesitate this time," I muttered.

"You need to be careful with any kind of connection where consciousness is moved." She shook her head.

I nodded. "Agreed."

"I don't think you should try that again," she said. "Not without someone who knows more about it."

"I think you're right."

It was several more minutes before Uma gestured towards the body that now stood in the grass waiting for instructions. "Put it to rest and we can go."

I turned back to the bones and sighed.

Putting a body to rest was exactly the same as raising it, only in reverse. Instead of the body digging its way out of the grave, it slowly sank into the soil and out of sight, the earth taking back what was hers.

As my energy left the zombie it came back to me in a rush. I gritted my teeth and dug my fingers into the grass as warmth rushed through me in an euphoric wave. Everything was good. Happy. Blissful. The euphoric rush took my fears, my stress, any and every anxiety or doubt I had and washed them away in the wave of energy. It seemed to go on and on, until finally, like the last light of day, it faded away and I was left gasping in the grass.

By the time I slipped into the front seat of Uma's car a wave of exhaustion had hit me, leaving me almost dizzy. I pulled on my seatbelt then began to rub my temple.

The car was quiet as we pulled out of the cemetery. But not for long.

"It can be addictive," Uma said. "Raising the dead."

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip and nodded as I looked out the window. This wasn't the first time she'd brought it up, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

"Do you understand how?"

"It feels ..." I swallowed hard. I hated to admit it out loud, but I had to. "It feels good."

Uma turned onto another street. "And that is why it's dangerous."

I looked down at my hands, folded into my lap. "Why does it feel that way? That rush?"

Uma took a slow, deep breath. "Maybe because you're working with life energy and your body reacts to it. I'm not sure. Louis was always tight lipped about it and how it made him feel."

"Why?"

She shrugged gracefully. "He was ashamed of the way he reacted to it. He despised it."

"I don't blame him," I muttered.

"Just be aware of your motives before raising the dead," she said. "Make sure you're not doing it for the rush."

"Got it." I couldn't imagine ever wanting to raise the dead for the rush. Yeah, for a few seconds everything felt fine, but it was a lie. It was a drug. A drug I didn't want. I looked out the window as the trees passed by in a blur.

* * *

Jessica

I was working on my chemistry when someone pounded on my front door. My heart leapt into my throat. I knew that knock. It was Jason, and he was pissed. I met Tara's gaze and swallowed hard. Lucy was upstairs in the bathroom.

Setting my books aside, I got to my feet and started for the door. Whatever he wanted, he could kiss my ass. I wasn't his girlfriend anymore and I never would be again. No matter what he wanted, I owed him nothing. Goosebumps rose on the back of my neck as my trembling hand turned the doorknob. Heart pounding, I opened the door only a little before lifting my head.

Scowling, Jason towered over me. "You can't just break up with me."

I swallowed hard. "I already did."

He stepped closer.

Fear beat at me as I braced my foot against the door so he couldn't push it open. "What do you want?"

His eyes narrowed at me. "I want you back."

Stunned, I gaped up at him. He couldn't be serious. "No. Not now, not ever again."

He gritted his teeth. "You love me."

Come on, Jess, you can do this. I lifted my chin and met his gaze. "And all that got me was pain and bruises."

He eyed me. "That's not fair. You know how you are—"

"And blame." I pulled the door open and stood fully in front of him, no longer cowering behind anything. "You always blamed me for everything that went wrong in your life." I shook my head. "I'm not taking it anymore."

His nostrils flared as he slowly cracked his neck. Teeth bared he moved closer, looming over me. Something caught his attention behind me but there was no way I was turning to see what it was. In a low whispered growl he threatened, "If you don't come back, I'll make sure everyone at school sees our sex tape, Jess."

My heart dropped. Oh fuck. Oh God. Everyone? I swallowed hard as my palms began to sweat.

"Now, you're going to get back together with me and put an end to the rumors going around." He met my gaze. "Understand?"

I looked down at the floor of the porch and took several deep breaths. How could he hold that over my head? What kind of piece of shit would do that? Squaring my shoulders, I looked him right in the eye. I remembered that video. We had been doing anal for the first time. It had hurt, and I had told him that. An idea sparked to life.

"Go ahead. Show the entire school that you liked hurting me in bed."

His eyebrows drew down. "What?"

I smirked. "I remember that time, Jason. I told you that it hurt, and you just told me to shut up."

I could almost hear the grinding of his teeth as his jaw flexed and a vein began to pulse on his forehead.

I shook my head. What a pathetic piece of shit. I was better than this. Better than he ever made me feel. I wasn't trash, and I was done with him. "Give me your phone."

The scowl was back. "Fuck you."

"Give me the memory card or I'll tell your football coach to test you for steroids," I stated simply.

His face went slack as he looked me over more carefully. "You wouldn't."

I raised an eyebrow. "Try me."

We stared at each other for several heartbeats before he finally reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone. He jerked the card out of it and tossed it to me.

Relief flooded me as I caught it. I met his gaze. "Get lost. Don't ever contact me again." I stepped back and slammed the door in his face, then made sure to lock it.

Stunned at what I'd done, I stood there shaking until I heard the squeal of tires as his car roared down the street. It took several slow, deep breaths, but eventually I turned around.

Isaac was standing at the base of the stairs. He must have come in the back door. I hadn't been alone with Jason after all. My lips trembled as he took a step towards me. I all but jumped into his arms as tears began to fall. "I didn't know you were here."

"I know." His hand rubbed my back. "You did good, Jess."

"I was scared," I whispered.

"I know. But now he'll leave you alone," Isaac said, "or he'll deal with the rest of us."

I wiped my face and stepped back. "I missed you, you brat."

He grinned. "We missed you too."

* * *

Lexie

UMA PULLED into the crowded drive in front of Miles' house. She had her own cabin further down the property away from the chaos. With how full the house could get at times, I envied her that little cabin.

"Don't forget, I want to see those books tomorrow," she stated as she stopped.

"I won't," I muttered as I got out of the car. Shuffling my way to the front door, it was all I could do to stay upright as I went inside.

On pure instinct and muscle memory, I continued my shuffle through the foyer and towards my bedroom.

"Ally?"

Asher's voice had me turning in the long hall.

He finished wiping his hands on his apron. "Are you alright?"

I nodded. "Just tired."

He eyed me. "Are you going to bed?"

I nodded. "My lesson wasn't easy tonight. I'm wiped."

His brow drew together. "Zeke and Ethan switched date nights."

It took several heartbeats as I sifted through the fog that was in my brain. Crap. I had a date tonight. Hell, most nights now. It shouldn't have surprised me that Asher knew about the switch. Ever since he'd come back he'd been

hearing things he didn't want to. Though ... "They switched?"

Asher nodded.

The only reason to switch was if something was wrong with one of them. "Shit. Where is he?"

His eyes went above my head.

I looked straight up.

Zeke was behind me, leaning forward and looking down at me with a frown. "You look like shit."

"Sweet talker," I muttered as I dropped my head again.

He stepped around me. "Go take a bath and you'll feel better."

I nodded and started down the hall with him.

"She hasn't eaten a snack yet," Asher called.

"After her bath," Zeke promised for me.

As we got closer to my bedroom door, his hand moved to my lower back. I leaned against him a little, needing the connection.

His hand moved to my waist and took some of my weight. "What happened?"

"I raised an old zombie," I muttered as we stopped at my door. He opened it and half carried me inside as we headed straight for the bathroom.

He set me down on the edge of the tub and dropped to a squat. Those blue eyes met mine, searching. "Are you okay to take a bath?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I just need to eat something and I'll be full of energy again." Luckily, the guys knew my postraising needs well already.

I watched as Zeke reached around me, getting the bath water ready, the scent of leather and engine grease filling my senses. "Here, get in and I'll bring you some food." All I could muster was a nod in response as the feeling of being home filled me completely. Before I could reach down and get my shoes, Zeke was already undoing them and pulling

them off. His hands hesitated at my sweater hem. Without thinking about it, I reached up to pull it off.

His hands stopped me. "Baby, I'm right here."

I met his eyes. "I didn't even think about it."

He swallowed hard.

"Does it bother you?" I asked softly.

He shook his head slightly. "Does it bother you?" "No."

He let go of my hands. I pulled the dark green sweater up and off my head. To show him the black cami I was wearing underneath.

He let out a breath of relief.

I snickered.

"That wasn't funny," he said.

"It was a little funny," I teased.

He bit back a grin as he took my sweater and headed for the door. "Get in the tub, I'll get you some leftovers."

"Thanks." He closed the door behind him before I finished undressing. Hot water and bubbles covered me to my shoulders. I sank into the warmth and laid my head back.

Everything just took a step back for a moment, as if to give me breathing room. School, work, the guys. The hot water eased my tense shoulders, relaxed my mind. Baths were magical, never let anyone tell you differently.

I was half asleep when there was a knock on the door. "Hmm?"

The door opened. Zeke came in, frowning. "You fell asleep."

I shook my head, sitting up a little more but staying covered by the bubbles. "No, not at all. I'm super awake."

"You're so full of shit." He came in and handed me a bowl of food. "Here, eat so you don't drown."

I blinked hard several times before actually taking the bowl. "You might want to have a seat then. I don't know how much awake I have left."

He ran his hand through his hair as he surveyed the bathroom. He finally settled on the edge of the tub with his back to me.

"Why are you looking that way?" I asked before popping some noodles into my mouth.

He sighed. "So I can't see into the tub."

I half grinned. "I'm that distracting, huh?"

"I'm trying to be respectful here," he said in the soft voice he used with me sometimes. "You're tired and I don't want you regretting anything."

"Okay, I'll stop teasing." I twirled my fork in the noodles. "So, why did you and Ethan switch nights?"

His shoulders grew tense. "I ... I haven't been sleeping."

"Bad dreams?"

He nodded.

"Tank isn't helping?" Since Sylvie was out of town already, Zeke had moved Kita and Tank to Miles' backyard. Originally, we'd been worried they wouldn't do well with the shifters that came around, but it had been quite the opposite. The wolf hybrids simply accepted the shifters as if they were their own.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I need you tonight."

Damn, the way he said that had heat pooling low in my belly as I fought the urge to squirm at the sensation. "Well, you got me tonight."

"Thanks, Baby."

"What happened while I was gone?" I asked as I prayed that my body would cool down.

"Weapons practice," Zeke said. "We went up against the shifters and for once we managed to hold our own."

"Wait." I finished my bite. "Tell me this wasn't with live vials in the staffs?"

Zeke turned his head, giving me his profile. "It was."

"You guys can't practice with live weapons," I snapped. "You're going to kill someone."

"We don't have a choice." Zeke's hard voice sent a shiver down my neck. "We need to know how they work and have practice using them."

"Zeke—"

"This is war, Lexie," he reminded me. "And we're training to fight for our lives. We can't pull any punches."

He was right. I hated it. I hated that they were a part of this, but he was right. "Tell me you guys took the blade off?"

His shoulders relaxed. "Yeah, we used a blunt wooden blade for practice."

"They're talking about attacking Jadis." I took another bite, not really tasting it before I set the bowl onto the ledge on my right.

"We figured," he said.

"We could lose people," I reminded him, the thought making my throat tight.

He grunted in response.

A question had been haunting me for some time, and I knew Zeke was the one to ask. He wouldn't try to sugarcoat anything. "Do you ever regret meeting me?"

Zeke rolled his shoulders as he shook his head. "Not once. Not ever."

"What if we lose one of the others?" I asked, even as my heart twisted painfully at the mere thought.

Zeke half turned to look down at me. His eyes went straight to my face and stayed there. "Even then." He reached out and lifted my chin with his knuckles. His face was calm, his eyes certain. "No matter how this ends, how it goes, no matter who we lose ..." His thumb brushed my lower lip. "I will never regret knowing you, not for a second."

A tear slid from the corner of my eye as I sat up and kissed him softly. Just a brush of my lips that settled my heart. He pressed harder, his mouth making it clear he meant his words. My hands moved to his scruffy jaw as his

lips took mine. Lights danced behind my eyes. It wasn't until I shifted closer and water sloshed that I remembered that I was in the tub. I dropped back into the bubbles, smiling as the front of his jeans and pant legs were soaked with soapy bath water.

He shook his head.

"Sorry." I cringed.

"I needed to change anyway." He turned back around and put his gaze on the wall. "You want my room or yours tonight?"

"Yours. You sleep better there." My smile faded as I remembered what other news I had. "I've got something to tell you."

His shoulders grew tense.

"It's about—"

He shook his head as he got to his feet. "Tell me after your bath."

"Zeke."

"Not while you're in the tub, Baby," he said in a rough rasp, refusing to look at me.

The tension radiating from him stopped me from telling him about Riley. "Okay."

He slipped out of the bathroom.

I sunk back into the hot water. How the hell was I going to tell him? Was he going to blame himself? Was he going to blame me? My heart ached at the thought of either of those happening. Zeke wasn't responsible for Riley being taken. I was. If she hadn't been with me that day, she'd still be here at home. Still living with her family. She'd still have a future.

My thoughts went to the guys. Ethan had changed. Asher was a werewolf. Isaac was seeing auras. How long would it be before something changed Zeke and Miles too? Was I going to ruin their futures one at a time? I shoved the thought as far away as I could. There was no point in hiding

from the truth in the tub. I needed to face Zeke and tell him.

With renewed energy, I finished my bath, got dressed in my pajamas. With a heavy heart, I headed upstairs to Zeke's room.

Did I really have to tell him? Couldn't I just forget that I had heard from Samuel? I rejected the idea as soon as it occurred to me. I couldn't lie to him like that. I wrung my fingers as I climbed the stairs.

I knocked on Zeke's door, my stomach churning.

"Come in," Zeke's muffled voice called.

This was it. I had to tell him about Riley. God help me. I opened the door and found him sitting at the foot of his bed in only his mesh shorts, changing the channels on the TV on the wall across from him. Zeke's room here was different to his house. Here there were no motor parts sitting around waiting to be put back together. No clothes on the floor in the corner. Simply a bed, nightstands, dresser, and television. It reminded me of a hotel to be honest. Blank and empty of anything personal.

He turned to me, his face serious. "What's wrong?"

I licked my lips as I edged further into the room. "I have news about Riley."

His brow furrowed as he tossed the remote on the bed and turned toward me completely. "How bad is it?"

I wrung my fingers as my chest ached. I so didn't want to tell him. "Bad."

His gaze ran over me before meeting mine again. "She's a vampire, isn't she?"

My eyes stung; my mouth grew dry. I nodded. "I got the news before the demonstration tonight."

The blood drained from his face as he turned his head away, clenching his jaw.

I stepped closer. "Sam's staying to get her out, but he doesn't know when that could be. Something about keeping her free will."

His fists clenched and unclenched.

I tried and failed to blink my tears away as the news really hit. Riley was a vampire. Her life with her family was over. Her life here, over. Any plans she had for herself were now dust. Tears trailed down my face as I stepped closer to Zeke. "I'm sorry, it's all my fault."

His head snapped back around, his own face harsh. "No, it's not. It's whoever took her. It's their fault. It's Jadis' fault." He reached up and held my face in his big hand, his thumb wiping a tear away. "It was never yours, Baby."

My lower lip trembled as I continued to stand there silently weeping. "It feels like it. She wouldn't have been there if it weren't for me."

"I know," he said. "But she wouldn't have been there if I never dated her. Doesn't that really make it my fault?"

I shook my head. "I couldn't stop them. I didn't even get a chance."

"They were vampires, Lexie," he said in that soft voice. "You wouldn't have had a chance." His gaze ran over me. "Come here."

I stepped into him and slipped my arms around his neck. His thick arm wrapped around me completely, enfolding me in his warmth. I buried my face in his neck and took a deep breath of engine grease. "I'm sorry, Zeke."

"Me too."

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CHAPTER 4

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he shattering of glass had my heart pounding as I rolled out of bed and to my feet before I even fully opened my eyes. What the hell was that? The slight scent of smoke and chemicals reached my senses the same time the faint hiss of fire did. What the hell was Jess burning this time? I grabbed my shirt from my laundry pile and pulled it on as I went out the door and down the stairs. The stench of smoke grew stronger. The sound louder. The fire alarm went off.

Cursing, I stepped off the stairs and found smoke billowing from the kitchen. A bright yellow and orange flame drew my eye. My stomach dropped. Fire.

* * *

Lexie

The hallway grew longer and longer no matter how fast I pumped my legs. It just kept growing. The girl with blonde hair and big, sad eyes was reaching out to me again. My heart pounded, my legs growing heavier as I pushed myself harder. Closer! I had to reach her! Tears fell down her face as the floor fell out from under me—

I woke up with a jerk. Out of breath, I looked up at the ceiling and tried to shake off the dream. Hopelessness clung to me like a film. I tried to grab the fleeting images, but they slipped through my fingers. Again.

Zeke half sat up, suddenly wide awake. "Huh? What's wrong?"

I shook my head and wiped the sweat off my face. "Nightmare."

"Come here." He pulled me closer to his warmth. I buried myself against his hard chest and took a deep breath of leather and engine grease. His big hand ran up and down my back in a soothing motion. My pulse began to slow, my breathing evened out.

His arms tightened around me. I shifted my leg over his hip, his thigh moved flush against the apex of my thighs. It was our usual cuddling position and I relished it this morning.

"I had that dream again, with the blonde girl." I shoved some hair out of my face.

His thumb traced my lower lip. "What do you think it's about?"

"I don't know." I ran my fingers over the scruff on his jaw. "What do you have to do today?"

"School work, fighting practice. And ..."

"Hanging posters for Riley," I finished for him.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Tomorrow too."

It wasn't like we could tell Riley's parents where she was or that she was never coming back. Sam had warned us to let Riley handle telling her parents about what had happened to her, but that didn't stop Zeke from hanging up missing posters. He once said it helped with the guilt. He did seem to be handling Riley's disappearance better than I was. "How's Ryan doing?"

His eyes narrowed on mine. "The girl he loves went missing. It's rough."

I ran my fingers over the hair on his arm. "I wish we could tell him."

"That would just make it worse. If he even believed us. Knowing she's been changed, knowing she was in trouble? It'd drive him crazy." His eyes filled with shadows. "I know it would drive me crazy."

I reached up and brushed my fingers against his jaw. "I'm not going anywhere."

"And you're going to stay safe?"

I nodded. "I need to get up," I muttered, sinking further against his hard, warm body.

"No, we don't." He brushed his nose against my hair.

I thought about it. If I spent the afternoon working on schoolwork, I'd probably be able to get caught up and still cuddle with Zeke. Cuddles won, hands down. I traced my fingers up his chest, through the light smattering of chest hair to rest on his muscled pec.

He shifted his hips a little further away from mine as we lay there in peaceful silence. That was until my stomach growled. He pulled back and looked down at me through slitted eyes. "Breakfast."

I cursed under my breath, then climbed out of bed and started looking for my pajama bottoms on the floor. I usually only slept in panties and my cami with Zeke. We both seemed to sleep better when we were skin to skin. Speaking of. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good. Did you?" He watched me search with a wry grin on his face. I found my PJ bottoms under the bed.

"Yeah." I slipped them on with him watching me. My cheeks warmed at the look in his eyes. "What?"

"Thanks, Baby," he said in that soft voice that melted my insides.

It took everything I had not to crawl back in bed and snuggle up to him. "Anytime."

He examined my face. "You still didn't sleep much, did you?"

I ducked my head slightly, not wanting to meet his gaze.

He reached out, his big hand engulfing mine, giving me a slight tug till I sat down on the bed facing him. "What happened?"

I sighed as the feeling of unease washed over me. "I laid awake most of the night, thinking of the idea of you guys in a fight with witches and shifters. A real drag out, nasty fight."

His fingers squeezed mine. "Is there anything you can do about that?"

"Make you leave?" I raised my eyebrows hopefully.

He scoffed. "Not likely."

I deflated.

"You can only control your own actions and reactions, no one else's," he reminded me. "Everything else will only give you sleepless nights and shitty dreams."

I smiled a little. "You're starting to sound like a therapist."

He gave a half shrug. "I would hope so given the number of hours I've logged."

I smiled. "I'll try to remember."

He lifted my hand and kissed the back of my fingers. "That's all anyone can ask."

I squeezed his fingers and left his room with a smile.

"Ally! Zeke! Miles!" Asher's shout echoed throughout the house.

Zeke and I bolted from the bedroom and ran down the hall. Miles emerged from his room and hurried ahead of us. Everyone racing for the stairs. Standing in the foyer in their pajamas were Asher, Isaac, Ethan and Jessica. The scent of smoke filled the foyer.

"What happened?" Miles demanded as he reached the foyer.

"Our house caught fire, that's what happened," Asher barked as he moved past Miles and dropped his bag by the stairs.

"It was probably Jason." Jessica grimaced. "I really pissed him off yesterday."

"Whoa, whoa. Hold on." Zeke turned back to Asher. "Start at the beginning."

I stepped off the last step and stood beside Zeke. "Start with the fire."

Asher turned back to us, the muscles in his neck rigid. "About three hours ago, I was dead asleep when glass shattered. The smell of smoke got me out of bed. The kitchen was on fire, so I grabbed Jess and got us out of the house."

"What started the fire?" Miles ran his hand through his messy hair.

"Fire department says it looks like someone threw a Molotov cocktail through the kitchen window." Asher turned to Miles. "Can we stay with you for a while? The investigators and insurance people will only talk to Dad about repairs to the kitchen."

"Of course." Miles didn't hesitate. "Though, I don't know which room to give Jessica."

"She can take my room," I offered. "I'm rarely in it anymore."

Jessica's eyes snapped to me.

"Ally, can you help get her settled?" Asher asked.

"Sure." I gestured for Jessica to follow me and turned to go into the long hallway.

"Wait a minute," Jessica snapped. "I didn't agree to sharing a room with her."

"It's that or the couch, Jess," Asher said in a tone that I rarely ever heard from him.

Jessica debated it for a heartbeat before she let out a breath and followed.

I led her to the bedroom on the first floor and opened the door for her.

"Isn't this Miles' mom's room?" Jessica asked as she walked in and set her bag on the bed.

"It was, but since she's not coming back, Miles gave it to me," I explained as I went into the bathroom and pulled out several towels. "Here's some towels, and feel free to use any of the soap or conditioner you need."

I was on my way out the door when she asked, "Why don't you sleep in this room?"

I came to a complete stop and turned back to her. "What?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You said you rarely use this room anymore. Where do you sleep if not in here?"

Oh shit. Me and my big mouth. "Feel free to take the empty drawers in the dresser, I'll see you later." I shut the door behind me and mentally cursed myself. With Jessica around I was going to have to be much more careful about what I said. And I'd probably have to crash with Jessica from now on. Fuck that.

I walked into the living room where the others were sitting spread out over the couches.

"So, what does Jason have to do with the fire?" Miles asked Asher.

Asher clenched his fists as I sat beside him. "Apparently that shit came over to the house and threatened Jess yesterday."

My eyebrows shot up. "He threatened her?"

Isaac nodded. "He was trying to get her back and thought that using their sex tape would be the best way to do it."

Asher burst to his feet then began pacing in front of the fireplace.

"That piece of shit." I spat the words out.

"You'd have been proud of her. She stood right up to him and blackmailed him into handing over his memory card so he couldn't post it anywhere." Isaac smirked.

"What did she blackmail him with?" Zeke leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs.

"Apparently Jason's been using steroids and she threatened to tell his football coach." Isaac wore a wide, unapologetic grin now.

"Good," I muttered.

"I gotta go for a run." Asher turned and left the room in long strides. The back door slammed shut hard enough that it was a miracle the glass hadn't shattered on impact.

Ethan cringed. "Probably shouldn't have mentioned his sister's sex tape."

Isaac shrugged. "Hindsight."

"So, you guys think Jason did this?" I asked the group.

"He's got motive," Miles said. "And it doesn't take a genius to put gas in a bottle and light it on fire."

"Well, it's the cops' problem now." Ethan leaned back on the couch. "They know about the argument with Jason and they'll question him about it. All we need to do is lay low until he's in jail."

"Does anyone else think it's strange that Asher's house caught fire after Ethan was attacked?" Zeke asked the group.

The twins exchanged looks while Miles cleaned his glasses.

My phone rang. Groaning, I checked my phone. It was the funeral home. Great. "Hello?"

"Hello, may I speak with Miss Alexis Delaney?"

"Speaking."

"Hi Miss Delaney, I'm so sorry to be calling this early however there has been a slight problem with the flowers. I've tried contacting Mr. Huntington but have been unable to do so," the woman's voice said.

My shoulders dropped as I let out a sigh. "We'll head over right away." I hung up the phone and looked over to Miles. "There's a problem at the funeral home."

I watched all the color drain from Miles' face as he got to his feet. "I'll get dressed," he croaked out before quickly leaving the room. The others and I all shared a look. After getting dressed and driving across town, we were sitting in what looked like a conference room. The funeral home I'd chosen was simple yet classic, but it was still a funeral home. A blanket of sorrow and strain seemed to fill the air here to an almost palpable degree. It was clear; you came here to mourn and bury the dead. Why didn't cemeteries have that? I pushed my thoughts out of my mind and focused on what the director was telling us.

"Unfortunately, the lilies you had chosen are on back order. We do have some other lovely selections here for you," she said as she slipped the catalog across the table to me.

Miles was silent beside me, his fingers tapping on his thigh feverishly.

Focusing on the now, I turned to him. "What was your father's favorite color?"

Miles met my gaze, waving his hand dismissively. His face was paler, the bags under his eyes standing out against his skin.

"Right." I turned back to the portfolio. There was a lovely casket spread of red and white roses. It was a classic. "What do you think of this?"

"Lexie ..." He sighed.

The director's plastered smile cracked a little before turning to me. "Red roses typically mean that person was well loved."

"I don't know." Miles began to bounce his knee beside me. His hands moved into fists on his thighs, his knuckles turning white.

I turned to the director. "Can you give us a moment please?"

She gave me a practiced smile. "Of course."

Once the door closed softly, I turned to an almost ragged Miles. "I need your help."

He shook his head. "It's a fake funeral, Lexie. He's not dead."

I sighed and prayed for patience. "Miles, he's gone. And I can't keep making these decisions for you."

"It's not a real funeral."

"Yes, it is." When was it going to sink in?

He shook his head and dug into his back pocket. "Here, just order whatever you want."

"Miles, this your father, not mine," I all but snapped as he pulled out his wallet and opened it with shaking fingers.

That trembling was the only reason I didn't try to stop him from getting to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Lexie," he mumbled as he dropped a credit card on the table and walked out the office door.

I sighed deeply and turned back to the catalog. Was I being too hard on him? Should I be the one handling this? Could I be making it worse? By taking care of all the arrangements, did I make it possible for him not to face it? I rubbed my eyes with one hand. I didn't know what to do or say to Miles anymore. A restlessness began to bubble up inside of me. I was so tired of not knowing what to do.

It wasn't long before the director came back. I eventually found a nice spread of mixed color roses. They gave a light, hopeful vibe. I hoped the jerk rested in peace. "This one."

"That is a lovely choice, however I should warn you that the colors here may clash with the standing arrangements that you had previously selected," she began.

"Can I be honest?" I asked.

I could see her hesitation before she finally gave a brief nod.

"This man was an abusive asshole," I stated, feeling better that someone else knew.

She flinched at my language.

"He's not my father, he's my boyfriend's dad." I shrugged. "I don't know what to pick for him. So, could you

pick a couple of arrangements that would match? We'll pay for whatever you pick."

She hesitated again. "Isn't there an adult who can take over?"

I sighed. "No, at the moment, we're all there is."

With empathy in her eyes she gently took the portfolio back from me. "I understand. I do have a specific arrangement in mind that will go beautifully."

"Thank you." I slid the card across the table for her.

After showing me what she had in mind, she left to go run Miles' card. I needed to get through to him and nothing I said seemed to work. Maybe it was time to stop being subtle?

The director returned and we wrapped up business quickly.

I came out of the building to find Miles sitting in the driver's seat of his car. I slid in and closed the door. "Miles

"Put your seatbelt on." He started the car. "I've got to get back to work in the conservatory."

"Miles. Stop." I turned to him. "Could you please just ... talk to me?"

He gripped the wheel and licked his lips. "About what?"

"About your dad." I shifted so I could face him. "You're leaving everything to me, and I don't know what I'm doing."

He turned, his gaze focusing on me. "I'm sorry, Lexie. I know I should be handling this but every time I try ..." He looked out the windshield and shook his head. "Something just stops me. I get short of breath, a tightness in my chest. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"That's anxiety, sweetie," I said in a gentle voice.

He looked down at the steering wheel. "I need to be the calm one. I'm always the calm one."

I reached over and touched his shoulder. "No, Nemo. You don't. Not all the time."

He took several deep breaths before turning to me. "Then I don't know what to be."

I gave him a soft smile. "Be Miles. The man I love, however you are, however you feel."

He took my hand from his shoulder and kissed the back of it. "I'm yours. You know that, right?"

Warmth filled me at the uncertainty in his voice. "Yes, I know that. I'm just worried about you and why you're leaving the funeral to me. But I think I get it now." He was struggling to deal with it, and that I could understand.

His thumb moved over my knuckles. "I still think he's alive somewhere."

I sighed. Two steps forward, one step back. "He's not, sweetie."

He shook his head as he stared out the windshield looking very much lost. "It can't be true, Lexie. It just ... can't."

Deciding I'd pushed far enough today, I let it go. At least he hadn't shut me out.

Miles shifted the car into drive, then took possession of my hand again as he pulled out of the parking lot and drove us home in silence.

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CHAPTER 5

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hy are we doing this here again?" I asked Uma as we sat down outside a coffee shop on Main Street.

"Because it'll give you more of a chance to see different auras." Uma crossed her legs and gestured with her paper to-go cup of coffee at the crowd. "What do you see?"

I settled back in the patio bistro chair and surveyed the Saturday crowd. Even though things in town had gotten strange, people still walked by, going in and out of shops, talking, having a good time. And here I was trying to read their auras. "Nothing. I got nothing."

"Because you're fighting it." She turned to me with an understanding smile. "Relax your shoulders, clear your mind."

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I did as I was told. Immediately a woman across the street caught my eye. A light glow surrounded her. Shades of brown blended with silver around the woman, particularly around her heart.

"Her," I said in a low voice. "I see silver with a dingy brown overlay."

Uma eyed the woman through her sunglasses. "Brown overlay usually means insecurity, negative energy. And silver could mean health problems or an accumulation of fear." She turned to me. "What can you surmise from that?"

"Well, the silver is around her heart," I said. "So, she's scared of something."

"Possibly a boyfriend or girlfriend. Or even the idea of opening up can do that," Uma surmised. "Do you see how she's walking?"

I watched the woman walk through the crowd, her head down, avoiding even the possibility of contact with anyone. "Yeah. She's kinda in the crowd, but not. She's avoiding people."

"Do you see any other colors?" She took a sip of her coffee.

Now that she mentioned it, there was a soft edge of pastel pink mingled in with the browns and silvers. "Pastel pink."

"What does that mean?" Uma raised an eyebrow.

I racked my brain, trying to remember the books that Uma gave me. "She needs serenity. She's sensitive."

Uma nodded. "Good. What else do you see?"

I took the time to really look at the woman as she stopped at a window of a store. It was cool out, but not so cool that you needed the sweater and jacket she was wearing. Her shoulders were hunched. She kept looking around, as if reassuring herself that no one was watching her. "I think she's nervous about being out in the open."

Uma set her cup down on the table. "What can you get from her body language?"

"She's not confident," I thought out loud. "She's hiding her body with her clothes, they're baggier than they need to be. So ..." It hit me. "Could she be scared of just being out of the house?"

Uma smiled. "Very good." She gestured across the street toward the woman. "Social anxiety isn't easy to overcome, and I'd bet everything in my bank account that she's trying her best today to face it."

Poor woman. "That would suck."

Uma nodded. "Look through the crowd, tell me what else you see."

I spotted a couple walking hand in hand down the street. She pulled him to a stop outside an antique store. They talked. Her aura was bright and full of pink, clear reds and green. The woman was practically a Christmas tree. His on the other hand? Brown. Shit brown. With flecks of black throughout. "That guy's a dick."

She raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"Well, his aura is mostly solid brown, which means greedy and self-absorbed, but there are flecks of black and that could mean unreleased anger or an unforgiving personality."

We both watched as his girlfriend smiled up at him and gestured at the store. He shook his head and pulled her further down the sidewalk. Her smile disappeared.

"And she's completely in love with him," I added.

"Good assessment." Uma nodded. "However, an aura reading is only at that moment. It doesn't mean that person is that way at all times. He could be having a bad day."

I shrugged. "His girlfriend wanted to go into the store, he said no. That's a dick move."

"Do you always want to do what Lexie does?" Uma asked.

I turned to her. "No, but if she was smiling up at me like that, she can do whatever."

Uma's smile turned sad as she looked down at her coffee. "Louis was like that."

My heart sunk. "I'm sorry you guys lost him."

She nodded. "So am I."

A black glow emanated from her. Unreleased anger? Or grief? I didn't say anything. "How is the family?"

She let out a mirthless chuckle before taking a sip from her coffee. "Savannah is managing everything as best she can. The gargoyles were nice enough to take them in, so Juan has more protection then we did in New Orleans." "It's gotta be hard being away from them for so long," I said softly.

She looked down at her coffee. "It is. But I need to be here to make sure Jadis doesn't win."

More black flecks appeared in her aura. More anger probably. "Just, make sure you go home to them. I know you're angry and want justice for Louis, but those kids can't lose another parent."

She lifted her head and met my gaze through the glasses. Her eyes narrowed. "You're reading my aura."

"Sorry." I leaned back in my chair. "I kinda couldn't help it."

She tilted her head to the side and considered me. "You are very good."

My cheeks warmed as I looked out at the crowd again. "Only because you're helping."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do after high school?" she asked, surprising me.

I shrugged. "I had originally planned to go into MMA fighting but—"

"That's changed?"

I looked down at my cup and nodded. "Ever since the possession, I can't stand the idea of getting into the ring again."

"That's understandable," she said, her tone smooth and soothing. "Have you thought about utilizing your new gift?"

I raised an eyebrow. "How? It's not that useful."

She smiled softly. "Empaths and aura readers make excellent therapists."

My eyebrows shot up. "A therapist?" "Yes."

I shook my head. "Me? A therapist? Have you met me? I'm not that smart."

"You're smarter than you give yourself credit for." She gestured at the single woman still window shopping. "Most people might have thought she was being abused by

someone. But you thought of the fact she was avoiding others, watching the crowd. It was clever."

My cheeks warmed as I took a sip of my coffee.

"Just, think about it," she said. "You could help people. Make a difference."

Help people? Me?

"I heard about Asher's house catching fire." Uma said before taking a sip of her coffee.

"Yeah, did you know that Ethan was jumped just a few days before that? It doesn't seem like coincidence to me," I muttered.

Uma nodded. "Well, let's look at the facts. Is there anything to tie Jadis to the fire?"

"Only Asher's connection to Lexie," I countered.

"Are there any other suspects?" Uma asked.

I blew out a long breath. I knew she was going to ask that. "Yeah, but he's pretty stupid."

"Perhaps it was him, perhaps not," she said. "What about the woman, three tables down behind me?" she whispered. "Look without looking."

I kept my eyes on her and focused on seeing the woman she mentioned out of the corner of my eye. "I got nothing."

Uma nodded. "That's because she's a witch and her barriers are up. She's hiding that she's a witch too much."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone has an aura," she said as she got to her feet.

I picked up my cup as I joined her.

She took my arm and started us down the street. "If someone doesn't, it's because they know about auras and are hiding something. That means witch, psychic, or some other kind of sensitive."

We moved through the crowd. The hair on the back of my neck rose. "You think she works for Jadis?"

"Uh-huh. And she's following us."

"What do we do?" I whispered.

"We're going to duck into the alley and you're going to run to the car," Uma said in a low voice.

"And leave you here?" I scowled up at her.

"I'm a full-grown witch, Isaac," she hissed as she put the car keys in my hand. "I've got this covered. However, if they get their hands on you, Lexie will tear the world apart looking for you. Remember the lengths she went to in New Orleans?"

Oh yeah, I remembered. Lexie had used herself as bait and jerked some poor guy's soul to the Veil before threatening to kill him. My girlfriend could be scary as hell. "Good point."

"Once we turn the corner, run," she whispered. "Get the car running."

She steered me into the alley. I took off in a sprint. Heart pounding, arms pumping, I did as she said and hauled ass down the trash-strewn alley.

A fireball whooshed past me. I ducked my head a little and kept running. Curses and Latin filled the alley as I turned the corner and headed for Uma's car. A loud bang, like a gunshot, echoed through town. People ducked as I ran past. The small sedan came into view. Hands trembling, I unlocked the door and slid into the driver's seat. I had the car running by the time the passenger side door opened and Uma slid calmly into the seat.

"Go," she ordered.

I pulled out onto the road and started toward Miles' house as fast as I could without getting a ticket. Fuck. We couldn't even go into town now? "What the hell were they trying to do?"

"Either take you or follow us back to the house." Uma looked over her shoulder out the back window.

"Then let's lose them." I pressed down on the accelerator.

Lexie

I HAD JUST WALKED into the house when I was brought up short. Hades was waiting in the foyer. Miles hurried past us and into the long hallway without a word, heading back to the conservatory.

I sighed. "What now?"

He shook his head. "You are still upset with me."

I sighed. "Yeah, Hades. Me not liking what you did isn't just going to go away."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't understand. I did my job. I protected you. Why are you angry?"

I drug my hand through my hair. "It's not that you did your job, it's how you did your job."

He blinked at me. "You don't like the way I've done my job?"

"Bingo." Finally, we're on the same page.

His jaw clenched and unclenched as he stepped closer and lowered his voice. "My job is to protect you at all costs."

"I know."

He shook his head. "No, I don't believe you do understand. You are the only person who can stop whoever accessed the Veil the first time. Without you, the world might have fallen apart."

I swallowed hard as his words sunk in. Okay, yeah, I was important. But still ... "I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to understand what my job is, and to accept that I have to protect you."

"And I don't want you to kill people!" I snapped. "Don't kill. Is that so freaking hard for you to understand? Do I

have to order you to stop protecting me to make you understand?"

His jaw dropped. "You'd rebuke me?"

"I don't even know what that means!" I lost it. "You've never explained how this works!"

"It means, you'd fire me from being your familiar," he rasped. "Could you really do that?"

I shook my head, at a loss for words. "I don't know. I don't know how I feel about you staying in my bedroom, I don't know how I feel about you lying to me for a year."

"I was a pup," he stated. "I was a baby when I came to you."

"But you're a grown man now and—" I held my hands palm up. "I don't know what this is, how it works, or how I even feel about it. You've just got to give me some time and space."

We stood like that for a heartbeat, neither of us willing to be the first to back down or walk away.

"Who the hell is that?" Jessica's voice sent us both turning toward the long hallway.

"Jessica?" Hades raised an eyebrow before turning back to me.

"Do I know you?" Jessica's face scrunched.

I sighed. "This is Hades. He's a magical species of dog that has a human form."

The blood drained from her face. "Your dog Hades?"

"Yeah." I turned back to Hades, not knowing what else to say.

Apparently, neither did he. His face was hard as he moved past me out of the house. The slamming door made my chest ache.

"Can't you have anything normal?" Jessica asked before she disappeared into the long hallway.

I guess not. I sat on the stairs and tried to just be still. Since Miles had taken over the conservatory, my meditation space had moved to anywhere I could manage it. The stairs

probably weren't the best place, but it was quiet at the moment.

I took several deep breaths and focused on letting thoughts drift in and out of my head without paying them attention.

That was interrupted when Isaac came down the stairs. "I was just looking for you. Dinner's ready."

I shook my head, not ready to get up yet.

He sat beside me. "What's wrong?"

"I just had another fight with Hades." I turned to him. "And Miles just wrote off his father's funeral."

His arm moved around me. I leaned into him, his body heat helping me to relax.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "It's going to be okay."

"Is it?" It didn't seem like it was okay. "More people are going missing every day. You know ... I thought once I opened the Veil that this would all be over."

He squeezed me close. "I thought so too."

Heart heavy, I met his amber eyes. "Why won't Jadis just stop?"

"I don't know," he said softly. "But whatever she's going after, we can handle it. Together, as a family."

I nodded against his shoulder. "Thanks, Cookie Monster."

He smiled a little. "Are you okay? Your aura is a little dirty."

I snorted. "It's so weird to hear you talk about auras." I lifted my head and met his gaze. "How are you doing with that?"

He shrugged. "It comes and goes at weird times. Usually the person needs to be in a highly emotional state for me to see it."

I could feel the corner of my lips twitch with a smile. "What do you see when you look at mine?"

His mouth lifted into a half grin. "Well, yours is usually a bright gold. It swirls around you just above your skin." He took my hand in his. "Sometimes there's little flecks of white and gray, but mostly it's gold."

"There's gray in my aura?" I asked.

He nodded as his fingers tangled in mine. "Uma says that's typical. Gray usually means damage or depression. Everyone has a little of it."

"But I'm dirty today?"

He nodded, his eyes warm. "You're wearing out and getting down on yourself."

I looked down at our hands. "You might be right."

"Lexie, I'm here for you," he whispered. "We all are. Don't put everything on your own shoulders."

"But everyone ..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Say it, Red."

I shrugged. "Everyone seems to need something from me right now. And I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"And you won't. You would never disappoint us." He tucked a stray hair behind my ear. "But I'm here for you, no matter what. To talk, to cuddle, to share the load. I'm here for you, okay?"

I closed my eyes. I had forgotten that Isaac had been working to keep everything smooth between everyone. He'd been there for everyone lately. Making sure everyone was communicating and such. "Thank you, for everything you're doing for everyone."

His cheeks turned a dusky rose. "That's what I'm here for."

I leaned over and kissed him gently. His hand cupped my cheek before I pulled back and met his eyes.

"Hungry?" he whispered.

I nodded.

He grinned. "Come on, they're waiting for us."

We got off the steps and headed to the dining room.

Dinner was almost over when Zeke glanced at the door then cursed. The twins and I all looked at him.

"Miles didn't come for dinner again," he muttered.

Frustration sat like a knot in my stomach. "Neither did Asher." Though at least he was out on a run. "And Jessica is still eating all her meals in my room."

"Okay, who's officially worried about Miles?" Isaac raised his hand.

Everyone raised their hands.

"Intervention?" Ethan dropped his hand.

Isaac shook his head. "That won't work with him. He'll simply disappear more into his project."

"He's in denial about his dad," Isaac stated.

"We can't force him to accept his death," Ethan replied.

"At this point, I'd just be happy with him understanding his father is dead," I muttered.

"Has he seen the body?" Zeke turned back to the table and met my gaze.

I shook my head.

Zeke sighed. "For me, that was the only way I was able to believe mine was dead."

Isaac's eyebrows shot up. "You think he needs to see the body?"

Zeke shrugged. "It's just a suggestion."

"That's a little rough, isn't it?" Ethan said. "Couldn't that do more damage?"

"As much damage as never facing it?" Zeke countered.

The table fell into silence.

Making Miles see his father's body? I guess it was an option. "Let's say that's our last resort," I said.

The guys all agreed.

"Lexie, can you try to get him to eat?" Zeke asked.

I nodded as I got to my feet and dished up a bowl of stew for Miles, throwing in a couple of biscuits for good measure. "I think he's in the study," Ethan offered as I headed into the hallway.

* * *

Miles

THERE WAS a soft knock on the study door. I didn't call out. I didn't move. It was my fault. All my fault. He was really dead. Liam had used every contact he could of my father's and anything that tied to Jadis. And he had come up with nothing. But this? This I didn't expect.

I rubbed my eyes as the door creaked opened.

"Miles?" Her sweet voice called from the doorway into the dimly lit room. I couldn't answer as I stared at the floorboards. Asher's house. Ethan's attack. It was my fault. All of it. A pit of blackness opened up inside me and threatened to consume me. I picked up my tumbler and took a drink of scotch. It burned down my throat and I welcomed it in this abyss.

"Nemo?" Lexie came to the other side of the desk, a bowl in her hand.

I killed him. And I'd get her killed too. My eyes burned as rage coursed through me. I'm not going to be my father. I won't get her killed. Won't get them killed. But everything I'd done until now hadn't worked. And now, I was out of ideas. Out of resources. "It was all for nothing."

"What was?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. A long curl escaped and slid down her shoulder. My fingers itched to tuck it back.

But I couldn't. I shouldn't. It was all for nothing. "His contacts are useless." I gripped the arm of my chair until my knuckles turned white. "They can't even find one fucking witch."

It wasn't until I heard her sharp intake of breath that I even registered what I had said.

My stomach gave a hard twist "I'm sorry, you should go."

Instead of leaving she set the bowl down on the desk then stepped around to my side. "Talk to me."

My eyes stung as I shook my head. If she knew, she'd never forgive me. Not for putting the others in danger. Not for attacking Jadis. She'd realize what I really was — a control freak with daddy issues. I shook my head. "You should go."

She knelt near my knees, the scent of rosemary filling my lungs. My heart ached. Would she ever let me this close to her again if she knew?

"I'm not going anywhere," she whispered.

I shook my head as tears rolled down my face. "I can't tell you. Don't make me tell you. You'll hate me."

Her eyes widened then filled with warmth. "There's nothing in this world that could make me hate you."

I huffed. "You say that now." But I knew Lexie, if nothing else, protected what she loved, and I had put them in danger.

"Miles, you're scaring me," she said softly. "You're drinking alone in your office."

I shook my head. No, no, that was the last thing I wanted. I sat up and moved closer to her. "I messed up, Angel. I messed up really bad. And you'll hate me for it."

"I could never hate you, Nemo," she said, with her heart in her eyes.

Don't tell her. Don't.

But I knew it was pointless. I had to come clean. "His contacts are useless," I began in a dry rasp. "They can't find Jadis. Everything was for nothing."

"What was?"

I took a deep shuddering breath. "I sent my father after Jadis. And it killed him."

Her hands took mine. "Oh, sweetie. That's not your fault."

I nodded. "It is, Angel, he wouldn't have gone if it weren't for me. And if it weren't for me the others wouldn't be in danger now."

"You're not making sense." She squeezed my hand in hers. "Who's in danger now?"

"All of you." My voice cracked. The door creaked open, but I ignored it, completely focused on the beautiful woman in front of me. "Liam spotted one of Jadis' people near Asher's house before it went up. Jadis was behind the fire."

She swallowed hard. "Okay, but that's new information we can use. Now that we know—"

"Don't you get it?" I asked. "They're coming after us because I attacked first. I put all of us in danger."

Her eyes shone in the low light, sparkling with unshed tears.

Now it would come. The anger. The rage. How it was my fault. How I should have known better. How she couldn't stand to look at me anymore. I pulled away from her and buried my face in my hands. "I'm sorry, Angel. I didn't think. I know you hate me—"

She pulled my hands from my face and met my gaze. "I can never hate you, Miles. You made a mistake. That's all."

"It got him killed," I breathed. "I killed my father."

Her face morphed, filled with patience and love I didn't deserve. "No, Nemo. You didn't."

"Can you still love a killer?" I rasped as more tears fell.

"I love you." She gave me a warm smile that lit up her face like sunshine. "And you're not a killer."

Relief left me sagging in my chair. The world tilted and spun. I couldn't seem to stop the tears from falling as I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. She hugged me tightly as I breathed in her scent.

The floorboards creaked.

"He's wasted," Zeke's voice came from the shadows.

"Yeah." Lexie pulled back from me and wiped the tears from my cheeks. "We'll talk about this in the morning. But I still love you, Nemo."

Zeke's hand came down on my shoulder. "Come on, man. Let's get you to bed."

Lexie moved back.

I stumbled to my feet. Zeke took my arm and helped me move around the desk. "I'm sorry, Zeke."

"Don't be sorry, man," he said in a gruff voice as he helped guide me out of the office.

"I didn't mean to kill him," I mumbled as we started down the hallway.

"We know."

"I don't want to be him, Zeke," I whispered.

He squeezed my shoulder. "I know."

"Don't let me be him," I muttered as the world began to go dark.

* * *

Zeke

I was in the garage under Miles' truck, changing the oil when two booted feet came into view to my right.

"Zeke?" Hades' voice was hesitant.

"Down here," I called as I finished bolting the oil pan back in place. I slid out from under the truck to look up at the familiar.

He tilted his head to the side in a very dog-like manner. "What are you doing down there?"

"I was changing the oil on the truck." I grunted as I got to my feet. "You need something?"

He shifted on his feet and looked at the floor. "I need to ask you something."

I pulled my handkerchief out of my back pocket and began cleaning my hands. This wasn't the first time Hades had come to me with questions, but it was the first time he'd looked like a lost little kid. "Is it about Lexie?"

He nodded, still looking at the floor.

"Ask away."

He sighed. "I don't know how to talk to her. Or get her to understand that killing Ordin was necessary. All we do is fight. I'm doing things the best way I know how, and it just makes it worse."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is Lexie still with Miles?"

He leaned against Lexie's Blazer. "Yeah. She's hasn't left his side since he passed out."

"Does she even know you've been watching her?" I asked.

"She said she needed space." He met my gaze. "What does that mean for a human?"

Oh hell. "It means give her some time to understand and process what it is going on."

He scowled at me. "Process? What's to process? Ordin was a threat, now he's not."

I leaned back against the truck. "Okay, let's start simple. Lexie, above all things, believes that killing is wrong. She feels it down to her soul. It's part of who she is. She values life above everything else."

Hades frowned. "Why?"

His question took me back. "Why what?"

"Why does she value life so much?" he asked. "Considering the things she's survived, the things you survived, the constant pain, the uncertainty, why?"

Was he talking about Lexie or himself? "Because she had to fight for it. She almost died, several times, Hades."

"I know."

"That's how she is," I said. "She thinks as long as there is life, there's hope for a better tomorrow."

"You do too," he muttered, his brow furrowing as it turned down in a slight frown. "I understand feeling that way about normal people, but not people like Ordin."

I folded the handkerchief and stuffed it back into my back pocket. "I'm with you there. But she's not us. She's her."

He shook his head, his confusion plainly written on his face.

"Why did you kill him?" I asked carefully, trying a different route. "Truthfully."

"He was going to come after Lexie again." He met my gaze.

I nodded. "How do you know that?"

"I was keeping an eye on him," he hedged.

I knew him better than that. "What do you mean you were keeping an eye on him?"

He shrugged. "I visited the hospital some nights while he was sleeping and went through his things."

My eyebrows met my hairline. "You were sneaking into the hospital?"

"Wasn't much sneaking, their security is rather lax."

"What did you find that made you think he was going to go after Lexie again?" I asked.

"It was all over his journal. Drawings of her, the things he wanted to do to make her suffer for putting him there ... all of it."

That sick fuck. "What happened to it?"

"I burned it in the fireplace after I came back from killing him," he muttered.

I looked out at the house through the open garage door. I really wasn't the best person for this conversation, but Hades had come to me. I turned back to him. "That was only proof that he was mentally fucked up. That doesn't mean he was going to go after her."

He scowled. "Yeah, but his mother was close to getting him an early release from the hospital."

My heart dropped. "What?"

Hades nodded. "It's why I had to act now."

"Those fucking assholes," I bit out, barely resisting the urge to hit something. "Does Lexie know that?"

"No."

I tried to rub the ache out of my jaw as I wondered if I was doing the right thing here. "You should probably tell her. That should clear up any misunderstanding."

"How would that clear it up?" he asked.

"Because right now, she thinks you did it because you enjoyed it. Or something like that," I explained. "She doesn't know you had a valid reason to do what you did. Tell her the reason and that should help."

His head was hung low. "I'll try."

I eyed him. "How are you dealing with everything else? Being in your human form?"

He shrugged. "Fine, I guess. It's weird being on two legs all the time, but anytime Lexie sees me in my true form she gets oddly sad."

"Yeah, I expect so."

He raised an eyebrow.

"She misses her dog, Hades. She loves ya. And now she's confused because you also have a human form."

He frowned at me, his brows drawing in. "Should ... should I stay in my true form?"

"Probably not." I doubt reminding Lexie that he was her dog would help. Hell, it might even make things worse.

He shook his head. "She doesn't want to see me in my human form, and she gets sad when I'm in my true form. Is this a human thing?"

I shrugged. "Humans are complicated. I think you just need to be patient."

He nodded, face solemn. "I thought she was going to rebuke me today."

"What does that mean?"

"Basically, fire me from protecting her," he murmured as he went to the side of the truck and picked up a wrench.

"What would that mean for you?" I asked, curious.

"I'd go home in disgrace, without honor. I'd never have another witch to protect. Never find a mate of my species." He began fiddling with the wrench. "The only thing worse is having a witch die while under your protection."

I leaned against the truck. "So, bad."

"Yes, very bad."

"Lexie won't do that, not if she knows what it would do to you," I tried to reassure him. "So, how does this work? The familiar thing? How do you get one?"

He looked down at his hands. "Well, a normal person can't. It's not like going out and adopting a cat. There has to be a danger and a need for a familiar. Even then, you might not get one. A higher power needs to assign one to you."

"And who assigned you to Lexie?"

"Her Reaper grandmother." He set the wrench down next to the others. "She went to my mother, and they decided there was enough need to send me. They made sure that the information on Neapolitan Mastiffs made it to Miles, they spelled the breeder, and I was brought to you."

"That's a lot of work to keep things a secret."

He nodded. "You were never supposed to know I had a human form, but the circumstances warranted exposure."

"You saved Lexie," I said. "That's what matters."

"Luckily, the compulsion wiped Rory's memory of it." He picked up a screwdriver and spun it in his hands. "Otherwise, he'd hate me as much as Lexie does."

Probably. Lexie had decided that it was one secret Rory couldn't know. And frankly, I agreed. Finding out the dog you let lay on your chest while you watched football had a human form? Yeah, there'd be an issue. "She doesn't hate you. She's confused by you."

He nodded as he set down the screwdriver.

"So, they give you a job and send you off as a baby?" I asked, hoping to take his mind off of Lexie. "Without instruction? Isn't that kind of rough?"

He nodded. "That's the way it is. Familiars aren't running through the streets. There aren't a lot of us. Our instincts usually guide us in the right direction. Once a contract was made, my entire purpose was to protect Lexie. From nightmares, to her enemies, shadow people, demons, humans, all of it."

"And that's where you run into a problem with Lexie. She's saying the opposite of your instincts." At least that was clear.

He nodded again.

A question came to mind, an old one. One that I needed to know the answer to. "Have you ever thought to protect her from me?"

His head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine. "No."

"I mean"—I took a breath— "did you ever get the feeling that I shouldn't be near her? That I might hurt her?"

"Never." He tilted his head to the side in a very Lexie manner. "You don't have that in you, Zeke."

My eyes began to burn as I looked down at the floor. "How can you tell?"

"Instinct," he said. "There's a level of soul death that accompanies abusers, and I don't see that in you."

I glanced up at him. "Soul death?"

"Parts of their souls that are dead or damaged," he explained. "It happens sometimes by going through trauma. Some are born that way, some are taught to be that way, but it all results in the same kind of rot on their souls that is deep down. You don't have that."

Relief had me leaning against the truck. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," Hades said. "I think you're right. I should give her some space and time."

"No problem." I watched as the familiar walked out of the garage, still confused. I could only hope I gave him good advice. His words ran through my head. I didn't have soul rot. I wasn't my father.

* * *

Lexie

I was half asleep in Miles' room when something broke the silence. A voice, small and sobbing.

I bolted upright, trying to find the source of the sound.

Miles opened his eyes. "Angel? What's wrong?"

"Not me," I whispered.

He sat up beside me as I searched the room.

A small, frightened whimper drew my attention to the corner of the room. A girl was curled up there. Her small face looked up at me, her light eyes wide as tears poured down her face. "Make it stop."

My breath caught. It was the girl from my dreams. I pushed back my covers and got to my feet. In that time, she blinked out of existence.

"Did you see what I saw?" Miles got out of his side of the bed.

I nodded. "That's the girl from my dream."

"Where'd she go?" Miles asked, worry lining his face.

Our eyes met a heartbeat before we rushed out of the bedroom.

Miles went to Isaac's room while I hauled ass down the hall to Zeke's.

We both pounded on doors until everyone was awake.

After a thorough search we met in the living room.

Jessica shoved her mussed hair out of her face and squinted at us. "What is the matter with you people, don't you ever sleep?"

"Not when a possibly dead girl is wandering around the house." Ethan walked past her and went to me. His hand

went to my lower back. "Did you call Uma?"

I nodded then turned to the others as they reached us.

Isaac moved to stand beside Jess. Zeke took my other side while Asher and Miles filled in the rest of our circle.

"Uma?" Jessica asked.

"She's the head of the witches in town," I said absently. "Did anyone find anything?"

All the guys shook their heads.

"Every ward I saw was intact," Asher said.

"Ward?" Jessica turned to look up at her brother.

"It's a protection symbol, it keeps the dead out of the house and away from Ally," Asher answered.

"So, she wasn't dead," I surmised.

The front door opened. Uma walked in swathed in a lavender robe. "What do we know?"

The boys moved over for Uma to join the circle.

"It was the girl from my dreams, only this time in black and white while I was wide awake," I explained in a rush.

"So, this is Uma," Jessica whispered to Asher.

Asher nodded.

Uma glanced at her before turning back to us. "The wards?"

"Intact," Zeke answered.

"Hmm. She could be astral projecting."

"Right into our bedroom," Miles muttered.

Jessica's head snapped around, her eyes going from Miles to me and back again.

"Did she say anything?" Uma asked, drawing my attention back to her.

"Yeah, she asked to make it stop," I said. "But didn't say what 'it' was."

Jessica's eyes traveled down my body to where Ethan's hand rested now on my hip.

I pulled away a little; Ethan dropped his hand to his side.

"This was the same girl from the files in New Orleans?" Uma asked as her brow drew down.

"Yeah."

The witch's lips formed a tight line as she mulled over all the information. "Then let's take a wildly intuitive leap and say that she's probably still with Jadis' forces."

Ethan began to twirl his rings. "Do you think they've started up the experiments that they had going in New Orleans?"

My stomach tightened.

"They very well could have. They've been here long enough." Uma sighed. "What is she up to?"

"She's trying to take us out," Miles stated. "One by one."

Uma turned a questioning gaze on him. "What makes you say that?"

"An associate of mine spotted one of Jadis' people in the crowd while Asher's house burned," Miles announced.

Uma cursed under her breath. "If that's so, then we can assume that Ethan's attack was an abduction attempt."

"Let's assume away." Ethan's voice was dry. "If they're doing experiments again, we have to stop them."

I reached over and took his hand in mine. His fingers squeezed tightly. Jessica's brows drew down, her lips pinched.

Uma turned to Ethan. "The problem is, this could be a trap set up by Jadis."

"A trap?" Isaac asked.

Uma nodded. "To draw us in and hit us with overwhelming force."

I thought about the girl again, the desperation in her eyes. "I don't think it's a trap, she seemed genuinely terrified."

"Just like any good bait would be," Uma countered.

"If she was only bait, wouldn't she have had something more informative to say other than help me?" Miles asked.

Uma was silent for several heartbeats. "Maybe, maybe not. We'll have to see how this develops."

"What happens if she comes back?" Asher asked. "Can she do anything to us?"

Uma scratched her eyebrow. "Astral projection is one of the rarer abilities. If she's a strong enough psychic, she could move or interact with the location she's projecting to."

The guys and I cursed. Well, except for Miles.

"But that level of power is exceedingly rare," Uma explained. "It's almost unheard of."

"How much interaction are we talking about?" I shivered as a sudden chill ran up my spine.

Zeke stepped closer, sharing his body heat with me.

Jessica's eyes narrowed.

"The most I've heard of is picking up an object before the strain became too much and they disappeared," Uma said.

"So, she wouldn't be able to come at us with a knife?" Zeke asked, his hand moving to my back.

Jessica stood up straight and turned to Asher.

"No, I highly doubt that would become an issue. Tomorrow we'll decide how to move forward." Uma started for the door. "Go back to bed for now. We'll work on it in the morning."

Uma shut the front door behind her.

"There's a creepy not-dead girl around the house and we're supposed to go to sleep?" Isaac scoffed. "Not happening."

"She's right, we need to get some sleep." I knew I was tired as hell. "I'm going to bed. Night, guys."

"I'm coming with you." Isaac started to follow.

"Me too." Ethan shuddered. "I'm not going to be alone if creepy girl comes back."

"We can't all sleep in Lexie's room," Zeke snapped.

"You can sleep on the floor for that negativity," Isaac shot over his shoulder as his arm wrapped around me.

I snorted.

"Hold it!" Jessica's shout had everyone turning around. She was gaping up at Asher. "You're going to let your girlfriend go sleep with your friends?"

Silence dropped over the living room.

"She's cheating on you!" Jessica snapped.

"She's not cheating on me," Asher said, trying to be patient.

Jessica turned on him. "Bullshit! Look at them all over her!" She turned back to the guys. "How could you guys do this to him? It's not hard to see how he feels about her! And you're his best friends! What the hell are you guys thinking?"

"Jess," Asher bit out between his teeth. "Stop talking."

"She's not cheating on Asher," Ethan tried.

"You tell me I should be respected by whoever I'm with and yet you just stand by and let this ho get with your friends? What the hell are you thinking? She's worse than Trish—"

"She's dating all of us, Jess," Asher snapped.

My stomach dropped. We hadn't even begun to talk about coming out of the poly closet yet. And Asher just ... shit.

Jessica gaped up at Asher while the rest of us shared looks.

"What?" Jessica asked.

Asher clenched his fists. "She's dating all of us. Now stop insulting her."

"You're not serious." Jessica shook her head. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not," Asher said in a serious voice.

Jessica turned to Ethan. "Tell me you're not—"

"I am." Ethan reached over and wrapped his arm around my waist.

"So am I," Isaac announced with a smile.

Jessica turned to Zeke. "Zeke?"

"Yep." Zeke shrugged.

"Miles?" Jessica's voice was soft.

"Yes, I am," Miles stated simply as his ears began to turn pink.

Jessica turned to me. "You fucking slut!"

I rolled my eyes. "Here we go."

Jessica took a step towards me. "You freaking ho! I knew you were a slut, but I didn't think it was this bad! What is the matter with all of you? How could you do this to them?"

"Jess," Asher bit out. "Stop. Talking."

"No!" Jess took another step towards me. "My brother is the greatest, most loyal person on the planet, and you're just hooking up with his friends? I thought Trisha was low __"

"Jess!" Asher moved between us, stopping his sister from getting any closer to me.

"—but you fucked up his life by turning him into a werewolf and now you're fucking up everyone else's too! You're going to ruin his best friends!"

"Jess!" Zeke snapped.

"You're a fake! Liar! And Clay—"

Everyone erupted in protest.

"Jessica! Shut the hell up right this minute," Asher roared above all the others.

I grabbed the back of his shirt and I wasn't the only one. Ethan reached out and took a fistful too.

Jess looked up at Asher with wide eyes. "She-"

"Is dating all of us. It's a lifestyle choice. Every one of us is a consenting adult." Asher growled between his teeth. "I'm the one who agreed to it. I'm the one who has to see her with the others. I'm the one who has to hear her sleeping with Isaac. I'm the one who has to deal with it. So stop talking about shit you don't understand!"

Jessica gaped up at him, stunned, and took a step back.

Zeke moved between Asher and Jessica. "Asher. Calm down."

Asher's shoulders rose and fell as he took several deep breaths. "No, I'm sick of this bullshit attitude of hers." Asher tried to take a step forward but our grip kept him in place. "From now on you won't say a word against Ally, Jessica, or so help me, I'll never talk to you again."

The blood drained from her face as she gaped in horror at her twin.

Before anyone else could say anything Asher reached behind himself to pull my hand from his shirt. "I have to go for a run."

Both Ethan and I let go of him. Asher hurried past us and out of the room. The back door slammed shut hard enough to rattle the windows in the kitchen.

Jessica slowly sank onto the couch cushion in the silence.

Miles went to the kitchen muttering something about tea.

Ethan left my side to go to Jessica. He sat down on the coffee table across from her.

"Maybe I should go," I whispered up to Isaac.

Isaac met my eyes and nodded.

"I'll be in Miles' room." I squeezed his arm and quietly made my way out of the living room.

* * *

Ethan

Jessica's face was pale, her fingers trembling on her Hello Kitty pajama bottoms.

Eventually, Miles brought in a steaming mug of tea and held it out to her. She didn't even look at him as I took it and set it on the table beside me.

"Jess," I said softly, "take a deep breath for us."

She did as I asked, her eyes filling with tears. "How could he say that?"

"Which part?" I asked in what I hoped was a soothing voice.

Her blue eyes met mine. "How could he choose her over me?"

I leaned forward and took her hands in mine. "That's not what he's doing, Jess. He didn't mean that. Right now he's just pissed off and didn't know how else to let you know it."

She shook her head as the others moved closer around us. "How could you all *share* her?"

"That's not what we do," Zeke growled.

Jessica didn't even flinch.

"Yeah, it's not like that," Isaac stated.

"We each have our own relationship with her and we're aware of all of her relationships between us," I explained as simply as I could.

She shook her head. "You guys are crazy."

I grinned. "Maybe a little."

Isaac smacked my arm.

I looked up at him and shrugged. "Come on, we're a little crazy to try this."

"Not the best time for jokes, brother." Isaac squatted beside Jessica. "Jess, I know you're worried about Asher. Hell, about all of us. But we've all thought this over carefully. We debated for a long time about whether it's the right thing to do or not."

Jess looked up at Isaac.

"But what it all comes down to is, we're all in love with her, and she's in love with each of us. And we've all agreed to give this a shot instead of hurting each other," Isaac explained softly. "Lexie isn't a slut. She isn't trying to hurt anyone. She's just a girl in love who was in an impossible situation."

Jess shook her head. "It's going to end in disaster."

"Maybe. But if we didn't give this a shot, disaster would already have happened." Isaac shrugged. "Can you understand that?"

* * *

Lexie

I was sitting up against the headboard when Miles' bedroom door opened. The guys filed in one by one. Except Asher. He was probably out running still.

Miles sat beside me on the bed. Zeke leaned against the bookcase across from the end of the bed. Isaac and Ethan sat at the end of the bed.

"So, how'd the talk go?" I asked them.

"She's calmed down and understands that you aren't cheating on any of us," Miles summed up.

"I bet she loved that," I muttered.

"It took some talking, but Isaac managed to get through to her." Ethan turned to his brother. "Good job, by the way."

Isaac's cheeks tinted pink. "I just read her aura and talked to her about what she was really worried about."

"Me?"

"Nope." Isaac shook his head. "She was scared, not angry, so we spent some time talking about her fears."

"She was scared you'd hurt us," Zeke summed up. "And ruin our relationships."

"Ah." I couldn't blame her.

"But she's calmed down and agreed to keep quiet about it," Ethan said.

I nodded. "Good, that should at least buy us some time before it gets around school."

The twins shared a look.

Ethan turned to me. "Well, we all got to talking downstairs after Jess went to bed and, well, we were

thinking we needed to have a talk."

My stomach knotted. "About?"

"Birth control," Miles said.

I turned to him, stunned.

His ears were bright pink as he met my gaze. "And since Asher let it slip that your relationship with Isaac has ... progressed, I thought it would be a good time to discuss it."

My face warmed. I had nothing to be embarrassed about. It's perfectly logical that they'd want to talk about it now. "Okay ..."

"Shouldn't this be between each of us and her?" Zeke groused from across the room as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"STDs won't stay between only two of us," Miles countered.

"Shit, Miles." Isaac gaped at him.

Ethan cleared his throat. "I personally assumed condoms."

"So did I," I muttered. I would not balk from this conversation. Nothing to be embarrassed about. It's an important conversation to have. With four of the five of my boyfriends. Geeze.

"Condoms aren't always enough," Miles pointed out. "It might be a good idea to get everyone tested and add another form of control."

I turned and narrowed my eyes at him. "You mean the pill?"

Miles' ears turned red as his cheeks turned pink. "Well, not just that. There are other options. A diaphragm, an IUD, the ring. There's a lot to choose from."

"A diaphragm or cervical cap would be annoying," Ethan stated. "And she'd have to leave it in for hours after."

Isaac looked at his brother, horrified. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Are we really fucking talking about this?" Zeke muttered.

Ethan shrugged. "I have a lot of friends that are girls. They talk."

This was the strangest conversation of my life.

"There are potential side effects of an IUD," Miles added as he turned to me. "Including damage to your uterus."

My uterus. I was talking about my uterus with four of my boyfriends. God, this was weird.

"What about that implant under your arm? That thing lasts for like three years," Ethan asked as he turned to me. "Or the shot?"

Miles shook his head. "She'd have to be sure to get an appointment on time every three months. That might not always be possible."

I couldn't stay silent anymore. "Okay, first, what goes in my body isn't up for debate. I'll decide if I go on any form of birth control, not my boyfriends."

"Beautiful, we're just wanting everyone on the same page," Ethan said carefully. "No one is telling you what you should do. Condoms work fine."

"We just think we should add a back-up," Isaac added softly.

"Oh my God." My face caught fire. "Okay, look. If everyone gets tested, I'll add the pill or the shot or ... something as a back up to condoms. Okay?" I looked at each of them. "Good."

Isaac was the first to laugh, but within a heartbeat Ethan followed.

My face continued to burn as they stared at me. Miles was the next one to chuckle. Followed closely by Zeke.

I dropped onto the mattress and held a pillow over my face. "Shut up!"

"I've never seen you so red, Red," Isaac teased.

"You're all assholes and can go sleep outside!" I pulled the pillow off my face and shot a glare at Isaac.

When they kept chuckling, I threw the pillow. It hit Ethan in the face which just made him laugh even more.

"Screw you all, I'm going to sleep." I rolled onto my side opposite them and proceeded to try to ignore them.

In the end everyone ended up staying in Miles' room with blankets or sleeping bags. Miles and the twins took the bed with me, while Zeke propped himself up against the door.

It was quiet and warm. I smiled to myself. "I think we need a bigger bed."

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t was early morning, and I was at Rory's drinking coffee when he came out of his bedroom.

He paused on the other side of the table. "Lexie, what are you doing here?"

I lifted my head and met his gaze. "We need to talk."

He sighed as he moved to the coffee maker. "About what?"

I shook my head. "It's about Tara, Jess, Maria, and you."

He finished pouring his coffee and sat down across from me as the early light filtered through the window and across the pine table. "What's going on?"

"A few hours ago," I began, "a girl appeared in the house who we think was taken in New Orleans. We think she astral projected to us."

He rubbed his eyes with one hand. "I thought the house was warded?"

"So did we." I half shrugged. "I think you guys need to leave town. Even Aunt Susan."

"Susan's on the lecture circuit in Europe." He frowned at me. "What do you mean you want us to leave?"

"It'd be the best way to keep you safe in this." I looked down at my coffee, hating that this conversation was even happening. But I'd rather be the bad guy than watch them end up hurt or dead.

"Because I was compelled?" he asked, the lines of his face deepening.

Letting out a low breath, I couldn't lie about it. "Partly. Not because it was you, but because it could happen to anyone."

"You can fight compul—"

"Rory, you almost died," I growled. "If we hadn't gotten that magic off you, you would've died fighting it. Imagine if something like that happened to Tara? Or Jess, or Maria? I can't. I can't risk you guys."

"You're saying we're liabilities." He frowned, his facing darkening as he took a sip from his mug.

"I'm saying, you are non-combatants in an area that's quickly turning into a battlefield."

"I'm not a civilian," he countered.

"This isn't the military, Rory," I shot back. "Can you block magic? Can you throw fireballs? Because that's the kind of weapons we're talking about here."

"I can't say that it hasn't occurred to me." He sighed and met my gaze. "But I'm not leaving you here. Maria can watch out for Jess and Tara. I'm staying."

No. No, that couldn't happen. I appreciated that he wanted to protect me, but ... "Rory, you have the best chance of protecting them. You have to go too."

His eyes squinted as his jaw worked back and forth.

"They're talking about attacking Jadis. To stop her before she's ready. I don't know what that means, or when that is, but it's probably sooner rather than later."

He scrubbed his hands down his face as we sat silent in the dawn light.

"I don't want you to go, but I don't want to lose you guys," I said through a tight throat. "And I don't want you to lose Tara."

His haunted eyes met mine. "You're my kid too, Lexie. You may not biologically be a daughter to me, but you're my kid."

My heart threatened to break as I looked down at my mug. "Even more reason for you to leave." My eyes filling, I focused on the mug. "You've done so much for me that I can't stand the thought of something happening to any of you."

"You're a good girl. You deserved more than the mother you had."

Tears slipped from my eyes and rolled down my face. It was a relief. Hearing those words patched a crack in my heart that had been there so long, I hadn't even noticed it was there anymore. My mother may not have wanted me, but Rory did. My tears continued to fall.

We sat there in comfortable silence collecting ourselves.

It was a while before Rory cleared his throat. "You may be right. We have to leave."

"The guys are staying, I'll be safe," I promised.

He met my gaze. "Maybe you and the boys should go, too."

I gave a slight shake of my head. "The guys won't go, and even if we did, I think the witches would just follow me. It would be a hell of a coincidence that they came here after Louisiana."

"Not if we could keep a low profile, hide you." He leaned forward onto his elbows. "It may be the answer to keeping you safe."

I thought about it. For the first time, I really thought about running, but in the end I dismissed the idea. "Here I have back up, protection. I know the area. We have the advantage."

"It was worth a shot." He ran his hand through his hair, messing it up even more.

"Sorry."

"What about the boys? They're human," he said as he met my gaze.

I shook my head. "Not so much anymore. Asher is a shifter, Isaac developed some kind of sixth sense about people, and who knows what Ethan is."

"But Zeke and Miles still are."

My heart ached at the thought. "They won't go. I already tried this morning. Miles says he can hire an army of bodyguards if he has to, and Zeke is just plain stubborn."

His eyes ran over me. "Which one of them are you dating?"

My heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"Which one are you dating?" he asked again. "I'm not blind, Lexie. It's got to be one of them."

I turned my mug on the table. "That's not why. They just won't go."

He sighed. "Asher will need to have Jessica get into online classes."

"He's already talking to her about it," I admitted. "We're hoping you guys could be off tomorrow."

"Maria's not going to want to leave the twins." He took a drink of coffee.

I cringed. "Yeah, about that. I was kinda hoping you'd talk her into it."

He set his mug down leveling me with his gaze. "So, I'm the sacrificial lamb?"

I held my fingers up less than an inch apart. "A little bit."

"You brats."

"You're the only one she might not kill," I countered with a grin.

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that."

To be honest, I wasn't so sure either.

"Just make sure you have your vest on when you go."

Asher

"If this is about Lexie, I already told the others last night. I'll leave her alone and not tell anyone about your ... arrangement." Jess scowled at me before reaching up to grab the box of cereal out of the cabinet.

"Jess," I said, my voice firm. "This isn't a discussion. You're leaving."

She slammed the box onto the counter and turned around to face me. "You're my brother. And the guys are close enough to be family. I'm not going anywhere. I belong here."

I shook my head. How the hell could I make her understand? "Jess, they could kidnap you, torture you, change you in ways we can't imagine. Control and manipulate you. This isn't a game."

She scoffed. "If I go, you go."

I shook my head. "I can't. This is my fight, not yours."

She stepped closer and poked me in the chest hard. "Knock that off. You're all the family I have and I'm not about to abandon you."

I couldn't help the small smile that was tugging at my lips. This wasn't the scared little girl she had been shaped into by a father that abandoned her and a boyfriend that abused her. I was seeing my little firecracker of a sister for the first time in I don't know how long. I was just grateful to see that stubborn set of her shoulders, even with her heart pounding, the scent of fear coming off her in waves. She held her chin high and the light was back in her eyes. She would still stand by me even if it terrified her. It was humbling.

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not. I'm just seeing the person you're becoming and"—I shook my head— "I'm in awe."

"There's nothing good about who I became over the last couple of years." Her cheeks tinted as she looked down at the floor.

"What do you mean?" I asked softly.

"I did some messed up things. Said so many cruel things."

I reached out and took her hand. "Do you regret them?"

Still looking at the floor, she nodded.

"Then you can apologize for them."

She peeked up at me through a curtain of blonde hair, the confidence slipping as fear seeped back into her eyes. "I don't think I can."

I huffed. "You can do anything, Jess. If you want to."

Tears brimmed her lashes. "Apologizing won't erase everything. It won't unsay the things I said."

"But it's a start," I countered. "And sometimes starting is the hardest part."

Her head hung slightly as her shoulders curled forward. "I don't think I can."

I stepped closer. "You can."

"Why do you think that? What makes you so sure that I could be anything but a waste of space?"

I pulled my little sister into my arms and held her tight. She buried her face in my chest and clung to my shirt.

I ran my hand up and down her back as her shoulders shook. "You're not a waste of space. You're my beautiful, talented sister." I squeezed her gently. "You just got off course for a while."

"I lost myself, Ash." She sniffed. "I'm so confused."

"I've got you. I know who you are, even if you don't." I held her even tighter. "You're a stubborn, outgoing girl who can be fierce when needed. You love Hello Kitty. You love fashion. And you are smarter than you let anyone know."

My shirt grew wet against my skin as she took a deep, shuddering breath.

"You're scared of spiders," I whispered. "And you're terrified that you will never be good enough."

"How do you know that?" She sniffed against my chest.

"Because I was too," I said softly, still running my hand up and down her back. "I thought I had to be what Dad wanted. That it was the only way I'd get approval or be valued."

"But it's bullshit, Jess," I continued. "I have value because I'm me, just like you have value because you are you. No one else in this world is like you."

I continued to hold her as she pulled herself back together.

Eventually, she pulled back and wiped her face. "I'm still not leaving you here."

"Jess. I'm not asking," I stated firmly.

She looked up at me with bloodshot eyes.

"You are going to leave with Rory and Maria," I told her. "I need you safe, and this is the only way. I can't keep you safe here. I can't protect you. We can't protect you. Even Sylvie took a vacation and left the state."

Her eyes rounded in surprise. "Sylvie left?"

"Last week," I said. "Zeke let her know what was going on."

It was several heartbeats before she nodded.

"Pack your things and take your laptop," I said before leaving the kitchen.

* * *

Lexie

As I LEFT Rory's, I was walking back to my Blazer when I found Hades leaning against my truck.

I slowed my step as my shoulders tightened. Mixed emotions ran through me. Anger, indignation, but underneath all of them was a thick layer of sadness. I didn't like how things were with Hades. In fact, I hated them.

"Hi," he said, his posture rigid. "Can we talk?"

I nodded. "In the truck."

He moved to the other side while I climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door.

The Blazer rocked as he shut his door.

The silence stretched.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't want you to kill people."

"Some people need killing," he countered.

I turned to him and asked him directly. "Why did you kill him?"

"He was obsessed with you still." He turned to me with soulful blue eyes. "And his parents were trying to get him released early."

My heart plummeted. "What?"

"His mother was trying to bribe his doctors to say he wasn't a danger to you anymore," he explained.

I gaped at him. "How do you know that?"

"I kept an eye on the situation at the hospital," he said.

Stunned, I looked out the windshield. Cars went by on the street as usual. As if we weren't in my car having a conversation about a murder. Yeah, perfectly normal. Nothing to see here.

"He was going to try again," I said, just so I could hear it out loud.

"Yes." His voice was certain.

I shook my head as the situation sunk in. He was going to get out again. "So, you really were protecting me?"

"Why are you so angry with me?" he demanded.

My eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? You killed someone."

"In your defense," he countered. "And it can't be just that."

"It's not," I snapped, my fists tightening around the steering wheel. "You kept seeing things that were private. That should have been between two people."

He scowled at me. "Like what?"

"Isaac and I for a start. Our first time," I hissed. "You have no idea how humiliating that is."

"I'm not a human, Lexie," he snapped.

I turned to face him.

"I may look it, but I'm not," he said. "My animal form is my true one. It's who I am. I protect. That's all I do. That's all I care about."

"Then why do you care if I'm mad at you?" I asked.

He blinked several times before looking out the passenger side window. "I guess I shouldn't care."

Something about the set of his shoulders, the way he hung his head, had guilt eating at me, as if I had kicked a puppy. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "You said you're not human, what does that mean?"

"My instincts and priorities are more animalistic," he said. "I protect, hunt, and when needed, kill. I don't think the way you humans do."

Yeah, that wasn't ominous at all. "What does all of that mean exactly?"

He sighed as he turned back to me. "It means that I don't understand you humans that well. That you and Isaac being together in front of me was of no interest other than you two were vulnerable and I needed to guard the door."

Wait, back that up. "What?"

His eyes met mine. "I don't care if you're naked or having sex, Lexie. I only care about protecting you. Why do you think I was guarding the door that night?"

So, he wasn't getting his jollies. "You don't think of sex?"

His eyebrows shot up as a blush spread across his face. "What? No. My species is only sexual with our own kind."

He turned away and started surveying the area around the car.

Tucking that piece of info away for later, I decided to try and dig further. "So, you were a puppy when you came to me. Were you actually a puppy or was it an illusion or something?"

"No illusions," he said. "Our species doesn't usually go to our witch until we're two years old."

"But I got you at two months."

"You were a special case," he said.

"How so?"

"Your Reaper grandmother told my mother the situation and my mother made an exception," he muttered. "They sent me early."

"But you were a baby." It didn't seem right.

"And you were saving the world," he countered.

So, we both had jobs that we weren't ready for. He was just following his instincts and doing the best he could. Perhaps I needed to let this go.

I watched him as he scanned the area around us, looking for threats. If he was telling me the truth, he wasn't watching me and Isaac. Or my phone calls with Ethan.

I started the Blazer and started for home in silence. I needed to settle this and put down boundaries with Hades, and sooner was better than later.

"Have you ever heard of privacy?" I asked.

"Privacy?" He turned to me. "Is that some human thing?"

I sighed. Of course he didn't understand privacy. He'd licked his balls in front of us for months. "Okay, it means something that shouldn't be shared. So, if I'm with one of the guys, I don't think I want you sleeping in the bedroom anymore."

"How about on the other side of the door?" he asked. "I can sleep in the hall."

I thought about it. "Okay, that I can agree to."

"Deal." His smile was so open and big, it made my heart warm.

As we drove back to Miles' house, we talked about other times I would want my privacy and explained why. It was the first real talking we had done since Hades turned into a human in front of me a month ago.

* * *

Asher

"Watch my waist, Kayley," I instructed as I put my arms down. "My hips will tell you if I'm changing direction, my shoulders will tell you what arm I'm going to use."

Kayley dropped her arms and stepped back from me. She blew the long strands of pale-yellow hair out of her face. "I know, I'm sorry. I'm a kindergarten teacher, not a fighter."

I sighed. And that was the problem. Kayley was a kind person with a good heart who wanted nothing more than to work with kids, and she was stuck in the middle of a war for her species.

The tall woman shrugged her slim shoulders. "I'm trying."

"I know," I said as I picked up a towel off the bench and wiped the sweat from my face. "And you're getting better." It wasn't that she was a pushover—the woman could hold her own—but she wasn't aggressive in fighting. She always defended. "One day you'll have to take the offense."

She blew out air, puffing up her flushed cheeks. "I know."

The door to the weight room opened. Ally walked in. When she spotted me a brilliant smile spread across her face. Damn, it was good to see her. With everything going on lately, getting one on one time was almost impossible. "We'll call it a day."

Kayley looked over her shoulder and spotted Ally. "Umhmm." She turned back to me with a grin. "Does she know you want her to be your bonded?"

My face caught fire. "I do not."

Kayley smiled. "Sure. Whatever."

I threw my towel at her.

She caught it with a laugh before heading out the door.

Ally raised an eyebrow but didn't ask as she came towards me.

"Hey, how'd your conversation with Rory go?" I asked as she reached me.

She sighed. "Better than I expected. I thought he'd have a fit, but it looks like he was thinking the same thing we were. Only, he wanted me to go with him too."

I cringed. "You're not, right?"

"I convinced him that I needed to stay here, but he's not happy about it." She tilted her head back to look up at me. "How'd Jessica take the news?"

I let out a breath. "Better than I thought she would." I stepped closer to her and set my hands on her hips. "She argued with me over it."

"Of course."

I smiled down at her. "But she knows it's for the best."

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

I leaned down and brushed a kiss against her cheek. "Do you care if we just have a night in for our date tonight?"

Those emerald eyes sparkled as she met my gaze. "Not one bit."

"Good." All I needed was Ally to myself for a few hours and everything would be right again. We could manage that.

The door to the gym opened. Isaac stepped just inside the door. "You guys might want to get upstairs. Miles is telling Uma about what his dad did."

Lexie

OH SHIT. I pulled away from Asher and ran for the door. Asher got there first and rushed ahead of us.

When we reached the walkthrough for the living room we skidded to a stop. Blocking the way were the other guys standing silently. I slipped between them and got to the front of the group. Uma, Brody, and Miles were in the living room, sitting in a tense silence.

Uma sighed. "This certainly explains a lot."

"Why they suddenly started going after you kids makes more sense now." Brody pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I know," Miles said. "And I'm sorry about my actions."

Uma shook her head. "I understand why you did it. But it wasn't your decision to make."

"If you had shared the location, we could have attacked in force," Brody stated in a clipped tone. "This could have been over a month ago."

Miles hung his head. "I'm aware."

Uma shook her head and turned her gaze to all of us standing in the doorway. "Since it's become obvious that Jadis is aiming for you boys, no one is allowed to leave this property without a bodyguard. Is that clear?"

Yeses and nods circled the room.

Brody turned to Uma. "We need to rethink our strategy."

"Agreed." Uma got to her feet and followed Brody out into the hallway.

We filed into the living room. I sat beside Miles while the twins sat across from us on the other couch. Zeke stood near the fireplace while Asher sat on the raised hearth.

"Miles?" I said softly.

With his head bowed I could only just see him peeking at me out of the corner of his eyes. "Are you ready to talk?" I asked.

He began to tap his thigh. "Yes."

I didn't know where to start.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Zeke apparently didn't have the same problem.

Miles' shoulders stiffened as he turned to Zeke. "What?"

"You're using your father's contacts." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"If I hadn't then we wouldn't know that Jadis was coming after us," Miles countered.

"If you hadn't had your father attack then we wouldn't have Jadis coming after us," Zeke shot back.

"Zeke," Asher said in a chiding tone.

Zeke turned to Asher. "No, no more kid gloves." He turned back to Miles. "What you did was reckless and stupid. What the hell?"

Miles shook his head and met Zeke's gaze. "I had the chance to put a stop to all this and I took it."

Isaac shook his head. "That was a bad call, man."

Miles buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What were you thinking?" Isaac asked, dumbfounded.

Miles dropped his hands and shook his head. "I wasn't. Rory might've died and I just ... reacted."

"You can't make decisions like that," Zeke said. "Not on your own."

Miles looked down at the floor between his feet. "I'm slipping, you guys."

"You've been slipping for a while," Ethan said as he leaned forward. "Talk to us."

"The protection my father had when he came to town," Miles said. "I hired them to protect each of us."

What?

"You've been having us followed? For how long?" Ethan's tone turning harsh.

"A month," Miles said in a subdued voice.

"That guy who helped me at the bar ..." Ethan cursed under his breath.

"Did they have a choice?" Zeke asked carefully.

I turned to him. "What do you mean?"

Zeke gestured at Miles with a jerk of his chin. "His father had mob contacts. It's not unheard of that if one leader dies, another takes over and their allegiance shifts accordingly."

"Yes, they had a choice," Miles rasped.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Asher said, asking the question that had been weighing heavily on my mind too.

"Because I knew what Zeke would say," Miles murmured. "That you all would be angry and talk me out of it."

"You bet your ass I would," Zeke stated.

"Ease up, Zeke." I turned back to Miles. "Miles, what's going on?"

He lifted his head, his gaze finally meeting mine. "I keep watching the people around me suffer because of that woman. All this time, I've had the resources to take her out. And I didn't." He shook his head. "I couldn't sit back and do nothing about it anymore."

My heart ached for him as I gently rested a hand on his shoulder. "But instead of stopping, it made it worse."

He looked down at his hands. "I know."

"Decisions like this have to go to the committee. This is about everyone and the future of the supernatural world." I shook my head, at a complete loss for what else I could say to make him understand.

He nodded slowly.

His lost eyes met mine. "I only wanted to protect everyone."

I took his hand. "I know, but it's too big for us to do alone."

His fingers squeezed mine.

"This entire situation is out of our control," Zeke rasped. "It's scary as fuck."

Miles' gaze moved past me to rest on Zeke. "It is."

Zeke moved to my side.

Miles shook his head, his eyes filling. "I was so scared of what else they might do. Furious that they'd try to—" His grip tightened on my hand. "I can't lose you, any of you."

My eyes burned as I pulled him into my arms and held him tight.

"You're at a crossroads, Miles," Zeke stated. "You can't keep using your father's mob contacts. You can't keep going this way."

Miles held me even closer as he looked over my head. "I know, but ..."

"Miles," Zeke sighed. "It's a slippery slope. You had good intentions, but you didn't tell us."

Miles shook his head.

"Miles," I said softly as I pulled back.

Miles had his head bowed again. I had never seen him look so lost before. "I hate being followed," I whispered. "I hate it with a passion." I lifted his chin so that he could look at me face to face.

"I know," he said.

"After this is over, are you going to keep having us followed?" I asked, needing to know.

That stony mask slipped over his expression, telling me he had thought about it.

I shook my head. "That's what Zeke is talking about."

The color drained from his face as understanding dawned on him. "We don't want to lose you," I said. "And this scares me."

His hand moved to hold my face, his thumb stroking my cheekbone. "I just want everyone safe."

"And we will be once this is over," Isaac said. "But you have to make a choice. You can't be straddling two worlds like this, man."

Miles examined my face, then each of the guys before he seemed to come to a decision. He nodded. "After this is over, no more of my father's contacts."

I pulled him close and hugged him tightly as relief swamped me. He buried his face in my neck and took a deep breath.

"Thank God," Zeke said under his breath as he moved away.

Miles pulled back and turned to the others. "I'm sorry."

"We get it, man," Ethan said. "It's tempting to have that much power."

And we did understand. Each of us would do anything for any of the others. But there needed to be a line somewhere. Miles simply hadn't seen his.

* * *

Zeke

I FINISHED PUTTING up the last flyer in my stack. My exgirlfriend smiled down at me from the post I'd stapled her missing poster to. She was a vampire now. I stepped back and started back down the street.

Brody, my bodyguard for the outing, was a quiet, lumbering shadow beside me. The man wasn't much of a talker, and frankly, I didn't have it in me to try to make friendly chit-chat, especially since the committee seemed to agree that we couldn't do shit to help. I gritted my teeth as we walked down the sidewalk. Every post, every mailbox, had a flyer. I had peppered them all with posters today. And not one bit of it was ever going to help.

Riley wasn't human anymore. She wasn't going to come home.

Fuck, everything had changed over the last year. Ethan and Asher had been changed. Isaac could read auras or

emotions or something. And all of us were on the edge of a fight. "We could help, you know."

"You're kids," Brody reminded me.

"We're all eighteen."

"Barely."

I scoffed and shook my head. "We don't need babysitters."

"Bodyguards," he countered. "If Jadis gets her hands on any of you, she'd have the leverage to get what she wants from Lexie."

Yeah, yeah. I'd heard it all earlier. An idea skittered thought my mind for the millionth time that day. I ran my hand through my hair as I debated asking. Fuck it. "What if you made me a shifter?"

Brody came to a dead stop.

I turned around to face him.

He scowled at me. "What?"

"What if I was a shifter? Could I fight then?"

He looked at me as if I were insane. "Why would you want to be a shifter?"

I turned away from his gaze and clenched my fists. If I was ever going to get a chance, now was the time. "Because I want to protect my family." I turned back to him. "I'm not used to this, not being able to do anything. I hate it."

He sighed. "Being a shifter is more than protecting what you love. It changes everything about you."

"And I'm willing to do that for them." I met his gaze. "I can handle it."

Brody nodded. "I'm sure you can. However, I'm not going to turn you. And any alpha who would, you don't want."

"I could be an asset," I hissed.

"I know," he stated, his eyes sharp. "But I'm not going to change your entire life simply because you have some control issues." I growled at him before turning and walking away. The fucker didn't get it. I hated this. Hated watching Asher go on patrol at night with other shifters, not being able to protect him or the guys. It went against every instinct I had.

* * *

Lexie

Asher's bedroom in Miles' house was comfortable. I curled up against him, my head on his shoulder as he turned the movie on. He wrapped his other arm around me as he settled back against the headboard.

"Today was rough," I muttered.

He brushed his lips against my forehead. "But at least Miles is talking now."

"And he's agreed to stop using his father's contacts." I sunk against him in relief. "That's something at least."

He kissed my hair, making me smile. "Well, the day is over now."

"It's nice to get some alone time with you. How was your day?"

"Brody cornered me again." He sighed.

I looked up at him. "He's still on you about joining a pack?"

"Yeah." His thumb absently drew circles over the back of my hand.

"What are the benefits?"

He sighed again. "Protection, mentors, wolves to have at my back."

"What are the downsides?"

He squeezed me a little. "Brody says that in unhealthy packs they try to control your life, including what species you can or cannot date."

I looked up at him frowning. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "But supposedly, it doesn't happen in healthy packs."

"Does he know any healthy packs?" I asked, curious.

"There are several." He met my eyes. "In Seattle. Massachusetts."

"Oh." I tried to keep my voice even. "You'd have to move?"

He nodded. "But I'm not going to join."

"But it'd be good for you. Right?" I didn't want to hold him back from doing what was best for him.

"If I joined a pack, it'd be after I graduate," he said. "So, there's no point in worrying about it now."

"Well"—I tried to figure out how to say what I needed to say— "I'm worried you won't do what's best for you."

He let go of my hand and brushed his knuckles along my jaw. "I will, I promise. But I'm also going to think about how it would affect you all."

I shook my head. "You can't."

His eyes narrowed at me as his brow drew down. "Why not?"

"Because it's your life," I said softly. "You can't make the best decision for you if you bring us into that decision."

He pressed his forehead against mine. "I love you."

Light and warmth swept through me. "I love you too."

He pulled back and smiled. "Then trust me to make this decision?"

I chewed lightly on my lip as I thought about it. "Promise me it'll be what's best for you and what you want?"

His eyes twinkled with humor and understanding. "I promise."

"I trust you," I whispered as he leaned down to kiss me.

A knock sounded on the door.

We pulled away as Isaac poked his head in the door. "Hey, there you guys are." He opened the door and walked inside with Ethan following.

Zeke came in last with a large bowl of popcorn. "What are we watching?"

"Uh ... guys?" This was private time. What did they think they were doing?

Ethan plopped down in front of me and dropped back to lay his head against my knees.

Isaac sat in front of Asher. "It's boring without you guys around."

Zeke dropped onto the end of the bed and laid back. He left the bowl on his stomach as he tucked an arm under his head. "Godzilla. Nice."

"Which version?" Miles asked as he came in and sat on the floor at the foot of the bed.

I turned to the guys. "Guys, we were kinda ..."

Asher smiled and squeezed me softly. "It's okay."

I raised an eyebrow as the others began talking about the movie. "Are you sure?"

He nodded.

I smiled and rested my head against his shoulder and simply enjoyed being with everyone.

At least until my phone rang.

I checked the number then answered. "Hey, Rory."

"Hey, kid, listen ... I'm in the emergency room."

It took us longer than I'd like to gather our new bodyguards, stuff everyone into the cars and get across town.

But when we got there, we learned they'd only let me back there. The bodyguards didn't like it, but eventually agreed to wait. The guys took up spots in the waiting room with Lucy while I went through the door.

By the time I reached his curtained off section, Rory was sitting up in the bed and smiling at the nurse like nothing had happened.

"Dad, will you lay down," Tara snapped from her chair beside the gurney. "For crying out loud."

The nurse left the curtained off area, blushing.

Rory was chuckling as I walked in. "Oh, let me have a little fun, Tara. I could have died."

"Exactly, you could have died. You should be resting, not flirting with the nurses." Tara shoved her hair behind her ear roughly.

Rory was still smiling when he turned to me. "Hey, kid."

"What happened?" I asked as I took a good look at Rory. There were a few scratches here and there on his face, a bruise near his temple. Otherwise, he seemed fine.

"Someone ran me off the road. Hit and run." He shrugged as if it were no big deal. "The car rolled down an embankment, the doctor said I'm fine."

"The doctor is waiting on tests to say he's fine," Tara corrected. "Tell her the rest, Dad."

I turned to Rory. "What else happened?"

Rory shot a censuring look at Tara before turning back to me. "Someone set my car on fire before driving off. I distinctly remember hearing another language before it went up."

My belly turned to water and I felt sick. Stepping closer to the gurney, I lowered my voice. "You think it was witches?"

Rory shrugged. "The other cops think it was a Molotov cocktail, but I didn't smell any gasoline."

I cursed. Jadis had tried to kill Rory. Again. "You're leaving first thing in the morning."

Rory's smile faded as he nodded. "And I'm taking you with us."

I shook my head. "No, Rory. You're not."

The heart rate monitor started beeping rapidly as Rory and I locked eyes in a contest of wills. "This isn't a discussion."

"If I go, I'll make you and Tara a bigger target," I reminded him. "And that'll defeat the entire purpose of you leaving."

"You're leaving with us, and that's final," Rory ordered.

My heart ached. A part of me did want to go. Just leave and not come back until Uma and Brody took care of Jadis. But I couldn't, wouldn't leave the guys. And Jadis would only follow me. "I can't."

"Yes, you can," Rory decided. "This isn't a fight you're in, it's about you. You don't have to be here."

I rubbed my temples, trying to alleviate some of the tension that had been building. "Maybe. But I'm not leaving."

"Dad." Tara drew his attention. "She needs to stay here and deal with it. You can't make her—"

"The hell I can't," Rory roared. "You will get in that car tomorrow."

"No, I won't, Rory. I won't risk your lives any more than I already have." I met his gaze. "I can't leave."

"We'll talk about it at home," Rory grated harshly.

"Rory."

He held out his hand, trying to block out my words.

"If I go with you, I'll probably get you all killed." I shook my head, as my throat went dry. I had to make him understand. "I can't do that to you guys. I won't."

"Dad. Please, listen to her," Tara pleaded. "She knows the situation better than we do. If she says it's too dangerous, it's too dangerous."

A vein ticked in Rory's temple as his heart rate monitor continued to race. As he looked over at Tara, his eyes softened. "We can't just abandon her. Family doesn't do that."

"It's not abandoning me." I sat down at the end of his gurney. "It's about getting you guys out of harm's way."

"Lexie ..." Rory sighed and seemed to search for patience.

"Rory, I have to stay and see this to the end," I said. "I don't have a choice here."

"But you do, you can leave with us tomorrow," he countered.

"And probably get you killed," I all but hissed. "If we leave, and Jadis comes at us with everything she has, with Lucy we'd have a good chance against witches. But if there are shapeshifters, we'd be nothing but meat to them. An easy meal."

Rory flinched. "I'm not a civilian."

"But you don't have supernatural abilities, Rory," I reminded him. "Once you ran out of ammo you'd be done for. And these people, they won't just kill you, Rory. They'll torture you first to get to me. And not just you, but Tara too. Don't make loving me be the reason you die."

Rory was silent for several heartbeats before he sighed. "I want to speak to Uma and Brody. I want to know what their plan is to protect you."

"Okay."

His eyes were shadowed as they met mine. "I don't like this, Lexie."

My smile was humorless as I looked at him. "Neither do I." I gestured over my shoulder. "Let me go tell the guys you're okay." With a heavy heart, I turned and headed out to the emergency room waiting area to tell the guys.

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hat is going on down there?" Jake's voice made my head pound.

"Look, I'll explain everything when you come down." I sighed as I paced in front of Rory's house the next morning. The guys were helping pack the SUV with Rory and Tara's stuff when I got a call from Jake.

"Why can't you explain now?"

I grimaced. "Because we're trying to get everyone out of here and Rory suddenly has a bug up his ass over taking me too."

"Hurry up, Asher!" Zeke shouted from beside the SUV in the driveway. "They need to get on the road today."

"Tara's got like ten suitcases!" Asher called back from inside the house.

"And I have to have every one of them!" Tara shouted, laughter in her voice.

"So, Tara and Rory are leaving?" Jake asked in my ear.

I sighed. "Yeah, along with Maria and Jess."

"Where are they going?" Jake asked. "Are you going with them?"

"South, I think. I wasn't really asking. And no. Rory would have to get me in the car by force and he'd never do that. I'm just expecting a fight soon." I shrugged, even though he couldn't see it. "Just be careful, someone ran

Rory off the road last night and now we're worried about everyone we've been seen with."

"Oh my God. Yeah, I'll be sure to keep aware of my surroundings and all that. I'll let you go deal with that, then," he said. "Just, be careful. I expect the full story later."

"You got it, hon." I hung up the phone and rubbed my eyes. Turning, I started to go into the house only to freeze.

Stepping onto the front lawn was a woman about my height. Lackluster brown hair and sunken hazel eyes, my mother had obviously been pretty once, but years of drug and alcohol abuse had aged her horribly. The lines of Lisa Delaney's face deepened as she saw me. Her smile was yellow and crooked. "Baby girl."

"Why are you here?" I asked, my voice catching on the last word. A storm began to build inside me, jumbling everything up until it was all I could do to stand there facing her.

"Well"—she glanced at the door to Rory's house then back to me—"aren't you going to give me a hug?"

Every muscle in my body went rigid at the thought. "Why would I? Last time I saw you, you were beating me."

"Lexie?" Zeke came around the SUV to my side. "What's wrong?"

My mother looked up at him, drawing in a frustrated breath. "Who is this?"

"None of your business," Zeke told her before turning back to me. "Lexie?"

"She's my mother," I said in a clipped tone.

His hand went to my shoulder, urging me back several steps. "You don't have to talk to her."

Her nostrils flared and I watched her jaw sawing back and forth. "Excuse me, but this has nothing to do with you, young man, so you should just go on inside."

"Not happening," Zeke snapped at her before turning back to me. "What do you want?"

Still struggling, I looked up at him, wrapping my arms loosely around myself as I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and back again.

"Do you want me to go inside?" he tried.

I shook my head.

"Do you want me to get Miles? Or Isaac?"

Casting a quick glance back toward the house, I shook my head again.

"Take your time." His eyes were shadowed as they ran over my face.

I took a deep shuddering breath and let it back out slowly. What I wanted was the last thing my common sense said I needed. With everything going on—the war, Jadis, the threat to our lives—I wanted to walk into my mother's arms and have her tell me it was all going to be okay. A single tear slipped from the corner of my eye as I tried to convey that to Zeke without words. He got it.

"Whatever you want, Baby," he whispered as he reached up and wiped it away before anyone saw.

I turned back to her, emotions simmering below the surface. "What are you doing here?"

She visibly wilted, head bowing slightly. "The last time I saw you I was so out of it I didn't know what I was doing."

Was it real? Could I believe her?

"But I'm clean now and it'll never happen again," she assured me.

I wanted to believe her. Wanted it almost more than anything. She was my mother, and it still felt like I needed her to be okay. "That doesn't answer my question, Mom. What are you even doing here?"

Her face softened. "I came to town hoping you'd see me. I've missed you."

Questions swirled around in my mind, all fighting for supremacy, but there was one above all else that I needed to ask. "Why? Why did you beat the shit out of me?"

Her eyes narrowed as her lips pressed into a thin line. "It's in the past. Let's not go over it. This can be our fresh start, sweetheart."

I began shifting my weight between my feet again. "Why did you call me a demon child? You knew the truth."

Her gaze flicked between Zeke and me. "I really don't see why we need to go over it, Lexie. Let's move forward and rebuild what we have."

She just wanted to spackle over the past and pretend it never happened? I couldn't do that. Once I might have, but now? No. I wouldn't do that anymore. "If there is hope of any kind of relationship, we have to deal with the past."

She clenched her jaw as her body leaned toward me. "It was all the drugs. Can't we leave it at that?" she hissed.

"No." I wasn't going to back down. I couldn't. "I'm not going to just sweep all this under the rug and pretend it didn't happen. Not this time."

"Lexie!" Mom bit back. "Don't you dare talk to me that way, you know I don't like it."

"I don't give a fuck what you like or don't. I didn't like being called a demon child, but you did it. For years!" I bellowed, the words tasting bitter and acidic as I spat them at her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rory demanded as he strode out of the house and to my side.

Mom turned to Rory, squaring her shoulders as she lifted her chin defiantly at him. "I wanted to see my daughter."

Rory dropped his hands to his sides where they formed fists that were clenched so tightly his knuckles had already turned white. "We had a deal. You take the check, and you don't contact her," he growled.

My stomach tightened into a painful knot. "Check?"

Rory nodded. "She came to town three days ago to borrow money so she could set back up in Los Angeles."

Mom turned to me. She reached for my arm. "I also wanted to see you."

I stepped out of her reach and looked around me. The twins had hands on Maria as they watched from the front porch. Her jaw was clenched, her eyes hard as she watched my mother. Rory stood beside me, tense and on stand-by. Every one of them was waiting, waiting for me to make a decision.

All the anger and fear and anxiety drained from my body as realization dawned on me. She hadn't come for me. She'd just come for money. I shook my head. Suddenly everything I'd ever wanted to say to her surged forward but died on my lips as I remembered the beating, the pain. The things she said. My throat tightened as I opened my mouth to say everything I had ever wanted to say to her, only to find that the words were no longer there.

The woman standing across from me wouldn't care. Not like Maria cared about the twins, all of us really. Not like Sylvie cared about Zeke. Not like Rory cared. He had two daughters who weren't biologically his and it didn't bother him in the slightest. This woman wouldn't, couldn't, give me the answers I wanted. She'd never been able to. My questions simply didn't matter enough to her. I didn't matter to her. I looked back at the people who were now surrounding me. I mattered to them. And she wasn't worth my time, not anymore.

So, I did the hardest thing I had ever done in my life.

I let go of the hate, the fear, the pain that I'd been wrapping myself up in for so long. The knot in my stomach eased as my mind and emotions finally calmed. "Goodbye, Lisa. Don't ever contact me again."

Zeke squeezed my fingers.

She stood there blinking for several heartbeats, mouth hanging partly open. "Lexie ... I'm your mother. We're family."

"No. We really aren't," I said, making sure to enunciate every word for her before I turned and looked up at Rory. "Make her leave, please."

Zeke blocked her view of me as I walked back into the house, past the guys. The crowd split for me, each of them touching me as I passed into the house. The love that radiated from them warmed my heart. They were my family.

UMA, Brody and Rory ended up talking for a full hour before Rory finally agreed to let me stay. Though, to be honest, he didn't really have much of a choice and he knew it. Eventually it was time to say goodbye.

"That's everything," Rory announced.

My heart felt heavy as I got to my feet and followed them out to the car where Tara, Lucy and Jessica waited. "Are you sure?" I knew it was coming, but that didn't make it any easier.

Rory turned to me on the walkway, jaw clenched. "Yeah, kid. We need to get on the road and put as much distance between us and this town as possible."

Maria and the twins began talking animatedly in Spanish on the other side of the SUV. Asher met Jessica on the sidewalk a little way from the others.

I chewed the corner of my lower lip as I nodded. "I know." I just didn't think it would be this hard to say goodbye.

His face was stony as he took a breath. "It's not forever. Just until all of this is over."

I nodded again. "It's better this way."

"Safer," he agreed begrudgingly.

"Then you guys better get going," Isaac said from the other side of the car.

Maria looked at us over the hood of the SUV. "I hate this plan."

"We know," the twins said at once.

Maria's eyes filled as she pulled her sons into her arms and held them tight. "You two stay safe. Promise me?"

"We will," they answered in unison as they hugged her back.

Asher hugged Jess to him fiercely, still whispering to her. Rory turned to me. "I can stay a few days."

I shook my head immediately. "No, you're the best protection they have beside Lucy, Tank and Kita." The massive dogs were already inside the SUV, panting away between the seats. I still couldn't believe that Zeke was letting them out of his sight, let alone sending them with Rory and Maria.

"You handled your mom well," Rory said softly, pride in his voice.

I huffed. "I'm just barely avoiding becoming a blubbering mess at this point."

He grinned. "You hide it well."

I snorted.

"I'll see you later, kid."

My throat tightened.

Rory pulled me into a warm hug and held me tight. "No tears. You get this done and we'll come home."

I nodded and took a deep breath for strength before letting him go.

Rory gave me one last concerned fatherly look before moving towards the car that Miles had supplied. Maria wiped her face and came to me.

"Take care of them?" I said as I turned to Maria.

Maria wrapped me in a warm hug. "You know I will."

I hugged her back tightly. "I'm going to miss you guys."

"Stay safe, mija, okay?"

"That's the plan." My throat grew tighter as I fought not to cling to her. "Keep an eye behind you at all times." Maria squeezed me one more time before stepping back. "We will. Just get this finished."

I nodded. "As fast as I can."

Maria's eyes shone for a split second before she turned and went to the passenger side of the car.

I moved to the end of the walkway and waited with the twins.

Jessica began to get into the car and paused. She looked over her shoulder and met my gaze. "Keep them alive, okay?"

I nodded. With every breath in my body, they were going to come out of this safe.

Jess nodded once before climbing into the back seat.

Tara climbed into the seat beside Lucy and reached out to close the door only to stop. Her eyes locked with mine. "Be careful."

Stunned, I could barely nod before she was slamming the door shut.

We watched the vehicle until it turned the corner. And then some. They're going to be okay. Safer. And out of Jadis' reach. I hoped. It still didn't ease the ache in my chest.

Asher wrapped his arm around my waist and guided me past the bodyguards and back into the house where Uma and Brody waited.

The room was silent and heavy as we took in the empty house. At least until someone's phone rang.

Miles pulled out his cell phone and answered it. "Yes?" Everyone watched him as his brow drew down.

"Are you sure?" he asked whoever was on the phone. "Thanks." Miles hung up and turned to Uma and Brody. "I might have a location on Jadis."

Brody straightened to his full height. "How?"

"My people found some strange shipments of salt going to an address outside of town," Miles said.

Uma raised an eyebrow. "Salt? How is that unusual?"

"Large shipments. Over a thousand pounds of it," Miles stated.

Uma perked up at the news. "That's certainly strange enough to warrant some scouting, wouldn't you say, Brody?"

"I agree. It's strange." Brody nodded. "Text us the address and I'll get my shifters out there to scout out the property."

"And I'll send some witches with you." Uma turned with Brody and started for the door. "We'll leave your bodyguards outside," Uma called over her shoulder.

Heart heavy, I turned to Miles. "That tip was from your father's contacts, wasn't it?"

Miles looked down at the floor and nodded. "I'm going to give them up, after everything is dealt with."

I wanted to believe him, I truly did. But was he telling us the truth? Please, let that be the truth.

I was sitting in the living room of Miles' house, staring at the fire in the fireplace when Asher found me.

"You okay?" he asked as he sat down beside me on the couch.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. Miles fell back asleep, so that's good."

"That's not what I was asking," Asher pointed out.

I gave him a small sad smile. "I was just sitting here, waiting for Jake to show up."

He sighed. "Yeah, about Jake ..."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I think you need to tell him to stay away for a while," he said. "At least until everything is settled with Jadis."

"You too?"

He nodded.

"I was thinking the same thing." I shifted on the couch so that my back was against the arm and slid my feet under his leg.

Asher reached over and took the throw off the back of the couch then covered me with it. I didn't know why, but I couldn't seem to get warm today. Autumn was in full force, but it wasn't that kind of cold. "It'd be safer for him."

I pulled the blanket up to my chest and rested my head against the back of the couch. "I know. I was going to talk to him about it."

"I'm sorry, Ally," he said softly.

I half shrugged. "It's only until this is over."

He snorted. "You know, we keep saying that. And we have no idea when it'll be over."

"Yeah, I can barely keep up as it is. Especially not with date nights."

His hand slipped up to rest on the outside of my knee. "You're doing good, honey."

"Thanks."

We stayed like for several heartbeats.

His face grew somber. "I don't know what to talk about right now."

My lips twitched. "Do we have to talk?"

He chuckled. His eyes lighting up. "You sound like Zeke."

I guess I did. "There's just never any time to just, be. You know?"

He nodded as he squeezed my knee. "I know."

My feet ended up in his lap, his hands rubbing the arch of my foot as we sat looking at the fire in the fireplace. It was nice. Peaceful. Exactly what we needed.

By the time there was a knock on the door, I felt ready to talk to Jake.

Asher got to his feet and answered the door.

Jake walked in a few seconds later. Jake was a good-looking guy, his short-styled blond hair streaked with

lighter blond highlights.

A polite expression crossed his face, but it never reached his eyes. "What happened?"

I sighed. "Someone tried to kill Rory."

The blood drained from his face. "What?"

I nodded, tucking my feet back under my blanket. "Rory was run off the road and had his car set on fire."

"But he's okay. Right?"

"Yeah." The ache in my chest easing slightly.

He nodded, then pointed out the large front window. "Why are there people practicing fighting out on the lawn?" "Shapeshifter practice."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh, okay. Shapeshifters. Right."

Jake was still getting used to the new world we had introduced him to. It wasn't exactly easy to just think in supernatural terms.

Jake leaned towards me. "Are you really okay? That can't be it?"

I shook my head and opened my mouth. I never even meant to, but I found myself pouring my heart out to Jake. It was easier than talking to the guys right now. They were just as in this as I was. They were facing torture or death. Jake wasn't. I could unload it all without guilt. I spoke about everything bothering me. Miles, the funeral coming up, my mother, the pressure of dating all the guys. All of it. In the end, I scrubbed my hands down my face. "Sorry to unload like this."

He gave me a soft smile. "It's okay, we're friends, right?"

"I just, I don't want to burden the guys when they're stressed out too."

He narrowed his eyes on mine. "But that's what they're here for. To support you, and you them."

"Yeah, I know." I wiped my face again.

"Try talking to them," he said as he squeezed my hand. "You'll feel better."

I nodded. "I am. I just lost it a little."

The warmth in his eyes faded. "So, the fight is still going?"

I nodded. "How is Dylan's dad?"

"He's lost even more weight." Jake sighed. "They're talking of putting him on hospice care and adding a feeding tube."

A sigh escaped my lips. "I'm sorry, Jake."

His expression darkened. "Isn't there something you can do? A spell? Anything?"

I shook my head. "I can't heal people. I don't even think the witches can. I'm sorry."

He swallowed hard and looked at the fire. "Yeah, everyone's sorry."

He turned back to me, that polite expression plastered to his face once more. "It sucks, but we'll manage. We always do."

"I would help if I could," I said softly.

He winked. "I know, sweetie."

I sighed.

His eyes narrowed at me. "Lexie ..."

"Riley got taken because of me," I reminded him. "She's now been converted into a vampire. Our families are hopefully out of the line of fire, but I need you to stay away from here until this is over. I won't fuck up your life too."

His expression darkened as leaned towards me. "Do you guys have any kind of plan to get out of this yet?"

I shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know."

He nodded. "You really think I need to stay away?"

My throat tightened. "It sucks, but it's what's best for you."

He seemed to struggle with something before he scooted closer and I tugged him into a hug.

"You're probably right," he murmured.

My eyes stung as he squeezed me.

"Be safe, okay?"

"As long as you do," I whispered.

"I will." He let me go, got to his feet. He cleared his throat as he looked down at the wooden floor before turning and walking away.

I watched as he left the living room, my heart heavy. It was what was best for him. Safer. Lately, safer always seemed to be away from me. I closed my eyes and let out a slow, deep breath. It's not me, it's Jadis. It's not me, it's Jadis. I'm not the one making this situation, only responding to it.

I was still sitting there fifteen minutes later when the front door opened and closed.

"Evelyn's help should be here tonight." Uma strolled into the room from the foyer. "And—what's happened?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, I just told a friend to stay away from us until this is over."

"Oh, good idea." Uma sat gracefully onto the other couch.

"Now, what's this about backup?" I asked. I didn't remember talking about it.

"While you were at the hospital I called Evelyn. She's sending us some help. To keep you safe," Uma explained as she crossed her legs sideways. "She'll be here tonight."

I nodded, deciding I didn't want to know the details. "And what do we do in the meantime?"

"Well, there's nothing to do now but wait. And have you practice."

"Zombie raising now?" My eyebrows went up.

She shook her head. "Magic practice."

I groaned. "I just sent my family away so they don't get killed, doesn't that get me a day off?"

"No, young lady, it doesn't." She got to her feet. "Come on."

Cursing under my breath, I shoved the blanket back and followed her down to the basement.

"Do you have your stone?" Uma led me into a barren warded room that the witches used for practice. A protective circle was painted on the cement floor.

"Always."

Uma sat inside of it on one side. "Good."

I sat on the other. "So, what are we working on today?"

"Control," Uma stated.

I sighed. "Maybe I just shouldn't do magic?"

Uma met my gaze. "Do you really want to not be able to protect your men? Yourself?"

I growled. She had a point. "Okay, fine."

I didn't miss the smirk that flitted across her face. "I thought so." She settled herself a bit more. "Close your eyes and find your center without dropping into it."

I cursed under my breath as I closed my eyes. Deep breaths in, and slow breaths out. I had enough practice finding my center without needing much time. When I was at that place that was me, right before dropping in, I held myself in that spot before memories surged.

"Here."

"Good job," she said. "This is what we call your grounded state. Your connected state to who you are. This is where all magic is done for humans. This is your workspace."

"Workspace?"

"This is where the energy from ley lines or stones goes to. You change it through your channels for magic, you make it yours. Then your will is what controls it. Do you understand?"

"Channels are a funnel for energy, turning it into stuff I can use," I summed up.

"And your will is the control," she confirmed. "Now, staying in that state, take out your stone. It's time to learn how to use that energy."

I pulled the small orange stone out of my pocket and palmed it. Energy ran up my arm, raising the hairs.

"Drop your barriers a tiny bit," she instructed. "Let the energy in."

The energy was hot as it moved through me to my center, like a whirlpool that didn't drain.

"That's enough," she said. "Close your barrier."

I did as she said.

"Now, this is the tricky part. You need to visualize what you want. You need to feel it, smell it. Will it to exist."

"What do you want me to make?" I asked, still feeling that whirlpool of energy as it turned from orange to gold.

"We'll start easy with ice," she said. "I want you to make a patch of ice on the cement."

Keeping my eyes closed, I placed my fingertips on the cold floor. I pictured ice. The crisp bite of it on the air, the feel of that slickness under my fingertips. The surface of a frozen lake. That vortex of energy began to move through me to my fingertips. The stinging, dry feel of ice appeared beneath them. Keeping my eyes closed, I focused on the energy moving through me.

"Good," she said in a calm voice. "Now, stop the flow."

"How?" I asked.

"Stop picturing ice and let your mind go back to that center state," she said.

But the energy wanted to go out. It didn't belong in me. A surge of energy moved up my arm as I tried to stop thinking of the cold. Of my breath as it fogged when I exhaled, the snow falling from the sky. It wanted to be what I saw. The power shook me through and through as I fought to break my mind free.

"Lexie, you need to stop," she ordered. "Open your eyes."

I did to find a frost covered Uma. Snow fell between us to the ice-covered floor. The entire circle was frozen, right up to the line.

"The energy," I rasped. "It won't stop. It wants out."

Uma's gaze narrowed. "Send it back into the stone, Lexie."

I stared at the stone and focused with everything I was. That vortex inside me stopped spinning. It shot down my arm in a painful arc. "Fuck!" I dropped the stone and held my hand.

A small red mark stained the middle of my palm. The snow stopped falling as Uma took my hand and examined it. When she looked up, there were worry lines around her eyes. "From now on, we're working with your eyes open."

I swallowed hard. "I think that's a good idea."

"You have lots of power and little control." Uma dropped my hand.

"I noticed." My breath finally stopped fogging.

Uma sighed. "That's not good. We have a much longer road ahead of us than I imagined."

My gaze snapped to hers. "What? Why?"

"If this is you at just learning—" She shook her head. "You need to practice for hours at a time."

"Seriously?" All day practicing?

She nodded. "Do you understand how dangerous you are right now? Your abilities have grown. A bad dream, a surprise, stress, even anger—any of these could cause you to instinctively react."

"And hurt people." I nodded. "I get it."

"Now, put the stone away." She shifted a little more to get comfortable on the hard floor. "I want to teach you how to pull energy from the environment. It's slower and will be sufficient for control practice."

I tucked the stone into my front pocket.

"Go back to your workspace."

I dropped down to that quiet, still part of me again.

"Now, crack your barrier."

Again, I did as I was told, this time keeping my eyes open.

"Feel the energy around you. The earth beneath you, solid and strong," she said.

I placed my hand on the floor and focused on the feeling of solid support. My energy trickled down into the cement and sought something below that. The soil. Green light danced into my mind. "I feel it."

"Now, pull on that energy."

I gave it a small tug. A trickle of green energy moved up through the cement and to my fingertips. Only a little. Not nearly as much as the stone. Not nearly enough to do anything with. Along my skin, the air stirred. Energy crackled along the back of my hand. There was more around me than below me. I turned my wrist.

"Lexie, what are you doing?"

"The air ..." I whispered as the feel of it increased on my fingertips. "It's full of energy."

"Lexie."

I pulled from the air. That energy sizzled up my arm and filled the space inside me. Goosebumps rose along my skin as the temperature dropped. It was the strangest feeling. Every inch of exposed skin tingled and sang with energy.

"Lexie, break off from it," she ordered.

I slowly raised my barriers.

Worry lines had appeared on her face again. "How did you pull from the air?"

I shrugged. "The same way I did from the earth."

She shook her head. "You shouldn't be able to do that. No one can pull energy from the air except—"

"Except?"

"Ghosts," she stated. "Ghosts pull energy from the air."

Dread reared up to claw my chest. "What does that mean?"

She eyed me. "If it is your necromancy, then you could be a lot more than we ever thought."

I swallowed hard. "Again, what does that mean?"

She met my gaze. "You could be even stronger than you are now."

"Is that good or bad?" I asked softly.

Her brows knit together, the worry plain on her face. "I honestly don't know."

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CHAPTER 8

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ad pulled into a gas station after being on the road for hours. Needing to pee, I climbed over a sleeping Tank and opened the door as soon as the SUV came to a full stop, then ran for the station, racing towards the restroom sign.

Thankfully, it was clean.

On my way out, I made a point to stop and grab a packet of licorice. The gas station attendant took my money without a word. His gaze was fixed on a small old VCR television set that was playing a black and white movie on the back counter. I stepped out of the store just as another SUV pulled into a spot in front of our car at the pumps. Something about it had me hurrying back to Dad's side as he filled the tank.

No one got out of the other vehicle.

"Get in the car," Dad ordered.

My heart jumped as I hurried to do what he said, only for another car to pull in behind us. "Dad."

"We've got another one," Maria announced as she got out, her hand under her jacket at her waistband. "Get in the car, Tara."

I hurried into the vehicle, slammed the door, and hit the lock while Maria moved to the front of the car and Dad moved to the back of the car. "What the hell is going on?"

Tank and Kita were suddenly awake and moving. Tank moved between me and the door while Kita moved to Jess's side. Both of their ears were up, their hair on end.

"We were followed." Lucy shifted, pulling out several vials of colored liquid. "Here, if you get grabbed, break it on their skin." She forced one into each of our hands as she watched the windows.

I shared a look with Jess. Her eyes were wide, her face pale, but the way she moved to Kita's side let me know she was ready for whatever came next. Okay. Okay. I turned to my own door and waited as no one got out of the car in front of us. How the hell did they find us? We'd been driving all day. Dad used an old paper map, not even turning on the GPS!

My heart hammered in my chest as I waited in the tense silence.

"Oh, shit." Lucy's voice dragged my attention to the front of the car.

The SUV doors opened. Maria stood firm, pushing back her jacket and showing the sidearm.

Two women emerged, standing in their doors.

"That won't protect you," one announced, her voice muffled through the glass.

Maria pulled her sidearm. My heart leaped into my throat. I reached over and clung to Lucy's hand.

Maria aimed at the woman. "Would runed bullets? 'Cause, that's what Lexie gave us."

The witch's smile faded, her hand turning over palm up.

The gas attendant stepped out of the gas station door and lit up a cigarette. Maria tucked the gun back down by her thigh, hiding it from the worker's sight. The witches dropped their hands to their sides.

The silence stretched impossibly long as the two groups faced off with each other, neither advancing nor retreating.

The gas nozzle popped.

There was the sound of the nozzle being taken out. Dad was soon at the driver's door. "Maria."

Maria kept her firearm out as she climbed back into the car. Dad jumped the curb and squealed out of the gas station.

"How'd they find us?" Maria asked as she looked out the window. "They're following!"

"I don't know. They shouldn't have been able to," Dad snapped as he pulled out his phone. "We're going to need some help."

* * *

Lexie

I was walking down the long hallway in the basement when Isaac came down the stairs and spotted me.

"Hey, Red. I was looking for you." His grin faded once he saw my face. "What's wrong?"

"I just finished practice with Uma," I said.

His brows drew down. "How'd it go?"

I shrugged. "I ... I don't really know."

He took my hand and pulled me closer. "What happened?"

"Apparently, I have some weird ghost-like powers." I looked up at him. "Why can't I be normal?"

"What's a normal necro like?" He grinned.

I shrugged.

"Because then you wouldn't be you." He bent down and brushed his lips against my cheek. "And I love you."

"I love you too."

He took my hand. "I have a surprise for you, but now I'm not so sure it's the right time."

I squeezed his hand and pushed everything else back. "A surprise?"

He grinned. "Come on."

He led me to another door in the basement and opened it. Flickering candlelight filled the small room. A blanket was spread out over the cement floor with an actual real picnic basket on top of it.

I looked up at him, smiling. "Cookie Monster."

A blush rose up his neck as he shifted. "I thought we could have a proper date for once."

I went to my toes and kissed him gently. "You're the sweetest boyfriend a girl could have."

He raised an eyebrow at that. "You have five."

I shrugged as I walked into the room. "And right now, you're the sweetest."

I sank down onto the thick blanket that was somewhat familiar. It had to be one of the ones from the linen closet.

Isaac sat across from me and opened up the basket. "So, it's a changing lineup?"

"It changes day to day," I teased.

Isaac pulled out two Tupperware boxes and handed me one. I opened it to find fried chicken, pasta salad, and carrots. Wait a minute. "Did you cook?"

He scoffed. "No way. I was going to do sandwiches but then Asher caught me and insisted on making the food."

Ah. That did sound like Asher. "I love it, Isaac. Thank you."

He busied himself opening a bottle of sparkling cider. "We've all noticed how overwhelmed you've been, so I just thought some quiet time would be nice."

I smiled. "And the candles?"

His face turned red. "Don't pick at it, Red."

I chuckled as he poured cider into a champagne flute then handed it to me. I took a sip and enjoyed the crisp apple on my tongue. "So, how are you doing?"

"Don't do that." He put the lid back on the bottle before turning to me. "You don't need to check on me."

I raised an eyebrow. "You sound like Ethan."

He shrugged. "He warned me you might try something like this."

I frowned. "I guess I have been doing that a lot lately."

"We've noticed." He handed me a fork.

"I want to make sure I'm doing my part as your girlfriend." I took a bite of my pasta salad. Hmm. Delicious, as always.

"You do your part as my girlfriend," he said after he swallowed a bite of chicken. "You do more. That's why this date is about you."

"About me?"

He nodded. "Yeah, this is your quiet, mellow time. I don't want you to think about Jadis, or your powers training. I want you to just enjoy being with me and having a meal."

A slow smile spread across my face at his thoughtfulness. "Thanks, Cookie Monster."

He met my gaze. "You're welcome. Now eat."

We passed the next hour in comfortable conversation. We talked about everything and anything except the big stressors in our lives. He even rubbed the tension out of my shoulders while we talked. It was a great hour that I knew I'd always remember.

All of it ended when shouts erupted upstairs. We looked at each other, then got to our feet and hauled ass up the basement steps. Asher beat us to the living room by seconds.

Brody was kneeling by the couch with several other beaten and bloody werewolves.

"What happened?" Asher asked as he carried a first aid kit to the bleeding werewolf on the couch.

"We had a run-in with Jadis' witches." Brody cursed as he held his hand over a bleeding wound. "They were using telekinetic spells."

"They threw us around like rag dolls," a man spoke up in a groan.

"What the hell were they on that they got that kind of power?" Brody muttered under his breath.

Not knowing what else to do, I went into the kitchen. After pulling out several bags of frozen veggies, I passed them out among the group. Several put them on their ribs, a couple put them on their faces and shoulders. The group was beat up, that's for sure, but one thing was obvious and unanimous among them. Jadis had won that fight. How many more would she win before this was over?

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ow is this Jade supposed to get here?" I asked Uma. Everyone was standing in the backyard beyond the pool, looking out over the large lawn behind the house.

"You'll see." Uma gave me a knowing grin as she turned back to look out into the woods.

"I've got ten on skydiving in," Isaac announced.

"Through the woods," Zeke countered.

"There aren't any roads back there," Isaac pointed out.

"There's always roads somewhere." Zeke shrugged.

"I think she's in a prop plane and flying in," Ethan said. "The lawn is freaking big enough."

I shook my head as they continued to theorize and take bets. I simply watched the evening sky and waited.

Eventually, something caught my eye. A figure I couldn't quite grasp. Whatever it was, it was large, had wings, and was definitely not a plane.

"Holy shit." Ethan shifted, moving himself a little in front of me. "Uh, does anyone else see that?"

"Yeah," the guys answered in unison.

The thing was massive. Its wingspan had to be close to a football field wide.

"That's a dragon." Isaac gaped as the large creature turned in the air.

"Dragons are real," Ethan said, stunned. "Dragons are real. Dragons are real."

I simply stared in awe.

The long serpent-like body was covered in gleaming dark scales. Only, something made the dark scales stand out in the sky. An edge of neon green lined each and every scale along the enormous body. Neon green ridges ran from the back of its head to the tip of its long tail. Long black talons shone on its four feet while large bat-like wings flapped in the fading light.

The creature moved towards the grass to land. Everyone backed up several feet, but before it even touched the grass the body went up in smoke and green flames. The scent of burning leaves filled the air. Everyone stepped back as a form dropped out of the smoke to land on the grass in a crouch.

Heart slamming, I stared as the woman got to her feet.

She was a small Asian woman in black leather pants and vest. High cheek bones highlighted her pretty, triangular face. Her jet-black hair was streaked with a bright green that matched her bright eyes. She walked toward us with a grin. "So, you're the troublemakers."

"You're Jade, I take it?" Uma smiled. "It's nice to meet you."

The woman eyed Uma. "You're a witch."

Uma smiled with patience. "Yes."

Jade nodded as if storing the information away for later and turned to me. "You must be the necromancer."

I nodded, still flabbergasted. "You're a dragon."

She grinned, showing her sharp teeth. "Good eye." She turned to Asher. "Wolf." Then she turned to Ethan. "You, I didn't expect."

My heart slammed as Ethan straightened to his full height. "You know what I am?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Of course. Don't you?"

"He was abducted and changed," Uma explained as she moved behind Ethan. "He's only just started noticing differences in the last few months."

Jade eyed Ethan with a critical eye. "Yes, I know what you are."

"Which is?" I asked, hopeful.

Ethan's hand found mine as Jade turned to me and seemed to size me up.

"Jade?" Uma asked.

The dragon shook her head. "Sorry, I was just wondering what you are to each other." Jade turned to Uma. "What did you want to know?"

"What am I?" Ethan asked softly, his grip tightening on my hand.

Those piercing green eyes moved back to Ethan. "You're a phoenix."

She had answered!

"A phoenix?" Ethan asked.

"A rare species to encounter, even for the length of time I've been around, and supposedly extinct now." She turned to Uma. "How did he change?"

"You'd have to ask his captors," Uma said. "No one knows what they did, only the results."

"Phoenix," Ethan muttered under his breath, a little put out. "Couldn't be a dragon."

I bit back a grin as Jade turned back to him.

"Phoenixes were warriors. They were difficult to kill, so they were the perfect fighters that improved over the centuries as they gained experience throughout their lives." She looked over our heads to the house. "Do you have any food here?"

Food?

Jade walked past us and towards the house. Everyone turned and scrambled to follow.

"So, he can never die?" Isaac asked as we tried to keep up.

"I didn't say that," she sent over her shoulder as she opened the back door. "Everything can die, it just takes a lot more to kill him."

"Like what?" Ethan followed her inside and we trailed after him.

Jade began rummaging through the kitchen cabinets. "Being crushed under a landslide would be a slow and painful way to do it. However, the main cause of their extinction was the centuries long hunts that witches held. Chopping the bodies of the phoenix up and keeping them separate would stop them from being able to reform." She turned to us, a box of crackers in her hand. "Do you have any meat? I need to eat after flying such a distance."

Asher opened the fridge. "I'll make dinner while you answer questions."

She stood near the counter and started nibbling on crackers. "A large portion. According to Zahur, I burn a lot of calories." She seemed to remember something. "Please."

Asher went about making pork chops while we focused on her.

"So, being crushed can kill me?" Ethan asked, his shoulders straightening.

She nodded. "Yes, as long as your body stays crushed. If the pressure is released, you'd just heal again. As I said, dismemberment, placing your body parts in mirror-lined boxes and sunk in different bodies of water is the only sure way of doing the job."

I simply stared, fascinated, as the woman finished off a roll of crackers and pulled out another one.

"What about fire?" Zeke asked.

She shook her head. "Fire would help him heal. It's part of a phoenix's ability. Get a stab wound, cauterize it and you'll scar in a few hours or

so. A lot of phoenixes were burned as witches over the centuries. It wasn't remarkably effective." She frowned down at the crackers then moved over to peek around Asher's shoulder. "Are you finished?"

Asher sighed as he set the meat on the grill. "Not yet, it's got to cook."

She saw the meat on the grill and frowned. "That's not enough."

"It's ten pork chops." Asher glanced back at her.

She looked up at him with an oddly innocent face and nodded. "Yes, and it's not enough. Not if you people want to eat as well."

Asher's eyebrows went up. "Okay, then the pork chops are for you and I'll make something else for the others."

Her smile was brilliant as she thanked him before returning to her crackers and turning back to us. "What were we talking about?"

"How I can die," Ethan said, his voice strained.

Jade nodded. "Of course. So, punctures are bad but you're a fast healer so it's not too bad if you do get stabbed. Your subcutaneous scales just can't protect against it, but they can against lacerations. Phoenixes were mostly revered."

"What?" I shook my head not following. "If they were so revered, why were they hunted into extinction?"

She nodded and swallowed her bite as the scent of cooking pork filled the kitchen. "Witches mistook them for dragons. Mostly in what is now Asia, since that's where we're from, but that was at least a millennia ago."

"I thought dragons were a symbol of protection?" Ethan said.

"That came later," she said around a cracker. "When we became extremely rare, they realized how much we protected our chosen villages. Before that, they wanted us dead."

"How did you survive?" Isaac asked as he leaned against the breakfast counter.

"I hid. Stayed in human form, moved from village to village. Then, when the hunts finally stopped, I went into hibernation." Her chewing slowed. "If I don't fly or shift humans don't really notice me. Simple."

Simple, right. "Okay, so, can Ethan shift?"

Asher began to plate her pork chops.

She shook her head as her attention went completely to the plate in Asher's hands. "Since he wasn't born a phoenix, I highly doubt it. But he should have their practically immortal lifespans."

Asher got a knife and fork then delivered the plate to Jade. "Here you go."

"Thank you." She took the plate, set it on the kitchen's breakfast bar, and began to shovel down food. I don't think she even paused to breathe.

I shared a look with Asher as everyone watched in odd fascination as the tiny woman scarfed down the food.

Ethan sighed.

"What's wrong?" I whispered as my hand moved to his back.

He shook his head and met my gaze. "For a minute there, I thought I was a dragon."

I fought back the smile. "And you're disappointed?"

He turned to Jade. "How sure are you that I'll have their lifespans?"

She tilted her head to the side and thought about it. "Completely. Hybrid or not."

Isaac grinned. "That's fucking awesome."

Ethan turned to Isaac as he began to spin his rings. "Yeah, sure. Until you guys start dying around me."

Jade paused her eating, looking between all of us. One day, Ethan would be alone.

"Ethan ..." I didn't know what to say.

He shook his head and walked out of the kitchen.

"Was it something I said?" Jade asked before taking another enormous bite.

"It wasn't you," Uma explained.

Jade nodded then turned to me. "Who is this girl you keep seeing?"

The change of topic was jarring and caught me completely off guard. "Um, I don't know. It started with dreams."

"Then she showed up in our bedroom," Miles added. "And disappeared."

"Did she say anything?" Jade asked before she popped another piece of meat into her mouth.

"Just to 'Make it stop.'" I shook my head, still at a loss.

"And she's not a ghost?" Jade asked.

"No, she wasn't." Of that I was certain.

Jade frowned. "She might be astral projecting her spirit, though she'd have to be extremely strong to do it."

"That was my assessment," Uma said. "She seems to need help."

Jade's gaze focused on me. "What else do you remember?"

I tried to think of anything that might help but I had almost nothing. "She was one of the people they experimented on in New Orleans."

"Evelyn filled me in on New Orleans," Jade said. "The girl is probably still imprisoned by them."

Uma nodded. "We need to rescue her."

"Ask her where she is next time you see her," Jade told me before turning to Uma. "What are your forces like here?"

As the conversation around me shifted, I couldn't help the worry for Ethan that weighed on my mind, making it impossible to focus on what Uma and Jade were talking about. I quietly left the kitchen and looked for him.

I found him in his room, sitting on the side of the bed, his gaze on the floor.

"Snoopy." I sat beside him. What could I say?

"I'll be alone," he rasped as his eyes filled. "My biggest

I took his hand. "I know."

He shook his head. "I don't know if I can do that, Lexie."

"We don't know for sure," I tried. "You aren't born to it, so you can't shift and maybe you won't ..."

He shook his head. "She said she was sure."

A painful pressure began to build in my chest. What could I do about it? A thought came to me, the decision made in an instant out of pure emotion. "You won't be alone."

He turned to me. "Of course I will."

I shook my head and smiled. "If it looks like you aren't going to age and die with us, I'll become a Reaper."

His eyes rounded in surprise.

"They live forever, so you won't be alone," I thought out loud.

"You'd do that?" he whispered. "Not move on?"

I smiled. "For you? Always."

His lips crushed mine in a breath stealing kiss. His hand moved to my hair and pulled my head back to give him more access. Love and warmth rose inside me, washing everything else away as his teeth nipped my bottom lip. I met him stroke for stroke, feeling his hard body against mine. His arm crushed me to his chest as a firestorm of need shook me to my core.

He pulled away and met my eyes with a hunger burning in his. "I need you, to feel you."

Heart pounding, heat crackled over me, his smokey voice soaking my panties. I nodded.

His mouth took mine again as he pulled me to my feet. His hand in my hair turned me toward the edge of the bed, his hard body pressing against me from behind. His teeth brushed my earlobe. "Do you trust me?"

With hunger burning through me, I nodded.

"You can always say stop," he whispered before reaching around to my jeans. Before I knew it, I was bent over the edge of the bed with my bare ass in the air. I began to shake as his finger slipped between my folds. "Mmm, perfect."

I was already almost there from his grip on me. His pants fluttered against my ass as he freed himself.

"Condom," I rasped.

"Stay there," he ordered as he let me go. I relaxed into the bed, lowering my upper body to the comforter.

My breathing grew heavier, my shaking worse as he pulled away from me and rummaged in a drawer. Then he was back, his hand moving around my hip to touch me. He stroked my clit with sure fingers, making me moan into the cover.

"Shh, Beautiful," he warned. "Don't make any loud noises, or I'll stop."

I bit my lower lip as he pressed against my aching center from behind. "Please don't stop."

"Then stay quiet," he ordered.

He surged inside me in one long stroke, hitting every nerve ending on the way. I gasped at the fullness deep within me, stretching me, driving every thought from my mind.

"Shit, you feel so good." He pulled out of me only to slide home again. His fingers stroked me in time to his slow thrusts. Lightning shot down my nerves. I shook around him and the heavy feeling inside me. My hands twisted in the covers as he stroked me gently, hurtling me towards that edge.

"Don't stop," I gasped. "Please ..."

His fingers stroked me again and I shattered. I buried my face in the comforter and tried not to cry out as my legs gave out, dropping me to the bed. My teeth chattered as I fell into bliss. His hand left me and moved to my hips. His thrusts grew harder, pounding me into the bed until I didn't know where I was, or who. His hand buried in the back of my hair and pulled, forcing me to support my upper body against the delicious sensation along my scalp.

Every surge of his hips sent more and more heat through me, more sensation. He was so fucking deep. "Ethan..."

His breathing grew rougher, his hips more desperate. His grip on me tightened as his body became rigid against mine. He took a deep, shaking breath.

I was still floating in a sea of sensation when he pulled out of me. I shivered. God, even that felt good.

He lay down beside me, his hand running up and down my back. "Beautiful, you okay?"

I nodded with my eyes still closed, enjoying the feel of his touch.

"You need to tell me," he whispered, his voice lighter than before.

"Good. So good," I muttered as something else occurred to me. "Did I stay quiet?"

He chuckled. "As quiet as I think you could."

I nodded. "Good." I shivered as an aftershock went through me.

He reached down and pulled the blanket over to cover me.

Every bone in my body seemed to have disappeared. "I think I needed that."

"Me too." He moved closer and wrapped around me. He pressed kisses to my neck and shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too," I mumbled as my legs began to feel steadier. "We need to go back for dinner."

"Let's miss it," he whispered.

I rolled to my side, scooted into his arms and simply enjoyed the moment. His lips brushed my skin as he whispered in Spanish, I didn't understand the words, but

his soft tone told me it didn't matter. I melted there, surrounded by love.

But, eventually, we did need to head back downstairs. We managed to pry ourselves from the bed, straightened our clothes, and slipped out into the hallway.

We were halfway to the stairs when Zeke appeared at the top. His jaw was clenched as he walked past us. Something was wrong. I turned to Ethan. He simply gave me a knowing smile and headed for the stairs.

I started back for Zeke. "Zeke?"

"Not now, Lexie," he said as he went into his bedroom.

I hurried and caught the door before it swung closed and slipped into his room. "Zeke? What's wrong?"

"Asher went for a run." Zeke turned back to me, his face lined with strain. "You and Ethan ... happened. Didn't you?"

I stopped in my tracks, stunned. "Uh ..."

He shook his head, his eyes filling with longing. "I can't touch you."

My jaw went slack at his words. "What?"

He clenched his fists and looked at the door over my head. "I can't touch you. Be with you."

"Zeke ..." My chest burned deeply. "That doesn't matter to me."

"You want more from me. I can feel it when we're close." Zeke's gaze met mine. Shadows swirled in the depths. "I can't give that to you."

"Tough Guy, I love you." I shrugged. "And yeah, I want to be close, but that doesn't mean I'm trying to pressure you into anything."

"But you need it." He turned away from me and moved to the window. "You need to be touched and I can't do that for you."

I didn't know what to say as I moved to his side and looked out at the backyard with him. "I can wait, Zeke."

He swallowed hard enough that I could hear him. "You don't have to. Not with the others."

"So? They aren't you." I looked up at him. "Tough Guy?"

"I'm too fucked up, too broken." His voice cracked before he met my gaze. "I can't be what you need."

"What I need?" I blinked up at him. "That's you. All that you are. The grumpy pain in the ass to the sweet, overprotective guy I love. I love every side of you."

"And the side that can't touch you?" Zeke rasped. "The side that never will."

Never will? "I can wait."

"And what if that day never comes?" he bit out between his teeth.

Shit. Did he really think that he'd never be able to touch me? Could I hold back that long with Zeke? The answer was as clear as day to me, but I had to make him see, make him understand. "What if the day never came where you could hold me again?"

"What?"

"What if I never healed enough from Ordin to hug you again?" My own voice cracked. "What if you couldn't hold me? Would you have walked away then?"

He shook his head, his brows drawn together. "I would have waited forever."

His calloused fingers moved to my face but stopped just before he touched me. I reached up and pressed his warm hand against my cheek. "And so will I."

He shook his head. "Baby, I don't know if I ever will."

"Then I'll be happy with just being near to you."

"Really?" He stroked my cheekbone with his thumb. "Could you really be happy like that?"

Love filled my heart as I nodded. "Just don't give up on us, okay?"

He bent down and lifted me into his arms. I wrapped my arms around his neck as his hand cradled my butt. I buried my nose in his neck and took a deep breath of engine grease. I held him and he held me. As long as we had each other, we would be okay.

A FEW HOURS later I knocked on Miles' bedroom door. A muffled voice called me in.

I found him on his bed, over the covers, staring up at the ceiling. Without a word, I went to one of the bookcases around the room and found *Robinson Crusoe* before I sat on the bed beside him and plumped my pillows behind me.

"I thought it was Ethan's night tonight?" he asked in a low murmur.

"It was. He decided that you needed me more." I opened the book, turned to the page where we left off and began to read out loud. "'Never any young adventurer's misfortunes, I believe, began sooner, or continued longer than mine. The ship was no sooner out of the Humber than the wind began to blow ..."

It wasn't long before Miles scooted closer, resting his head in my lap as I read to him, my fingers playing with his curls without thought between turning pages.

Eventually, he lifted his head. "Do you think my mother will be at the funeral?"

I closed my eyes. Why couldn't he ask an easy question? "I don't know." My fingers continued to run through his hair. "I hope so."

"Do you think she's dead?"

My chest grew tighter as I tried to figure out how to say what I wanted to say. "I don't know, Nemo." I looked down at him and saw the lost look on his face that he tried to hide. "But no matter what, we're here. And we're not going anywhere."

His arm slid around my hip and held me tight. I went back to reading. Eventually, his breathing deepened, his body relaxing, though his grip never eased.

ade and the others left before dawn to attack the location Miles' sources had found.

We were waiting in the living room, hoping to hear good news, when Jade walked through the foyer with a bundled figure in her arms. Her face was like stone as she passed the doorway.

Uma came into the living room before we could follow.

"We found her. The girl," Uma announced, her face lined with worry. "And others."

Bile rose in my throat at the thought. "Others?"

Uma's face was haunted as she turned to me. "The people who were missing."

"What did they do to them?" Ethan asked, his voice rough.

I reached over and took his hand. He squeezed my fingers.

"They set up shop, just like in New Orleans," Uma said before turning and starting out of the living room.

Like New Orleans? Fuck. That meant they were experimenting on people, blowing their channels wide open. "How many survived?"

Uma stopped at the door and turned back to us. "Everyone we found was alive."

But how many had already died? The question hung in the air.

"How many, Uma?" I asked again, refusing to be sidestepped.

She sighed. "We found four teenagers."

Zeke stepped forward. "But no adults?"

Uma shook her head.

No, that wasn't right. "With how many people are missing there had to have been more."

Brody walked into the hallway and joined us from the foyer. "Do you think they had another location?"

Miles shook his head. "They haven't found any shipments to other locations that look suspicious."

"They're probably dead and buried on the property," Brody bit out. "There was a rotten stench about the place."

Uma cursed. "There's no way to know. The police will be all over that place by now."

"Why are the police there?" I asked.

"We had to call in a tip," Brody explained. "To get those kids back to their parents."

Okay, that made sense.

"Were all of the survivors' channels blown?" Brody asked. "You didn't say earlier."

Uma shook her head. "From the quick look I took, it was mild scorching. Most of them will recover with no memory of what happened."

"There probably wasn't enough energy to blast them, not with the Veil open," I said. "Energy is moving, it's not just sitting around anymore."

"Which probably means they'll make their move soon." Uma started down the hallway.

"You think they'll attack?" Zeke asked as we followed her.

"For what we found, yes." Uma reached the door of my bedroom and opened it.

We followed her inside to find Jade standing guard over a small figure in the bed.

The breath left my lungs. The girl couldn't have been older than nine. Her blonde hair was a tangled, sopping mess, her face sallow and pale. Poor kid. Jade had her tucked into bed with the blankets up to her chin. Her small chest moved slowly and evenly. She was out cold. What the hell did they do to her?

"At least she's safe now," I commented.

Uma's face was hard as she moved to the bedside.

"She is. Right?" Isaac asked. "And all I'm seeing is dull gray."

"The girl is powerful," Uma said, not taking her eyes off the small figure in the bed. "She blasted me into a wall when we opened her sensory deprivation tank. The only one she'd allow near her was Jade."

"Jade?" I turned to the dragon who still hovered over the bed.

Uma turned to us. "Then she fell unconscious."

"From what?" Ethan asked as he moved closer to the bed.

Jade shifted her weight.

Ethan began to twirl his rings.

The air between them practically crackled with tension.

"Ethan's not going to hurt her," Isaac said.

"Sorry, it's instinct." Jade leaned back. "Forget I'm here."

I doubted anyone could forget the dragon in the room.

"What did they do to her?" Ethan asked again, his voice rough.

Uma turned to us with a frown. "I won't know until I look at her memories."

I shook my head as I looked at Ethan. "She's the only one that survived Jadis' experiments beside Ethan."

"Strong kid," Zeke said.

Uma nodded.

I turned back to her. "Tell me you got Jadis."

"They ran for it." Uma glanced at Jade. "Well, they tried after the first three people were charred to death."

"I regret nothing," Jade stated in a matter-of-fact manner. "They deserved it. The rest were clean and fast."

Okay ... "So, you killed all of them? Was Jadis one of them?"

Jade began cleaning her fingernails with a blade that just seemed to appear. "No, but once we find her, I'll take care of her just as quickly."

I didn't have it in me to be sorry, but ... "You're sure of that?"

Jade raised her head and met my gaze with her piercing eyes. "It's why Evelyn sent me. I'm your backup." Her gaze went to the child in the bed. "Though, I think I need to guard her until the next fight." Jade turned to Uma. "Find out what they did."

Uma sat, facing the girl on the side of the bed. We watched as Uma wrote in the air in front of the girl's head. The runes shimmered. She finished with a diamond that she put her hand through to touch the girl's forehead.

The rest was simply waiting for several minutes. I stayed near Ethan, brushing my shoulder against his and waiting. His arm wrapped around my waist. Touch always comforted Ethan, and right now, I knew he needed it just as much as I did.

Uma's face grew pale. Ethan went rigid beside me. That couldn't be good.

Eventually, Uma pulled back from the girl and turned to us, sweat beading at her hairline. "My God ..." She swallowed hard and shook her head. "They succeeded in blowing her channels wide open."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means they took a girl with natural talent and blew her mind apart." Uma's face was hard as she_turned back to us. "Blew her mind apart?" I asked.

"Her sense of reality is shattered. Like pieces of a glass smashed on the floor. She doesn't know what's real and what's not anymore," Uma explained.

Jade continued cleaning her nails, seemingly unfazed by the news.

"She knows what's real." A small voice had us all spinning around.

On the other side of the bed the girl stood. Only, she was still in the bed. I did a double take. Same hair. Same dark bags under haunted eyes, only now she was in full technicolor.

"She just doesn't want to come back," she whispered, her gaze on the body in the bed.

Uma didn't move.

The girl lifted her head a little to meet my gaze. "Not dead. She wants to be. Tried to be. But they kept her from it." She turned back to the girl. "Kept her there, in the dark."

"That was wrong of them," Uma said softly.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Her name is Quinn," she whispered. "Or, it was."

"Um," Asher cleared his throat, "how is she in two places at once?"

"She's astral projecting," Uma muttered before moving around the bed.

The girl backed away from the bed and Uma.

Uma stopped.

"She doesn't like the dark." She eyed Uma as she moved towards the window. "She makes herself sleep."

"And she sees things," Uma guessed as she backed up several steps.

The girl's shoulders relaxed a bit. She looked out the window and froze in place. A look of pure joy slipped across her face. Tears began to fall as she tried to touch the

curtain blocking some of the light. Her hand went through it. That smile began to fade.

I went to the window on our side of the bed and opened the curtains wide. The sunlight spilled through the window and across her pale body in the bed.

Astral girl turned and backed away from the window and bed. "This one too. Please. She was in there so long."

I slowly moved around the bed, past Uma, and opened the other curtains. Sunlight spilled through the room unfiltered.

Turning back, I moved out of her way as she walked towards the light, smiling. For a heartbeat she was a little girl again, whole and untraumatized.

She nodded as she took in my hair. "Red hair ... you were there. She saw you. Asked you to make it stop."

My heart ached at the utterly lost note in her voice. "I remember. I'm sorry we couldn't find you sooner."

She shook her head. "She doesn't want to come back. She wants to sleep."

"Then let her sleep for a while," I said in a gentle voice. "Sit in the sun. Rest. You're safe here."

The girl nodded before she turned to look back out the window. Jade stayed put as the rest of us slowly walked out of the room and closed the door behind us.

"We need to talk," Uma stated, her face hard.

Uma led us down the long hall and into the study near the conservatory. She began to pace as Asher closed the door behind us.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"That girl is a bomb waiting to go off." Uma turned and continued to pace.

"What do you mean?" My stomach knotted. "She's booby trapped?"

Uma took a deep breath and shook her head. "She's the most gifted person I've ever seen."

"You mean her powers?" Miles asked.

Uma nodded. "The channels they blew open may have fractured her mind, but they also make her able to create destruction on a massive scale."

Dread settled all the way through me down to my toes. "How massive?"

Isaac's hand moved to my shoulder as he joined us.

Uma ran her hand through her short hair. "She could decimate an area like a hydrogen bomb."

"Oh, shit," Zeke breathed.

Uma nodded. "She didn't just make herself unconscious for her safety. She did it to keep us safe as well."

"So, she knows what they did?" I couldn't imagine what the kid had been through.

Uma nodded. "In some part of her mind, she knows she's dangerous."

I wrung my hands together. "And we still don't know where Jadis is."

Uma nodded. "If they come for her, they will come with everything they have."

I took a breath and focused. "Okay, what can we expect? Does she have any control?"

"None." She quickened her pacing.

I nodded as I thought it out. "She has to leave."

Uma stopped and turned to me. "I was thinking the same thing."

I met her gaze. "We can send her to Evelyn. She'd be out of harm's way and with someone who might be able to piece her back together."

Uma was silent as she thought it over. "I agree."

"But how do we get her there?" Asher turned to me. "She doesn't exactly trust us right now."

"She trusts Jade," Uma countered. "And Jade could transport her safely."

"Jade just got here," Zeke pointed out. "She took out those witches easily, right? She could be the key to ending this." I looked up at him. "Yeah, and this kid could kill us all. Jadis knows we have her."

The door to the study opened as Jade came in. "I can take her tonight, at dusk."

Uma's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

Jade's brows drew together, and she looked at Uma as if she were dimwitted. "I can hear everything in the house." She turned to me. "It'd probably be better if she were unconscious and bundled onto my back. I can create a proper harness. The big issue will be cold at altitude."

"I can do a warming spell," Uma said. "We'll make it work."

I raised my hand. "I hate to throw a wrench into this, but shouldn't we find her parents? I mean, she's been locked up for who knows how long."

Jade nodded. "Good point. Let's ask her who they are." Jade started for the door.

"No! Jade!" I turned and hurried to block the door. "Let's let her get comfortable with us first. At least give her a couple of hours."

Jade thought about it. "Okay. No need to scare the hell out of her."

Relieved, I moved out of the doorway.

"I'll be standing guard." Jade left just as quickly as she came in.

I shook my head. "She's certainly an odd one."

Uma sighed. "We need to prepare defenses. We don't know when they'll decide to try to take her back."

"Or we could attack first," Brody countered.

Everyone turned to him.

"We don't know where they are," Uma shot back.

"They've been following my people all week," Brody said. "It's time we take advantage of it."

Uma raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"We grab one of our tails and make them talk." Brody said it so casually it chilled me to the bone.

"You mean torture them?" Was he seriously suggesting this?

He sent me a look. "I was thinking more along the lines of Uma doing that mind reading trick of hers and getting us a location."

Uma nodded. "Good plan. Get going and I'll get started on our defenses."

Brody gave a quick nod before he turned and left the room.

"There's something we need to discuss." Uma turned to us with a serious face. "What might happen if any of you are taken hostage."

Hostage? "She's coming to kill me and get Quinn back. I doubt she'll try and take anyone alive."

"I assumed torture and death," Isaac said with false cheerfulness.

The others nodded.

Uma's face grew stern. "And if she gets her hands on one of you boys? What would Lexie be willing to do to save you from that?"

Everyone turned to me.

"If they get the upper hand, they won't hesitate to use you," Uma stated.

I thought about it. What would I be willing to do to save the guys? A solid feeling filled my chest. I'd felt it before, when Jadis asked me the same question, but this time I knew the answer. "I'd burn the world myself."

"I think we need a moment," Miles said politely.

"I understand." Uma nodded before quickly and quietly leaving.

"Ally." Asher moved beside me. "If we're taken—"

"I'll save you." I looked up at him, daring him to tell me different. "That's a fact."

"We aren't worth the price of the world," Ethan stated. I scowled. "You are to me."

A big calloused hand wrapped around the back of my neck as Zeke moved to my side. "That's not who you are, Baby."

I ground my teeth. "Are you really going to stand there and tell me you wouldn't do the same."

"I'd do everything I could to save them," Zeke confirmed.

"So would I," I said. "I just have more resources."

"You have a responsibility to use your abilities for the right reasons," Ethan countered.

I turned to him. "If you tell me to let you guys be tortured, I'll tell you where to shove that idea."

Miles moved next to Zeke and the twins filled in our circle between Asher and Miles.

"What he's saying is ..." Isaac hesitated then turned back to Ethan. "What are you saying?"

"If we're taken, don't let them use us as a way to control you," Miles said in a hard voice. "Even if it means we die."

The guys all nodded in agreement.

I scowled at them. "And you think I could do that? Just let you be tortured. Killed." I started for the door. "You guys are fucking insane."

"Lexie," Miles called, "we just don't want you to do anything rash if the worst comes."

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. I took a deep breath. "Don't tell me not to save you. Please."

"We just don't want you to do anything that would put the world at risk," Ethan said gently.

Not able to take this anymore, I opened the door and left the study, not even willing to entertain the idea of not doing everything I could to save them. Yeah, I had a responsibility with my abilities, but that didn't mean I could just let them die!

Still seething, I went into the bathroom at the end of the hall. I looked down at the sink and took several deep

breaths around the rock sitting in my chest. I can keep them safe. I can do this. Inhale. Exhale.

But what if I can't? What if I just don't have what it takes to protect them? What if we lose someone? Fear bubbled inside me. Inhale. Exhale. I focused on breathing through the tightness in my chest. Focused on how the cold porcelain of the sink cooled my fingers. I focused on the now. I could protect them. I had to believe it in order to get through the next minute.

We just needed to keep everyone together during any fight. Watch each other's backs. We're good on our own, but together we were better. We had this. We would get through this and move on with our lives. I nodded to myself and straightened to my full height. I could do this. I'm a fighter. I'm a necro with witch skills. I could protect them. I had this.

I walked out of the bathroom hoping I wasn't lying to myself.

I was helping Asher rig a harness for Quinn when Brody hauled someone through the front door. Bloody and bruised, the man's hands were tied behind his back as he was forced through the foyer and down the long hallway.

We watched from our spot on the living room floor as he was all but dragged into the study. Uma soon went through the same doors. Asher and I looked at each other. Obviously, they had caught one of Jadis' lackeys. There was nothing we could do now but work and keep busy.

The next few hours were a flurry of activity. Barricades were built along the front and back of the house for cover if we needed it.

Dinner passed in tense silence, as most of us simply pushed food around on our plates. I doubt any of us actually ate anything. And we weren't the only ones. Asher put out a large platter of sandwiches and sides and I doubt more than ten people grabbed anything. Eventually Isaac and I went off to bed.

IT WAS SOMETIME LATER when something cold touched my arm. The scent of wet dog filled the room. I knew who it was before I even opened my eyes. Hades looked up at me in his dog form and wagged his tail. I clutched my sheet to my naked chest and sent him a look.

I lifted my head as he walked around the bed towards the door. Carefully, I untangled from Isaac and climbed out of bed.

By the time I dressed and stepped into the hall, Hades was in his human form.

I softly closed the door behind me. "Okay, first, if I'm in there with one of the boys, knock."

He pulled out a small notepad from his back pocket and wrote something down. "Knock. Got it."

"What are you doing?" I raised an eyebrow.

He put the pad back into his back pocket and met my gaze. "Making notes. Zeke suggested it the other day, so I won't forget what you want."

It was kinda sweet.

He tilted his head down the hallway toward the stairs. "Someone wants to talk to you in the family room."

"Who?"

"Your Reaper grandmother," he whispered.

My pulse jumped. My many-times great-grandmother? "Really?"

"Yes. She's downstairs now."

When I didn't move, he reached out and took my hand, giving me a small tug to get me moving. "Come on."

My feet seemed to turn to lead as he led me down the hallway and downstairs.

"Go talk to your grandmother while I do a perimeter check." Hades left me at the front door. He simply let go of my hand and slipped out through the door.

My grandmother was here, and she was a Reaper. I was about to meet my grandmother. I wrung my fingers as I walked down the hall. Who was she? Did I know her? Louis once said Reapers like to keep an eye on their half-bloods. Had she been keeping an eye on me?

I went into the family room not knowing who to expect.

But the woman waiting for me ... wasn't it.

"Mrs. Archer?" I gaped as my art teacher turned away from the dark television. Her image blurred. Her eyes turned green, her hair red. She grew taller and thicker, a different version of the woman appearing. A familiar jaw line, same nose. She looked enough like me that I couldn't deny the relationship. She looked to be in her late twenties. In truth, she had to be much older.

"Hi, Lexie," she said.

Stunned, I sat down on the arm of the sofa. "Huh?"

She smiled, understanding warming her face. "I thought you'd like to have some questions answered."

I nodded, still gaping. "You're ... you're my ..."

"I'm Mila. A Reaper." She sat down on the sofa. "First of your line, yes."

I shook my head, my mind completely blank. "Uh ... um ... shit."

She smiled. "We don't have much time."

I shook my head. "It's just ... you're a Reaper."

She nodded. "But I'm still your many-times great grandmother. And I'm worried about you."

"You are?" I asked, still trying to grasp who she was.

She moved a little closer. "Lexie, Jadis isn't done. You know that, right?"

"Well, considering we haven't gotten her yet, yeah," I muttered.

She took my hand. "She's going to come for you."

I narrowed my eyes. "How do you know?"

"I'm watching," she said.

I shook my head and looked at her with my brows drawn. "Why? Why didn't you come to me sooner? Why didn't you tell me what I was?"

The lines of her face softened. "I wasn't allowed. As a Reaper, I'm not supposed to interfere with the living. I'm supposed to barely be a ripple in the surface of the world."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "All very poetic, but what changed? Why now? I've needed help so many times. Why now?"

Her eyes grew shadowed. "You're approaching a crossroads here, Lexie. Your aura is getting closer to the line that separates the living and the dead."

"What does that mean?"

"You may have an important decision to make very soon. I want you to know all your options. So you can make an informed choice," she said in a low voice.

Stunned, I simply stared.

"You're running out of time, Lexie."

I tried not to focus on the crossroads thing but on what I wanted to know. "How strong of a necromancer am I? How dangerous is this going to be for me?"

She pressed her lips together before answering. "Your bloodline is ... a strong one. If you make it to twenty-five, you'll be able to raise probably a hundred zombies at once if you pushed it."

I shook my head. Pushed it? Why would I push it that hard? "Why? What good is that for?"

She tilted her head to the side as her eyes softened. "There's a reason and a purpose for it to exist. You just need to find it."

I surged to my feet. "Oh, bullshit." I walked across the family room and turned back to her. "There's a reason for it? There isn't a reason. Life is random. Fucked up and

painful. People make their own lives, so don't give me 'it happens for a reason.'"

"You don't believe in fate?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. Ask someone who's held up at gun point. Was it fate who put them there? Sometimes there just isn't a reason for the shit that happens to someone. It's just a product of other people's choices."

She eyed me. "Good."

I grew still. "Why do you say good?"

"Fate doesn't ease the fear of someone as they fight for others. They're there by choice."

I shook my head, not quite grasping what she was saying. "Why aren't the Reapers helping?"

She sighed. "You know the answer to that. We're the only truly neutral primal power left in this world. We're the cogs that make the world work. We have to keep it going."

At least that part made sense. "So, we're on our own? There's no help from you guys?"

She nodded slowly. "Afraid so."

Fear took hold of my heart. "Someone's going to die. Right?"

"It's a possibility. But you have options others don't." She met my gaze. "You can continue as a Reaper."

I met her gaze as my promise to Ethan ran through my mind. I couldn't leave him alone. "Tell me what it's like."

"You'd have more powers. More responsibilities," she began. "You'd be walking people to the Veil, at least those that can't make it on their own."

"What about my off hours?" I asked. "Would I get to have a life?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It's a lot of work to keep the balance."

"Then what's the benefit?" I snapped.

"You'll have the ability to pop in to see those you love in their afterlives. You'd be able to visit, talk, love ..." Her smile grew teary. "You'd be able to see them."

That did sound nice. "What about Ethan? Is he going to grow old?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

I shook my head. "I'd want to have a life."

Her lips pressed together in a tight line. "You might be able to ask Death, but I'd doubt it. He's cracked down on us since I, well, met your great-great-great-great-grandfather, Darren."

That was probably a no. So that's it. Even if Ethan was to live forever, he might be alone. Oh, fuck that. "I couldn't do that." I met her eyes. "I would need to be there for Ethan. We're family. I couldn't leave him alone if I was alive."

"You wouldn't be truly alive, Lexie. You'd just be ... paused." She tilted her head to the side. "But I could see what I can do."

Another question was nagging at me. "Why do you want me to be a Reaper?"

She hesitated. "Because you'd be good. Incredibly good."

I turned towards her. "Why do you think that?"

"You've been doing the job for years already." She smiled a small smile. "Talking to the dead, helping them tell their story or simply realize they're dead. You've been acting as a Reaper for some time now. Being a Reaper is about compassion. True, pure compassion for another soul. It's a rare trait in a person."

I shook my head. "Is that all you do? Talk to them?"

She shifted on the couch. "Most of the time we find a soul that's lost and deliver them to the Veil. We simply help them find their way."

"Then why couldn't the dead cross with the Veil shut?" I asked, moving to the couch to sit on the arm again.

She sighed. "Because we couldn't find it. Normally it's a beacon of light to us, but whatever was done blocked that light."

"So, the dead saw me as the Veil?" I asked.

She nodded. "Necromancers are tied to the dead. They always look like small beacons of light. Only, once you linked to the Veil you became as bright as the sun to them."

I shoved my hand through my hair. "That explains why they all came here."

Her brow furrowed. "Shoot." She got to her feet. "I have to go. I had hoped we'd have more time together."

"Thank you, for the books," I said.

A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. That would be against the rules."

I smiled. Between one blink and the next, she disappeared.

I was still sitting there in the dark an hour later, my mind racing over the situation. I had already promised Ethan and I would not go back on my promise. She wanted me as a Reaper for some reason, and that gave me leverage. Maybe I could use it, a bargaining chip so I could have a normal life and not leave Ethan alone?

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t was the morning of Miles' dad's funeral, so I made a point to make sure I was presentable. A charcoal sheath dress that hit my knees, black pumps, and my black coat rounded out my outfit. It was classic and respectful.

When it was time to go, I knocked softly on Miles' door.

"Come in," he called, his voice quiet.

I opened the door and found him staring at himself in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. He was in a smart black three-piece suit and white dress shirt.

As I watched, he finished tying his tie and met my gaze in the mirror. "It's time?"

I nodded.

Miles took a deep breath and moved into the hall. We walked beside one another, his cold hand in mine. "Stay with me today?"

"Of course." I squeezed his hand as we reached the top of the stairs.

The guys were waiting for us at the bottom, each of them in black trousers, matching jacket, and tie, though Asher's shirt was blue, Ethan's was red, and Isaac's was green. They were all so handsome. Even Zeke was dressed up in a black button down, black tie and slacks. There was a weighted silence that hung over all of us.

Miles looked at each of them with warmth in his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it.

"The car's here," Asher murmured before he led the way out to the long black limo that was sitting in the gravel drive.

One of the bodyguards sat in front with the driver as each of us slid across the lush leather seating. No one said a word as the limo moved slowly down the gravel driveway. Miles' gaze was dull and expressionless as he looked out the window at the passing trees.

"What church are we going to?" Isaac asked.

"I-I don't know." Miles blinked and turned to me. "Lexie?"

"Um, we're not. We're having it at the funeral home," I answered. "Was that okay?"

Miles nodded before turning to look out the window again. His hand tightened on mine.

What did you say at a time like this? I didn't know, so I simply squeezed his hand gently.

When we arrived there was already a crowd on the front steps. Miles instantly began to tap his fingers against his leg.

"Driver? Could you please pull around the back?" I asked.

"Sure," he answered as he drove past the crowd.

"I didn't realize there would be so many people," I said. I mean, I sent out the invites and all, but I never expected this many.

Miles sighed. "He had a multi-billion-dollar corporation. Of course all the heads would make an appearance. Social events like this are good for business." His voice was laced with bitterness.

"Luckily we're not doing a wake after this." I had seriously misjudged the crowd.

The car stopped.

After filing out of the limo, we made our way through the back door and into a small room occupied by the minister and an older woman.

Asher moved towards him. "We're sorry to intrude. This is Miles Huntington, his father's funeral is today, and the front of the building was a bit overwhelming."

The minister's face softened with understanding. "Of course. You're not the first person seeking a respite from the crowd today."

The woman turned to us, her mouth dropping open. "Miles?"

Miles' entire body went rigid, the shock of whoever this was rolling off him in waves as his hand crushed mine. "Mother?"

"Holy shit," Zeke muttered.

"Fuck me ..." Isaac breathed.

Miles' mother had a sweet oval face and large brown eyes. She went to him and pulled his tense body into her arms. "I'm so sorry I haven't been here." She pulled back to look at his face, tears streaming down her cheeks, smudging her eyeliner.

The minister slipped out the door.

"I thought you were dead." Miles shook his head, his jaw flexing.

"I know." She wiped her face. "I wanted to call every day."

"Then why didn't you? You couldn't have let me know you were alive?" Miles' voice grew colder.

I wrapped my other hand around Miles' bicep.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Miles." She shook her head as more tears fell. "I only wanted to keep you safe."

He scoffed. "Safe? Here, alone? Thinking you abandoned me or wondering if you had died?"

She shook her head, regret etched across her face. "It was the only way."

"So, you were just hiding out somewhere?" Asher asked, gaping at her. Hell, we all were. I think we all assumed she was dead.

She nodded, never taking her eyes off Miles. "Your father decided to clean up his businesses. He warned me what he was about to do would anger a lot of people, so I ran."

And left Miles. My lip curled in disgust at her selfishness. This wasn't about me. It was about Miles. I was here for him.

Miles turned to me, eyes filled with sadness and longing. I cupped his cheek to reassure him that he wasn't alone. Not anymore. He turned back to his mother, squaring his shoulders with his head held high. "You need to leave, Mom."

She frowned. "What?"

"I can't explain, but the situation in town isn't good. You need to leave. Now," Miles stated.

She shook her head. "I'm not going any—"

"Mother, this is for your own good. Please?" Miles all but pleaded.

Emotions warred across her face until she eventually nodded. "Come with me?"

He shook his head. "I can't."

I reached out and took his hand again. "Yeah, you can, Miles."

His head snapped around. He scowled at me. "I won't leave you here."

"Who is this?" his mother asked, her gaze going over me for the first time. I lifted my chin as she continued her assessment of me.

Miles' hand squeezed mine. "Mother, this is my girlfriend Lexie. Lexie, this is Deborah."

I met her gaze. "Nice to finally meet you."

She blinked at me in an oddly Miles-like way. "You too." She turned back to Miles. "But leaving?"

"Just trust me," Miles stated. "Leave before anyone sees you."

She swallowed hard and nodded. "I'll call you when I land. I expect a full explanation."

I barely bit back the urge to ask where hers was. She looked over Miles one more time before walking out the back door.

Miles let out a deep breath, his shoulders sagging in what looked like relief. "She's alive."

"I didn't expect that," Zeke muttered.

"I know." Facing him, I held Miles' hand with both of mine. Zeke put his hand on Miles' shoulder. Asher pressed against Miles' other side. Isaac and Ethan stepped closer, filling in the circle surrounding Miles. We didn't say a word. We were just there for him. This was family. Our family.

The interior door opened as the minister stuck his head inside. "Are you ready to begin?"

The funeral was a funeral. People got up and talked about how wonderful and kind Arthur Huntington was. How great of a boss he was, how he had a sharp business sense. No one really knew the real him, and it showed.

Miles stayed in his seat as tears streamed down his face. I kept his hand in mine as people droned on and on. Eventually, it was time to walk up there and say goodbye.

Miles' grip grew tight as we got to our feet. I stayed beside him as we reached the casket.

Miles took a shaky breath as he looked down at his father.

The guys moved around him, blocking him from sight of the crowd. Mr. Huntington looked just like he had in life. Only different. The relaxation of the muscles made it clear he was gone. His designer suit seemed to fit him perfectly. His hands were folded on his waist as if he were sleeping, but there was a stillness that came with death.

"We're here," Asher whispered.

"He's really gone," Miles said, his voice cracking.

"Yeah," Zeke said in a low voice. "And it's okay to mourn the good."

Miles nodded. "I-I-I need some air."

The guys parted. Miles dropped my hand then quickly walked away from the casket and down the side aisle. We followed him into the entryway.

His eyes were closed, and he was taking deep breaths. "I just need a minute."

"Take all the time you need." I moved to his side again.
"The rest can wait."

"Yeah." Isaac stuck his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

"He bought me my first telescope," Miles rasped as he stared at the floor.

"Really?" I didn't know what else to say.

"He got me into physics." Miles wiped his face and shook his head. "I can't believe this. I'm crying for an abusive son of a—"

"Remember the good, mourn that," I reminded him.

He glared at the doors to the chapel. "Imagine if they all knew what he was really like. How manipulative he was." He shook his head. "They wouldn't be here then."

"Do you want them to know?" I asked softly.

His bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes meet mine.

I pointed at the door. "If you do, I will go up to that microphone and tell them all what he did to your mother. What he put you both through." I'd do anything to make this better for him.

The tension in his shoulders eased.

"That would clear it out," Isaac mused.

"Probably cause a stampede at the door." Ethan tilted his head at the chapel doors. "The freaking mayor is in there. Imagine the scramble to save his image."

"We could film it," Asher added.

The corners of Miles' lips lifted. He shook his head and turned to me. "Thank you, but no. I shouldn't put that on you."

I shrugged. "It's really not a problem. I usually tell people they're assholes while they're alive, no reason I can't when they're dead."

Miles let out a soft chuckle.

The doors opened. Several large men in suits came into the entryway.

Miles immediately straightened his spine and moved a little in front of me. "Mr. Rossi."

The man in the center bowed his head a little. "Miles. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I bet," Zeke muttered under his breath.

Mr. Rossi's focus stayed on Miles. "I just wanted to make you aware that your family is in the clear, but if you needed anything in the future, you'd be more than welcome to give us a call."

Was he going to do as he said and not use his father's contacts anymore? Had he changed his mind? My stomach churned as Miles cleared his throat.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Miles said as he reached behind him and took my hand. "I have very specific plans for my future."

Relief flooded me as I clung to his warm hand.

Mr. Rossi glanced at me then back to Miles with a small smile. "I understand. We'll take our leave now."

Mr. Rossi and his men filed out and down the steps.

Everyone let out a deep breath.

"So, that was ..." I didn't even have it in me to say.

"Yeah." Miles turned to me. "They won't contact me again."

I nodded. Miles had firmly shut down their offer. Thank God. He turned to me, adjusting his tie.

I gave him a warm smile. "I'm proud of you. That couldn't have been easy."

The signs of strain around his eyes softened as he squeezed my fingers. "With the right motivation it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be."

Asher looked through the window in the door to the chapel. "Are you ready to go back inside?"

Miles took a deep breath and led us back through the door.

It wasn't long before we were following the casket down the center aisle. Miles held his head high as we reached the steps to the funeral home.

We stood with Miles in the receiving line, thanking everyone for coming. Several asked Miles how he was doing, and he gave them all vague answers. By the time we were done, the hearse had already driven off and the crowd was dispersing.

I sighed in relief. It was over. There wasn't a graveside service planned, so we could go home.

We were walking down the steps when a woman shoved her way through the crowd. Her hair was mussed. Her eyes beet red. Her suit rumpled. Clay Ordin's mother looked as if she'd had a few rough days.

"You!" Victoria Ordin pointed a shaking finger at me. "You little witch! It's your fault he's dead!"

I stepped back away from her as Miles moved between us.

"Mrs. Ordin, what are you talking about?" Miles asked. The others closed in around me.

"He's dead!" she shrieked. "You killed him!"

A big hand went to my arm and pulled me back even further away from the raving woman.

"Who's dead? Mrs. Ordin, you're not making any sense." Miles tried again to distract her. She turned to Miles, her red-rimmed eyes wild.

A large arm wrapped around my waist and began to steer me around the group.

"My son! She killed him!" she shouted.

I looked up and barely recognized one of our bodyguards as he all but lifted me off my feet and hurried me down the steps toward the car.

"Come back here, you little bitch!" Mrs. Ordin spotted me and moved around the guys, only our other bodyguards were there in time to block her from further pursuit.

My carrier hurried me into the car and moved out of the way.

"Mrs. Ordin, if you continue to make wild accusations like that, I'll have no choice but to sue you for defamation." Miles' voice was cold as Isaac was pushed into the car behind me. Ethan was all but shoved into his brother's lap. Everyone scrambled further into the back of the limo as Zeke got in under his own power and moved over.

Mrs. Ordin continued raving outside. Asher and Miles got in, the door slamming shut behind them, the car immediately pulled out of the parking space.

I was thrown back into Isaac as the car accelerated. Everyone was quiet as we drove home. Guilt ate at me. I mean, Mrs. Ordin wasn't completely wrong. It was my fault he was dead, only it wasn't me who killed him. But deep inside, a deep pit opened up.

By the time we reached the house I was all but crying.

"Ally, are you all right?" Asher asked as the front door shut behind us.

I stopped walking through the living room and spun around to face him. "I can't escape him."

The guys all stopped.

"What?" Zeke asked.

I wrapped my arms around me as my eyes burned. "Ordin. He's dead and even now I can't escape him."

Miles stepped closer. "You don't have to have anything to do with him ever again, Angel."

I shook my head as my chest clenched around my heart. "There's going to be an investigation, they'll look at us because of his mother, and who knows how long that is going to last ..." Tears began to fall. "He's just always going to be there."

Hades stepped into the living room, drawing my attention. "What's happened?"

"Ordin's mother just accused her of killing her son," Asher announced as I buried my face in my hands.

Isaac moved across the room and pulled me into his arms. I hid my face in his neck and took a deep breath of citrus. Another set of warm arms wrapped around me. Spicy cologne filled my nose.

"It's going to be okay, Beautiful."

A hand moved to the top of my hair. "Breathe, Baby."

"Hades? Where are you going?" Asher asked, barely loud enough for me to hear. I should have cared about where he was going, but I just didn't have it in me today. I clung to the guys and let it out.

Hours later, Hades hadn't come back. I wrapped my arms around myself and walked out to the garage, hoping to talk to Zeke. I spotted him at the tool bench at the back of the garage.

"Hey, Tough Guy." I stepped past the Jeep with an open hood and parts on the ground to reach his side.

"Hey, Baby." He set down whatever part was in his hands and turned to me. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. "Embarrassed. I can't believe I broke down like that."

He pulled his handkerchief out of his back pocket and began to clean his hands of grease. "You've been too stressed lately. I wondered when it would all come out."

I gave him a small warm smile as I hopped up onto a clear spot on the tool bench. "I just wish it didn't all end up soaking your guys' shirts."

"We don't mind so much." He put his handkerchief into his back pocket. "So, I heard you and Hades made up?"

"Yeah, we worked shit out." I looked down at the car part he was taking apart. "He's not going to kill anyone without my permission from now on."

"Well, that's good at least."

I looked up at him. "Why are you taking apart the Jeep again?"

He looked down at the part on the table. "I'm thinking."

I tilted my head to the side. "About?"

"Just got back from my shrink." He set his hands on the work bench. "I've got some homework she wants me to do."

"Does it involve me?" I asked softly.

His cheeks flushed ever so slightly.

Oh my God, Zeke was blushing. Holy shit. I hurried to keep a blank face. "What is it?"

He shook his head and looked down at the bench in front of him, clearly embarrassed. "Nothing, never mind."

"Zeke, just tell me." I reached out and lifted his chin with my fingers. "It's just me."

"She suggested ..." He sighed and stepped back from the bench. "She told me I should try to be close to you and see how it goes."

My heart leaped into my throat. Close to me was Zeke's way of saying being physical with me. "Okay."

He lifted his head and met my eyes. "What? Just like that? Just because my shrink said so?"

I smiled up at him. "Not because of your shrink, but because I love you. And I want to be close to you."

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he took a step back from the bench and growled. "What if I trigger you?" "What if I trigger you?" I countered. With his history it was always a possibility. He had far more trauma than I ever had. "What if the world ends tomorrow? What if the sky falls? We won't know until we try."

The hunger in his eyes was nearly my undoing right then and there. "Baby ..."

"If it happens, we'll work through it. Together," I said softly.

He exhaled hard, his shoulders sagging a little. "You're sure you're okay with this?"

I ran my gaze over him. Let it linger on his shoulders, that huge barrel chest, those long legs. I let my desire fill me as I met his eyes again. "Yeah, I'm sure."

His face softened as he stepped closer.

My heart pounded in my chest as he moved to stand between my knees, his waist forcing me to shift to accommodate him. His gentle fingers lifted my chin. He bent from his neck and pressed his lips against mine. My hands moved to his hard waist as his hands cradled my face. His lips were so gentle against mine, so soft as he kissed me. His tongue brushed over my lower lip, asking for more. He always asked, no matter how many times he kissed me.

Body thrumming, I opened my lips to him. He kissed me slowly, as if he were savoring every touch, every stroke of my tongue. I leaned closer, tilting my head back even more to give him more access.

He pulled back a little.

I met his ice-blue eyes as I tried to remember how to breathe.

"Are you good?" he asked.

"Yeah," I breathed.

His mouth took mine again in long, drugging kisses that grew deeper and hungrier with every kiss. Heat filled me slowly, inch by inch, with every stroke of his tongue. His hands dropped from my face to run down my back to my ass. Sparks danced down my spine. Needing to be closer, I wrapped my legs around his waist.

He pulled back a little, taking a deep shaking breath as I pressed against him. "Damn, Baby ..."

I looked up at him in surprise as his large hard bulge pressed against my core through my jeans. Holy shit. Need pounded through me. Zeke had always kept his hips from mine, and now I knew why.

"Still good?" he breathed as his hands tightened on my curves.

Unable to speak, I nodded and kissed him again. I wrapped my arms around his neck and sank into his heat. His fingers tightened on my ass, then his arms moved around me, supporting me as he leaned me back over the tool bench, grinding his hips even more against mine. His hand moved over my back, sending hot shivers down my spine.

He pulled back a little, his eyes filled with heat. "Still good?"

I tried to catch my breath as I shifted my hips against his. He closed his eyes and groaned as I pressed against his length. "So good."

His mouth took mine again, his tongue driving every thought out of my head but the feel of him against me. The world was gone, there was only Zeke and his touch.

A phone rang.

He lifted his head and met my eyes.

It rang again, this time vibrating against the bench. I cursed. Zeke pulled back enough for me to reach my phone.

I didn't even check the number. "What?"

"Lexie, I don't have much time." Hades' voice was like a bucket of ice-cold water over me.

I sat up straighter. "What's wrong?"

"I confessed to Ordin's murder."

"You did what?" I shouted into the phone.

"I had to make up for what I did, Stellina," Hades said. "It was the only way to get them to leave you alone without me killing someone."

I covered my eyes with my hand. "You stupid shit, you're going to get thrown in jail."

"I'll be fine," Hades promised, his breathing growing harder. "I created this mess, I'll be the one to clean it up."

I raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"I'm making my escape," he said. "Just stick close to the guys and your bodyguards until I can get back to you. Please?"

"Okay," I promised. "Just get back here as soon as you can."

"I will." He hung up the phone.

I looked up at Zeke, stunned. "He turned himself in for Ordin's murder."

Zeke nodded. "I'm not surprised."

"You're not? 'Cause I sure as hell am."

His hands went to my thighs. "Think about it. All he has ever tried to do is protect you, and today you came home certain you'll be investigated for the murder of Ordin. Of course he went and confessed."

"He said he's escaping now and should be here eventually." I shook my head, still not believing it. "I guess I better go tell Uma and Brody so they can check him off my bodyguard list."

"Lexie."

I lifted my head and met his gaze.

"He made the decision to turn himself in," Zeke said. "This wasn't your fault."

"I came home crying, I'm sure that had a hand in it," I countered.

He shook his head. "It was his decision. Not yours. Don't take that on yourself."

I wanted to argue. But I didn't. He was right. Hades made his own choice. "I hear ya."

Zeke reached out, grabbed my waist and lifted me off the bench. He set me down but held on.

I looked up and met his gaze.

"I didn't trigger you," he said softly.

Despite the phone call, a huge smile spread across my face. "And I didn't trigger you."

He leaned down and gave me a small warm kiss before straightening and letting me go.

I was still smiling as I walked into the study.

"Just because we have the location doesn't mean we should attack. Without the vampires we don't have an advantage," Uma shouted across the library at Brody. "Quinn has just left with Jade, she's out of danger, but we are also down one very powerful ally."

My smile disappeared.

Brody crossed his arms over his chest. "We know where they are. My shifters are ready."

"And without the witches or vampires you'll be sitting ducks," Uma countered.

"What's going on?" I asked as I closed the door behind me.

They turned to me. "We've got Jadis' location and we're deciding our course of action."

"You mean if you're going to attack," I said.

Brody crossed his arms over his chest. "It's time. The longer we draw this out the more deaths there'll be."

I sighed and looked up at Uma. "What do you think?"

She sat back down, frowning. "We know where they are, our numbers are about the same." She began to tap her finger. "I wouldn't count on surprise, and the spell to ground out magic isn't ready. We haven't gotten it working at a hundred percent yet."

"So, they'd still have some of their magic." Brody shrugged. "It's nothing we haven't faced before, and with those staffs from the kid we can do some damage of our own before having to shift for close range."

"It's risky," she reminded him. "The staffs are untested."

His eyes narrowed. "It's war. It's always risky."

I swallowed hard. He wasn't wrong, but ... I was so in above my head that I couldn't decide if I was drowning or suffocating. Fight or hold? What the hell do we do?

"What are the pros?" Uma pressed her lips together.

"From what we know, they don't have any vampires, so they wouldn't have an advantage," Brody added.

"We have more shifters than they do," Uma said. "The advantage would be ours in the twilight and pre-dawn lighting."

Brody nodded. "Cons?"

"It's a direct fight." Uma shook her head. "There'll be casualties."

Brody ran his hand over his jaw. "But the longer we draw it out, the more time she has to gather forces, resulting in an even greater risk for loss of life."

Uma nodded in agreement. "Fine, I'll get my witches ready to cloak the entire area to keep the humans from hearing the attack. Have you scouted their location?"

"Yeah, they're on their way back now," Brody answered.

"Let's talk strategy." Uma turned to me. "Lexie, you don't need to be here for this."

Nodding solemnly, I got to my feet and left the library. I leaned against the doors and took deep breaths. We were attacking, and I didn't know what to do. Could I even help? What about the guys? They had been training with the staffs ... The guys would be going too.

Oh, hell no. Over my dead body. There was no way in hell I was going to let them go out there. I pushed away from the wall and hurried out the door, looking for them.

Asher

"I'M NOT JOINING A PACK, KAYLEY," I repeated for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"And it's a mistake," the werewolf stated. "A pack provides support, guidance—"

"Will control my life," I countered, my irritation bleeding into my words. "They'll tell me what I can do and what I can't. Who I can be with." They'd forbid me being with Ally. They'd be logical and have reasons. They'd scare me into leaving her. I shook my head. "I'm not giving her up for a pack."

Kayley looked up at the sky, taking deep, measured breaths before turning back to me. "It doesn't have to be that way. A healthy pack doesn't control their wolves' lives like that."

I clenched my fist. "Yeah, I know there's one in Seattle, a few in Massachusetts."

She nodded.

I shook my head. I didn't know where Ally was going next year, and I wasn't about to join some pack that I'd never met. "I still have college to think about and other decisions to make. I don't want to commit to a pack when I don't know where I want to go."

She sighed, face full of understanding. "I know. I just want you to keep it in mind when you do make those decisions."

"I will," I muttered.

"Good." She started to walk away but stopped after a couple of steps. "You know you'll have to fight tomorrow."

I shifted on my feet. "Has anyone told Ally yet?"

"She's probably figured it out by now."

I sighed. That was a conversation I was not looking forward to. "What about Ethan?"

"Since we know what he is now, yes. It's his fight too."

I nodded. "You might want to tell him."

"He's the next stop for Brody." She started towards the back door of the house.

Light footsteps echoed across tile inside. Ally. Kayley glanced at the door to the kitchen then turned back to me.

"She'll be pissed," I warned back.

"I'll hide." She opened the door and disappeared inside.

I turned and looked down at the pool, dread settling deep inside of me. Fighting witches. Not how I ever thought I'd go out. I shook my head. I wasn't going to die tomorrow. But I might. If this was my last day on Earth, how did I want to spend it?

The door slammed as I turned. Ally strode out of the house. The rage rolled off her in waves that I could practically see. Her stride was confident, her jaw clenched, and her eyes practically glowed with her will. Her wild hair bounced with every step. Damn, she was stunning.

"No," she stated before she even reached me. "You are not fighting tomorrow."

I fought back a grin. Of course she'd fight it. "I'm a shapeshifter, Ally."

She shook her head as she stopped in front of me. "No."

"I have to," I said, unable to suppress the little grin that had been pulling at my lips.

Her eyes narrowed on mine. "This isn't funny. You could die!"

"Or I'll be fine."

She grabbed my shirt, balling it in her hands. "You can't do this," her voice ordered, but her hands trembled against my chest.

I reached up and held her hands. "They need everyone tomorrow."

Her grip tightened. "Not you. Not any of you."

"I'm sorry, Ally," I said softly. The worry in her eyes, I couldn't take it. I took her face in my hands before pressing my lips to hers. Her response was instantaneous, opening for me, stoking my own fire. My wolf and I growled in satisfaction, sweeping in and taking what was ours. The sweet taste of her on our tongue. She pressed against me, her curves making us ache for her. For our bonded. Need swept through me. The urge to sink my teeth into flesh, to mark her, was almost overpowering. Almost. I kissed her gently one last time before pulling back.

She kept her eyes closed and took deep breaths. "Promise me."

"I promise." I held her face gently. "I promise to not let anything stand in the way of getting back to you."

She lifted her half-hooded gaze to meet my own. "You'd better not. I'm coming too. Uma has taught me enough that I can do some damage."

We growled without thought.

"That's not going to stop me, Ash." Her determination was clear in her eyes. "You go, I go."

I swallowed hard. With that look in her eyes, I couldn't stop her. But the others? "Let's see what the guys say about that."

She nodded. "Sure, let's go tell them."

* * *

Lexie

Telling my other boyfriends went about as well as I imagined it would.

"I don't believe that's a good idea," Miles said. "You're the one they've been after."

"You're not going to go to a fight and make a target of yourself," Zeke added.

"The Veil is open again," I countered. "I'm not that important anymore."

"We still don't have the person who closed it to begin with," Miles reminded me.

"I told you, it was Dylan," I said, the exasperation plain in my voice.

Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "And Evelyn said that wasn't enough to allow her to get involved yet. We need more evidence."

"They can't go without us backing them up!" I wrung my fingers together.

The guys shared a look.

Zeke sighed. "Then we'll all go."

"What?" I could barely handle the idea of two of them going, but all of us? "No, no, no."

Isaac wrapped his arm around my back and pulled me close to his side. "Red, we're a family. If you insist on going with Asher and Ethan, we all go."

My throat tightened as I looked up at him. "But ..." I could lose all of them.

Isaac's face softened along his jaw. He squeezed me tight. "You can't have it both ways."

I shook my head. "No one."

"I have to, Ally. Ethan has to." Asher stepped closer to us, his hand taking mine and unclenching my fist. "I'm a wolf now. We're a part of the supernatural world. We have to fight."

I swallowed hard. Asher couldn't play by human rules anymore. Neither could Ethan. It's their lives they were fighting for. But still ... "I don't like those choices."

"These are the only choices we have." Zeke stepped closer. "All of us, or just Ethan and Asher."

I shook my head. What kind of choice was that? Risk only two of us or all of us. "I-I-I can't make that decision."

"All of us." Zeke turned to Miles.

Miles nodded. "Seconded."

Isaac put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Third."

"Motion passed," I rasped through a suddenly dry throat.

"We'll have to talk to the committee." Asher started towards the door. The rest of us followed and I slipped my hand into Ethan's as we filed down the hallway.

"It's going to be okay, Beautiful," Ethan whispered as the others moved into the library.

"Absolutely not." Uma's voice carried out to us in the hallway. That didn't bode well.

We filed into the room and stood in front of her and Brody as a group.

"We all go, or no one goes," I stated.

Uma turned to me and shook her head. "That's not how this is going to work. You aren't ready for this kind of fight, and the others are too human to be in it."

Isaac stepped forward. "We've been training in MMA for yea—"

"That's not the same kind of fight," Brody stated in a cold voice. "This is a war. One hit from a spell and you'll go down, even with your shield generators. We can't risk it."

"Uma," I turned back to her. "They've been training this entire time."

"Training, yes. But these people are aiming to kill." Uma's jaw was clenched as she turned back to me. "You are children, and this is war. It sounds harsh, and unfair, but none of you except Ethan and Asher are even close to being able to take part in this. I wouldn't send my own children, so I'm not sending you."

"We aren't children," Zeke bit out.

"You are in this case," Brody stated, crossing his arms over his chest. It was clear they weren't going to change their minds.

"We can help," I tried again anyway. "We aren't useless." Brody and Uma shared a look.

Brody turned back to us. "Then you can help set up the med bay in the living room. You can help with first aid and find a doctor that can be trusted."

"We can do that," Miles said for all of us. The rest of us nodded. Anything we could do that would help, we would.

* * *

Tara

It was later when Dad finally pulled into an old hotel. It was even later when I was the only one still up. Maria and Jess were in the other bed near the door, while Dad slept in a chair propped up near the bathroom door. Tank and Kita were out cold between the beds and the room door.

I was playing with a new design on my tablet when Lucy woke up beside me.

"Hmm?" She lifted her head, her eyes still closed.

"What'd you say?" she muttered rolling onto her back.

"Nothing." I smiled to myself as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

Her face was soft and rosy as she looked up at me. My heart took a hit. She really was pretty. I turned back to my work and focused on the neckline of the outfit I was designing.

"What are you working on?"

"Magical protection." My face burst into flame as I realized I had actually answered.

"Really?" She sat up and scooted back to sit beside me. The flowery scent of her perfume reached me, making my heart pound even harder as she moved closer.

"Wait? Are those runes?" She pointed at the small embroidery along the neckline and the seams of the arms and legs.

I licked my lips before I answered. "Yeah, protective ones, I think."

"Clever."

I lifted my head. "Do ... do you think they'd work?"

"I think so. We'd have to ask a witch, but I can't see why not."

I grinned and shifted so she could see better. "Lexie said that witches use stones to store energy, so I was thinking of incorporating small stones in the embroidery on the hands or in the middle of the chest. What do you think?"

She tapped the sleeves. "You'd want them near the hands, so sleeves that hook around the middle finger would be the perfect spot for them, I think."

I nodded, excitement bubbling up. "And the fabric could be anything. It wouldn't have to be leather or tough. It's the embroidery thread that would matter, right?"

She thought about it and nodded. "You also wouldn't even have to have the runes showing. I bet if you can do the embroidery small enough, you'd be able to hide it under the lining of jackets and pants."

I smiled up at her. "You think it's a good idea?"

"Good? It's brilliant." She shook her head. "Clothes that protect you from magical energy? That's a market that hasn't even been thought of, let alone established."

I began playing with the ends of my ponytail as I thought about the potential. "You think people would want this?"

"Witches? Yeah. Vampires? Definitely. And it's perfect for non-magical humans," she said.

As I met her eyes my smile dimmed. Tingles ran down my spine as the silence stretched. Her gaze dropped down to my lips for a heartbeat before I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. A shadow moved across the drawn curtains.

Lucy pulled back and turned just in time for the door to bust open. Bodies surged into the room. Dad went from a dead sleep to pulling his gun and firing in a heartbeat. The dogs leapt at the doorway. Lucy threw a vial from her bra. It shattered at their feet, billowing smoke filling the room. Her hand moved to my arm in a strong grip as she pushed me off the bed. "Move. Get out through the bathroom," she breathed into my ear before leaping to her feet on the bed and throwing more vials.

Heart pounding, I crawled through the room and into the tiled bathroom. I got to my feet and jerked open the window as more gunfire erupted inside of the room. Icy fingers of fear crawled along my spine, making the hair on my arms stand on end as I climbed out the window and into the alley. It was only a few heartbeats before Jess dropped from the window to the cold cement beside me.

Thinking only of putting distance between us and our attackers, I hauled her to her feet and we took off for the empty field of waist-high dry grass. My arms pumped, and my heart pounded as my breathing grew ragged.

Something hit me and a dull ache radiated from my shoulder as I was knocked to the dirt. Groaning, I pushed on to my side in time to dodge a long-fingered claw that sliced through the air, narrowly missing my face. I rolled backwards to my feet to find a man standing there, jerking his hand out of the dirt. He snarled. Sharp canines ... oh, crap. My breath turned to lead in my lungs as my body seized in terror.

"Get away from her, you prick!" Jess came out of the grass swinging what looked like a thick stick. She swung at the man, but he stepped back just as her foot hit some mud and slipped out from under her. She went down hard on her back.

A sharp-toothed grin spread across his face a heartbeat before he moved. A vise seemed to wrap around my throat. I wheezed as my feet left the ground. I grabbed at the hand around my throat and dug my nails in.

His eyes grew darker as he moved closer and sniffed my hair. "My, aren't you a pretty one."

I frantically dug into the flesh of his fingers, kicking at him with all my might, but he gave no sign of feeling it.

Things began to get dark. I was going to die.

Something flew out of the grass and hit the man. A smoking hole appeared in his shirt half a heartbeat before he dropped me. I hit the ground, greedily dragging air into my lungs as another vial sailed through the night. Purple liquid stained his shirt. His body jerked as he grew rigid, his eyes wide as he fell to his knees. The scent of burnt rubber filled the air.

Lucy rushed out of the grass and brought her fist down across his face. The shifter dropped to the ground, unconscious. Or dead. I couldn't be sure.

Lucy turned to me, her brows drawn down. "You okay?"

My very own knight. I nodded as relief swamped me, making me shake.

She reached down and helped me to my feet, then began to inspect me for damage. "He didn't scratch you, did he?"

My hand tingled in hers. "He tried ..."

Her fingers tightened on mine as she met my eyes.

"He was trying to kill me."

Her features softened, her eyes filling with warmth as she pulled me into her arms. I clung to her and took several deep breaths as her hand moved up and down my back.

"It's okay, I'm here," she whispered. "I'll keep you safe."

God help me, I melted against her and breathed in her perfume.

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CHAPTER 12

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e spent the rest of the night setting up cots and supplies in the med ward.

After that was done, Ethan had gotten me alone on one of my trips to the basement supply closet.

"Stay with Asher tonight," Ethan had whispered. "He's going to be in the thick of it tomorrow."

I turned with the box of bandages in my arms. "You both are going to be, and he's only pulling wounded out of the fight." At least, that had better be all he's doing.

Ethan shook his head. "Trust me, Beautiful. Stay with him tonight." He gave me a soft smile and slipped out before I could say another word. That man constantly surprised me. He'd stepped aside for Zeke, now Asher.

Once we were done, I asked Asher if I could stay with him tonight and his smile was so bright, I couldn't help but return it. A few hours later we were in his room, Asher sleeping soundly as my fingers stroked down his spine to his lower back. I traced the dimples just above his butt. I loved the man beside me fiercely. The idea of losing him or Ethan ... my breath shuddered roughly.

Asher's head lifted and he turned to me with his eyes barely open. "Ally?"

"Yeah?" I kept my voice light. Yay for me.

"You okay?" He moved closer to me and shifted to his side. His hand went to my thigh and squeezed.

I smiled. "Yeah, good. You?"

He opened his eyes fully and gave me the look. You know, the one with narrowed eyes and a half grin. It said 'stop lying.'

I blew out my cheeks as I gave in. "I'm worried about tomorrow."

He pulled me even closer. "We're going to be okay. I promise."

I reached up and ran my fingertips along his jaw.

Amusement and understanding danced across his handsome features as he leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. Passion and need poured through me. I kissed him back, taking his mouth and pressing harder against him.

His moan was low and throaty as he squeezed me tighter. "We"—he kissed me again— "can't."

I pulled back only enough to meet his eyes. "Put your hands on the headboard."

His pupils expanded as desire and raw need filled his eyes. He lay back on the bed, put his arms over his head and gripped the bottom of the headboard.

I slipped my leg over his hip and settled on his lap. My heart raced at the feel of him against the part of me that was aching for him.

His breathing grew heavier as I leaned over him. "Ally ..."

"Focus on your hands," I whispered before pressing my lips to his throat.

His head fell back as I trailed kisses down his throat and over his collarbone.

"Not a good idea," he breathed as I traced a line down his chest with my tongue. He moaned. "Ally."

I lifted my head and met his hungry gaze. "I want to show you how I feel before tomorrow." His hard shaft twitched against me, telling me he needed me too. "If you tell me to stop, I will."

His Adam's apple bobbed up and down a few times before he nodded. "Okay ... but slow down."

Oh, I'd go slow alright. I shifted further down and brushed my lips over the center line of his six pack. Heat curled through me as I tasted his skin down to his pajama pants. I lingered over the line of his Adonis belt, kissing out to his hip before my fingers hooked into the band of the soft cotton. I looked up and found him watching me, lust and love clearly visible in his expression. It was a heady combination coming from those ocean eyes. He gave me a small nod.

Kissing his skin, I pulled down his pants before sitting back for a moment and taking in the sight of him for the first time. His cock was rigid and standing straight up for me. His blond curls were trimmed and neat. My panties soaked at the sight as my skin suddenly felt too tight for me. I wanted nothing more than to strip down and take him inside my body. But I couldn't.

I reached out, wrapping my fingers around his thickness. He gasped, his head falling back as his hips moved against my hand. He was beautiful. The lines of his body, the feel of his cock in my hand. The motion of his hips in the moonlight. He was perfect. He was mine and I was his. I slowly lowered my lips and brushed my lips over the head of him.

Wood creaked. I looked up and met those wild silver eyes. "Ash?"

"Don't stop," he growled.

I took him at his word as I slowly ran my tongue along the underside to the very tip in one slow lick.

"Damn, Ally," he bit out between his lips, his arms shaking. "I'm not going to last long."

"Then don't," I whispered, my breath moving over his tip. I lowered my mouth around him and dragged my tongue along his length while sliding back down.

His body shook as his hips moved, meeting my mouth in rhythm. I took my time tasting him, exploring every inch, every line of vein, every curve until he was panting above me. I was lost in touching him, lost to us.

A trembling hand moved to my hair.

I looked up and met his eyes.

"Ally ... swallow for me," he breathed between his teeth.

I had never done anything like that before and I wasn't sure I could. The desire in his eyes gave me the motivation I needed.

I took his length down my throat and pulled almost all the way out again. Lost to the rhythm, I barely heard Asher.

"Ally."

His entire body grew tense just before he exploded. Salt and heat filled my mouth. I swallowed it down just as he'd asked.

He sat up and reached for me. I ended up underneath him, his lips on my throat. My skin was suddenly too tingly as butterflies danced in my belly. His hands molded to my curves as his hips pinned me to the bed. I groaned as his lips moved down my neck, his fingers shoving my shirt higher until I had to lift a little to pull it over my head.

His lips trailed down between my breasts. His palms stroked my nipples, giving me some relief, but I wanted more. I buried my hands in his hair as his mouth took one breast. I arched against him, rubbing myself against his still-hard length while his tongue danced over my nipple.

His hands took mine as he pulled away from my breast to pin my arms above me. Those silver eyes met mine. "Headboard."

I nodded, eager to obey. He let me go. I grabbed the bottom of the headboard, hoping for more.

His hands and lips moved down my body, leaving sparks tingling along my nerve endings in his wake. I gripped the headboard as my core ached more than ever. "Ash."

His fingers hooked into my pajamas and panties. Slowly, he slid them off my hips and down my legs. His palms moved back up my thighs to my hips, his thumbs stroking over the line of my hipbones. His lips found the inside of my thigh. His warm breath brushed over my skin. My heart thundered as his scorching mouth moved up my thigh, leaving my toes curled. He was so close. Please ...

Asher lowered his head and pressed a kiss to the outside of me.

I whimpered in need.

His tongue stroked me, sending pleasure through every cell in my body. My hips moved towards him, wanting more. He growled deep in his chest before he pressed harder, his mouth taking my clit. My body shook as he took his time, stroking, licking, exploring every part of me. That fucking tongue. He slipped two fingers inside me, bringing that edge up fast. I trembled as the wave built, higher and higher.

"Ally."

My heart was pounding so hard I was sure he could hear it.

"Say my name," he demanded.

I whimpered as his fingers stroked me, driving my need higher and higher. My breasts aching, I covered them with my own hands and squeezed. "Don't stop."

"Say my name," he ordered again.

"Asher, please." That was all it took. He lowered his head and his mouth worked over my clit. Pleasure surged over me and tore me apart. I slapped my hand over my mouth just as a cry leapt from my throat. It seemed to go on and on, far too long but still not long enough.

Once the storm subsided, the world came back into focus.

Asher stroked my hip in a loving caress. "Thank you."

He crawled back up the bed and wrapped me in his arms. I relaxed into him. He took my hand and threaded our fingers together. His long fingers reached the back of my hand. He looked down at me with those ocean eyes and smiled. "I love you."

I smiled back. "I love you, too."

It wasn't long before Asher once again fell asleep beside me.

It was early morning when the time came to say goodbye. My chest was tight as we met them at the door. The other shapeshifters and witches were loading up, so we didn't have much time.

Asher turned to us, his face strained. Ethan on the other hand appeared as calm as ever. They met each of the guys' eyes and nodded. Isaac, Miles, and Zeke nodded back in some macho guy acknowledgement of feelings. And it worked.

I wasn't the only one struggling as Asher turned to me.

His hand moved to my face. "Ally girl."

I held his hand in place and took a deep breath as all my fears crashed down on me. "Come back to me. To us."

He brushed my cheek with the pad of his thumb and pulled me close. I buried my face in his chest.

"I'm only doing first aid and bringing people to the ambulance," he whispered into my hair as he held me tight. "We'll be okay."

I sniffed.

"I promise," Asher whispered.

Pulling back, a sad smile spread across my face. I turned to Ethan.

His smirk was in place as he pulled me close. "Oh, Beautiful. You know we're both too stubborn to be taken out by Jadis or her lackeys."

I rested my forehead against his neck and took a deep breath of his spicy cologne. He kissed my neck and lifted his head. "We gotta go, Lexie."

I squeezed him tighter before I forced myself to let go. I wiped my face as I stepped back into Isaac's arms.

He wrapped around me from behind, his own nose brushing my neck. I clung to his arms as we watched two of our own walk out the door for what we all hoped wasn't the last time.

Standing in stunned silence as they drove away, I reached for Zeke's hand to find him already meeting me halfway. Miles' hand slipped into my other one, keeping my arms crossed over Isaac's.

"Breathe," Isaac whispered in my ear.

I took a deep, shaking breath and looked up at Zeke. His face was lined with worry as he watched the door. We needed a distraction. "Let's make sure the stations are all stocked up."

Everyone let go and stepped away from the door. We went about our business, making sure each cot near the door was stocked for every kind of emergency. Cuts, burns, even hypothermia. We covered all our bases, working silently, glancing at the door every few minutes.

They were only driving the ambulance. They would be okay, right?

* * *

Asher

THE BATTLE RAGED ON. Explosions and fire lit up the woods around the ruins of Jadis' house. Heart hammering, I ducked a fireball before hauling one of the wolves over my shoulder and running back towards the van we were using as an ambulance.

From the start, nothing had gone to plan. What we hoped would be a sneak attack turned into a battle as soon as we stepped out of the tree-line.

Their witches seemed to be getting some serious fire power despite our witches' best efforts. An orb shot past me and hit the ground, creating a patch of ice. I leapt over it, making sure my stride never slowed. The staffs hadn't given us the edge we thought they would, and Jadis' people were tearing through our forces.

Ethan was already at the back, bandaging a leg wound when I laid Kayley down. Half her face was a mask of burn blisters, raw and red. "We gotta get her back!"

Ethan tied off the bandage, jerked off the gloves and climbed into the front. "Get in the back!"

Adrenaline pumping. I moved her onto a cot while Ethan put it into drive, bracing myself as he took off, the doors in the back swinging back and forth.

My wolf was with me, close to the surface as we wet down a bandage and tried to take some of the heat from the burn. "Come on, Kayley." This wasn't a strong wolf. Something about her laying there in the cot, burned, tore through my wolf to me. Weak, she was weaker. She shouldn't have been here. The undeniable urge to protect rushed through me, leaving my hands shaking, an overwhelming desire to hurt, tear, and destroy whoever did this.

No, not now. I gritted my teeth as we turned a corner.

"Ash, behind us!" Ethan shouted over his shoulder.

I turned and spotted the half-wolves running after the ambulance on the dirt road. Giant and hairy, half shifted wolves were the werewolves of nightmares. They had the teeth and head of a wolf, covered in hair, but otherwise mostly human. Except for the claws. And completely feral.

My wolf leaped to the forefront, straining against my hold as my claws slipped out of my fingertips. They were going after the injured. My wolf and I were in perfect agreement. Something snapped into place. Strength surged through me. Purpose. We were suddenly gone, and it was just me in my skin. That wild part of me was with me, completely fused for the first time. There was no uncertainty in me. I would protect my pack, protect the soft and vulnerable. And I'd make them regret ever trying to prey on the weak.

The half-wolf leapt into the back of the ambulance and right into my claws.

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rom the first arrival of injured to the batch that had just come in, we ran from cot to cot, helping where we could and screaming for Dr. Zimmer when needed. Even with all that, we lost so many. Person after person died under our hands, each one driving a blade into my chest. Eventually, I couldn't take it. The screams of pain, the pleas for help. I just couldn't watch another person die.

Walking out of the living room, I crossed the long hallway filled with injured fighters and ducked into the kitchen. I took several deep, shaking breaths, desperate to find some relief from the ache and pressure that had been building inside of me.

A cool hand turned me back towards the door.

Dr. Zimmer met my watery gaze. "We need you in there."

I shook my head. "They just keep dying."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's the price of war. But we keep going. They fight, we help the injured."

I swallowed hard. "I don't know how."

His stare was fierce and determined. "You can't save all of them. But you need to fight for the ones you can, and we're wasting time they don't have."

Fuck. He was right. I needed to suck it up. Those people needed help. Scrubbing my hands down my face, I gave a curt nod before following him back into the hell that was the med ward.

People died while I helped them. Some lived, not many. Each time Zimmer said that there was nothing to do we moved on. Evisceration. Severe burns. It was hard and gritty, but I had to keep going. Zimmer was right. I saved those I could. It wasn't many, but that didn't matter.

I finished bandaging an arm and turned to look for the next patient. Only there wasn't one. Everyone that had lived through the fight was patched up and resting. I wrapped my arms around myself and walked through the living room, looking for the guys. Isaac was helping a woman with a splint. Zeke was putting pillows behind an older man's back. Miles was running bandages to a surgery station.

I turned just in time to spot Asher hurrying into the med area with an unconscious wolf in his arms. Uma moved into the doorway of the living room, quickly going to check on others as Ethan came in. I ran to him and Ethan caught me as I wrapped my arms around him. Sagging against him, relief rushed through me.

"We're safe, Beautiful." Ethan squeezed me tight.

"Thankfully." I held onto him, simply breathing in spice.

Ethan's hand moved up and down my back and supported my weight until I could pull back.

I met his eyes. "What happened?"

Asher moved to my side. "We lost."

"Lost? How the hell did that happen?" I asked as Uma walked over and joined us.

The lines around her face were deep as she met my eyes. "The witches were possessed."

"By demons," Brody said as he joined us.

"The witches were possessed, how?" I asked.

"Voluntarily, it would seem," Uma murmured as she began to pace. "Jadis has lost her mind."

"And we're screwed," Brody growled.

I looked at both of them, realizing how bad the situation was. "Do we need to leave?"

Uma and Brody turned to me.

"Do we have any other options?" Uma asked.

Brody was silent for several heartbeats. "No. We only have ten shifters left who can fight. How many witches?"

Uma rubbed her temple. "Eight."

Brody cursed. "We need to run."

"Where?" Uma asked.

"To Evelyn?" I asked.

They turned to me again.

"Possessed people are under her purview. She has jurisdiction with Jadis now," I explained. "Call her, she should be able to take them down."

Uma pulled out her phone.

"We need to start evacuating now." Brody turned and started toward the cots.

"Wait!" Uma called before turning her attention to the phone. "Jadis' witches are possessed." She fell silent, nodding as she listened. It wasn't long before she hung up the phone and turned to us. "Evelyn says she can be here in a couple of hours."

Brody pointed at the door. "We could be attacked in a couple of hours!"

"That's why we're leaving now," Uma snapped. "Let's start with the most critical. They'll take the longest to move."

"Where are we going?" Brody asked.

"To a gargoyle safe house," Uma answered. "Evelyn just gave me an address."

Brody turned to us. "Let's get to work.

Tara

Our backup apparently arrived while Jess, Lucy and I were out in the field. Some gargoyles named Evelyn and Atticus had been able to save Dad and Maria. After a day of driving, they stashed us away in a filthy empty warehouse while they went out to deal with our tails.

I wrapped my coat tighter around me and tried not to notice how my breath fogged in the air. Tank pressed himself against my leg a bit more and I welcomed the slight warmth.

Lucy moved to my other side, her shoulder brushing mine. I kept my eyes on my hands as emotions jumbled through me. Excitement, fear, anxiety. It was all a mess in my chest, freezing me in place.

She swallowed hard enough for me to hear. "Are you alright?"

I nodded quickly, hoping that would be the end of it while hating it at the same time. I liked her, but I knew no one would understand.

"'Cause you haven't looked at me since the field," she whispered. "Did I do something wrong?"

The hurt in her voice lifted my head. "It's not you."

"I thought ..."

Panic clawed at my throat as I glanced at her, then away just as quickly. How could I explain this to her?

"I like you, Tara," she said, her voice soft and full of a vulnerability I almost envied. "I thought ... you might like me too."

I could only manage to look back down at my hands as everything rushed through my head.

I had to face it. I wasn't like everyone else, and no matter how much I wanted to be, I just couldn't. Weariness washed through me. I was so tired of struggling. All my life, I redirected myself. Fought myself. See a pretty girl, make a point to see the cute boy she's with and focus on what makes him handsome. The girl didn't matter, it didn't matter if I was more attracted to her than him. It didn't matter that I liked her more than him. All that mattered was that I fit in. That I did like him, that I did find him attractive. Keep up the façade and lie through my teeth to my friends. My friends. I'd lose half of them if I ever told them the truth.

"Tara?"

But was it worth it? Was it worth living a lie to stay popular? To be ... something I wasn't? I wrung my fingers as Lexie popped into my mind. She didn't care about fitting in. She didn't care what people thought. And she was happy. I wanted that. Wanted it so badly that I couldn't seem to stop myself from resenting her. To be free. To just say it. I swallowed hard and gathered my nerve as I met those pretty eyes. "I'm so tired of trying to be something I'm not."

Her brow knit for a moment before understanding and warmth dawned over her expression. "Oh, Tara ... pretending to be something you're not will just make you miserable."

Relief filled me in a rush. I soaked up her words and took them into my heart. She was right. My eyes burned as I rested my head on her shoulder.

She slipped her arm around me and held me close.

"I don't want to fight myself anymore."

"Then don't," she whispered.

For the first time, I let go of the idea of fitting in. Of the fear. Of the pressure. I was simply me, being held by the girl I liked. And it was safe.

Lexie

The shifters were getting the injured out of the house and to a safe location. Hades had arrived sometime in the last hour, helping to load the injured into the cars. Uma and Miles organized an escape plan by setting up a gauntlet of explosive potions down the long main hallway, just in case. Her idea was, if we could draw them in, we could take them out on our way out of the mansion. It was a good plan, just one I was hoping we wouldn't need. Personally, I was banking on being gone by the time they arrived and letting the gargoyles handle it all.

The early evening sun was up over the mountains when a loud screech echoed through the house. Everyone covered their ears until it stopped.

Uma ran into the med ward. "That's the warning from the north wards. They're coming."

Heart pounding, everyone ran to load up the last of the cars. Uma, Hades, and Brody met with me in the long hallway.

"How far away are they?" Brody demanded.

"Half a mile out," Uma answered.

"How long is it going to take to get everyone else out?" Hades asked.

Brody shook his head. "Too long. And most of our able bodies are going to have to drive the cars."

Brody cursed. "There are too many to move."

"We need to buy time for the wounded to finish being evacuated," Uma stated.

I lifted my head and looked at each of them. Possessed witches were coming, coming to kill not just them but all of us. The injured, the loves of my life ... everyone. That hard, solid feeling of will filled my chest. I met Hades' eyes. "We might be able to give you eight minutes."

He squared his shoulders, his understanding clear. "We could, if you let me go for the kill."

I gave a sharp bob of my head. This was not the time to be the nice person.

He nodded back. "Then I should be able to lead some of them away."

Uma sighed. "Buy us what time you can."

We turned to make our way out of the long hallway.

"Lexie, what are you doing?" Isaac followed me through the kitchen, Hades a step behind him.

"We're doing what we can." I shoved the back door open and ran out to the backyard. "They're coming from the north." Then I'd go north. I dropped to my knees at the end of the patio and pressed my hand against the grass. Hades took off like a streak and disappeared into the trees. A door slammed open.

"What is she doing out here?" Zeke's bootsteps came towards us.

"Working. Now shut it," I ordered right before I found that quiet spot inside me.

"She and Hades are trying to buy time for the cars to get out of here," Isaac explained.

"What the hell is he going to do?" Zeke moved to us. "What is she going to do? She can't raise anything. There isn't a cemetery for miles."

"Shut up. Let her work," Isaac snapped.

I cracked my barriers. My energy poured from me in a wave to soak into the ground. I pulled from the air while my energy spread out away from the house, moving down the slight incline of thriving, healthy grass. Stretching, stretching, just a little more. There. Not too far from the tree line.

My skin became the earth, their footprints causing goosebumps to erupt all over my body. Thirty-two. Thirty-two demon possessed witches moved like shadows across the ground.

And around them, deep in the earth, were the bones of dead animals. Good. I took a deep breath and poured energy into those bones. Into those bodies. The energy knit them back together as much as it could.

"Rise," I ordered under my breath.

Claws dug at the soil, climbing to the surface. The brush of air on their faces. A fox slipped from the earth. I poured enough of my consciousness into it that I was able see through its eyes.

Off to the north the witches were walking through a meadow, the grass shriveling as they passed, the very earth rejecting their presence. A deep growl emanated through the air. The witches, led by Jadis, stopped in their tracks just before the figure burst through the grass. A half-rotted, maggot-ridden cougar blocked their path towards the house. The witches stepped back, gathering in a bunch with their backs to each other as the stench of rot filled the air. Zombies were strong, and they weren't as affected by magic as the living were. You could set them on fire, but they'd still tear you apart while they burned.

Another figure emerged from the grass. Hades straightened to his full height with a dagger in each hand.

"Attack the possessed," I ordered. The grass moved as the raised animals went after the witches.

The cougar leapt at Jadis, but she managed to duck out of the way at the last second. The zombie hit the man beside her, its teeth ripping at the witch's throat. Cries and shouts echoed through the meadow as my zombies attacked.

Hades became a blur as he struck.

I smirked as I kept the channel open, pouring more and more energy into the dead, giving them more drive, more strength as they fought to follow my order. While they were busy tearing apart my zombies, Hades picked them off here and there. As soon as their bodies hit the ground I was there, pouring my will into them.

I swept my energy east and west, the dead glowing like beacons in my mind. In groups, I raised them and sent them to the meadow. I raised forty-four before I ran out of corpses. Blasts of power shook the woods, the sound reaching the house. It went on and on. Some of my zombies dropped, completely spent, while others rose again. Wave after wave, I held, but Hades had begun to tire.

Eventually, a group of witches broke off and went after a slower Hades as he led them deeper into the woods, away from the house.

Sweat rolled down my face as the feeling of being stretched too thin consumed me. My grip on the dead shook. Hold. Hold. If I didn't hold on, then the wounded wouldn't get out of the way of the fight. Hold. Hold.

"Nine minutes," Zeke said.

"They're gone," Uma's voice called. "We need to go!"

No. No, I needed to keep going. Stop them. I pulled hard around me, the grass withering under my fingertips. The spot of dead grass grew outwards from my trembling hand as I raised the cougar again.

"Lexie! Enough!" Uma shouted in my ear, getting through to me.

I pulled back. Energy washed through me as a euphoria took over. I dropped to the grass as my mind fogged with it. Everything was okay. Everything was right in the world. I wanted nothing more than to just lay here. So much energy. It crackled along my skin, leaving tingles running over every inch of me. I was lifted and carried away by strong arms, the scent of citrus enveloping me as people poured from the woods and up the lawn.

The jostling brought me back to the present. Fear shot through me like ice in my veins, bringing the world back into sharp focus. "Put me down!"

Isaac got me into the house while Zeke slammed the door behind us. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I pumped my arms as we tore through the kitchen.

"Where are the staffs?" Miles asked as he met us in the hallway.

"No time, run!" Uma shouted as she led the way toward the front of the house.

Heart pounding against my ribs, we reached the front door.

Uma jerked it open only to slam it shut again. "They're around the front."

"Side door." Miles' voice spurred all of us toward the long hallway. The house shook, knocking all of us to the floor in the foyer. Dust fell from the ceiling.

"What the fuck was that?" I snapped as we got to our feet again.

"The wards," Uma grunted as we began to run again. "They're going to take out the walls with them."

"The conservatory." Miles took my hand and pulled me into a run with everyone else hauling ass behind us.

A haunting rumble came from the kitchen. Glass shattered. A chunk of granite flew in front of us and embedded into the wall.

"They're in!" Uma turned and threw a fireball. Fire erupted behind us at the kitchen doorway. "Faster!"

Smoke began to fill the hallway as we rushed through the conservatory doorway and through the plants. Miles reached the glass door first. "Shit!"

My heart dropped as we slid to a stop on the tiles. Outside the warded door a group of witches waited.

We turned back the way we came. The glass door cracked under a blast of light.

Uma grunted and threw her arm up. A shimmering barrier burst to life around us. The witches ran towards us. Asher shoved me behind them as I got ready to drop my own barriers.

The possessed bounced off the dome of shimmering light. They began to circle it like sharks as another group of them joined from the house.

"Uma? How long can you last?" I asked, breathless.

"Minutes," she whispered back as sweat began to drip down her face from the strain.

Jadis stepped out from the crowd, her eyes glowing black, a sick smirk crossing her face. "You can't keep this up, Uma. You're already tired."

"Screw you," Uma snapped between her teeth. "You're a disgrace to witches."

My gazed swept the area around me as realization dawned. We were trapped. "Shit, shit,"

"Any ideas?" Uma asked under her breath.

I looked at the others as we racked our brains. We were surrounded by the black-eyed possessed. Uma was already wearing out. We were fucked.

My hand brushed a hard lump in my pocket. I slipped my hand inside and pulled out my stone. An idea sparked. It wasn't a good one. We'd all die. But it would also stop Jadis and the possessed from spreading.

Could I do it. Kill us all? My hand shook around the stone as it grew warm against my skin. Did I have a choice? There was only one way this could play out. My throat grew tight. I couldn't make the decision on my own. I met Zeke's gaze.

"I'm going to blow my stone," I whispered, only loud enough for them to hear.

They turned to me.

"It'll take all of us out." My eyes burned as I held it out between all of us. "And them."

Uma's face grew strained and pale.

Miles was silent.

The twins turned to each other.

Zeke and Asher moved closer to me.

We were going to die. We all knew it, and there was nothing we could do to stop it. It only mattered if we took out the enemy too.

It was several heartbeats before Uma gave me a silent nod of approval.

Miles nodded and put his hand on mine. My sweet genius. How I loved the way he was. Silent, supportive. Wonderful. Loving. Nausea rolled through me.

"Do it, Red." Isaac's voice brought my gaze to his. The surety there. The confidence in himself, in us. It was beautiful to see before the end. His hand moved on top of Miles'.

My heart filled with love as I turned to Ethan.

Ethan nodded. "You go, we go." Ethan. My romantic at heart. I wished I had more time with him, with all of them. My creative genius. The only one who could understand what music and art meant to me. Ethan's hand covered his brother's.

"Together," Asher said, drawing my attention. Fuck. Asher. Words couldn't even capture how I felt about him. His sweetness, his love, everything he was.

Tears slipped out and rolled down my face as his hand covered Ethan's. My chest grew tight, hard to breathe.

I looked up and met Zeke's eyes. Shadows warred inside them as his hand joined ours. "As always." My tortured teddy bear. The courage it took for him to admit that he couldn't protect us now, that he couldn't sacrifice for us now. Love poured from me in tears.

I wouldn't be able to do what was needed if I kept thinking about it. I pulled energy from around us. From me, from them, and sent it to the stone. It grew to a scorching heat in my hand. I met each of their eyes again.

"We'll see you on the other side," Miles promised.

Ethan, Asher, and Zeke moved to protect the rest of us. Someone jerked me against them.

A blast hit us, and there was nothing.

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jerked awake, smoke and shattered glass everywhere. A heavy weight was shoved off of me. Numb, I looked up to find Mila, my grandmother, squatting beside me.

"You did good, girl." Mila smiled as her arms moved to my shoulders. I didn't understand until she helped me sit up. The conservatory was gone. Only a warped steel shell remained, and the house ... The house was engulfed in flames. Smoke billowed from the ruins, turning the sky dark.

But none of that mattered when I saw the bodies. Everywhere. Bodies lay thrown back from us in the rubble. Only the crackle of flames filled the silence.

I struggled to my feet and desperately began searching for the guys.

"Slow down," Mila said.

"Where are they?" I demanded as I spotted Zeke beside me. His ice-blue eyes were open, his shirt wet and stuck to his body. A large shard of glass protruded from his shoulder. He didn't move. I grabbed his hand. "No, no, no, no!" I quickly checked his pulse. Please ... No. Nothing. There was nothing.

Mila reached down and closed his eyes. "He protected you from the shrapnel."

I closed my eyes. Of course he did. Tears burned a path down my face as I began to look for the others. A flash of blond hair had me crawling through the debris to Asher's side. His shoulder was covered in blood as I rolled him onto his back. His eyes were closed, his skin already cooling, his chest still.

"No!" I screamed as my heart shattered again. No, no, no. It couldn't be. It couldn't end this way! It was getting harder and harder to breathe. I searched the wreckage for the others.

Miles! His beautiful hunter-green eyes were open, shirt soaked in blood. His right arm was under a large chuck of cement, blood pooling around it. I whimpered and wrapped my arms around myself. This couldn't be happening. Please

An aching pit grew inside me as I spotted the twins. Ethan was wrapped around Isaac, trying to shield him from the blast. Both were covered in blood. Both of their chests were still. They were gone. Uma. Where was Uma? I searched the wreckage but saw nothing. Gone. Juan just lost another parent. "No!" I screamed on a sob. My voice cracked, unable to hold the sound.

Mila wrapped her arms around me and held me to her shoulder as I sobbed. Completely broken, I fell apart in her arms. They were gone. Dead. I'd killed them. Someone help me, I'd killed the men I loved. Every heartbeat was agonizing as the realization clawed deep into my soul. Gone.

"Red. Breathe."

I opened my eyes and jerked away from Mila. Isaac's spirit was there, kneeling beside me, his hand out as if he had tried to touch me only to realize he couldn't. The others fanned out behind him. All of them, shimmering as if made of light.

Unable to say anything, I shook my head repeatedly and tried to get enough breath to speak.

"It's okay, Beautiful." Ethan smiled a sad smile. "It's going to be okay."

I met his eyes. My world was shattered around me. My heart in pieces. They were gone. There was nothing left for me, not without them. My voice trembled and croaked. "It's not okay, it never will be okay again. Not without you."

"Lexie, breathe. Please," Zeke rasped.

Shiny drops moved down all of their faces as I looked up at them, still gasping. Still trying to just exist. Trying to get through the next moment.

"You have to let us go," Asher said as he knelt down. "Please. You're alive, and we're okay with it."

I shook my head as the answer hit me. "I-I can bring you back."

Miles shook his head as he stepped closer. "Don't do that to us. Don't make us zombies."

I wiped my face and put my hand on the chest of Asher's body. "The Veil energy." Desperate, I went down deep to that place where it connected to me and pulled. Energy of creation, Jadis had said. I could save them. The energy slipped from my grasp. Desperate, almost out of my mind, I mentally scrambled for it again.

"No, Lexie. That'll close the Veil again." Mila grabbed my hand and pulled it back from Asher, turning me to her.

I jerked back and broke her hold. "I don't care."

"You can't do that," Mila said.

I shook my head and reached out. I connected to the Veil again. Gold light glowed under my hand. Heal. Please.

"You'd doom the world to save the people you love?" Mila demanded harshly.

I turned on her. "Yes! Fuck a world that doesn't have them in it!"

Her eyes narrowed on mine. "How does that make you any different than the person who started this?"

I flinched at her words, trying to hide from the truth of them. I couldn't do it. I couldn't save them. I wasn't like that person. I crumbled against her. "I can't do this."

"Where'd Ethan go?" Isaac asked behind me.

That broke me all over again. I sobbed into her shoulder. He'd moved on, left me. Left us. Why?

Thunder clapped above. The ground shook. A wave of energy ripped through the ruins, shaking me to the bone. I didn't care. Let it take me out. They were gone. That's all that mattered.

"Beautiful," a voice called.

I shook my head. He was gone, he'd never call me that again. The scent of spicy cologne reached me. I lifted my head only high enough to see him. Ethan. Whole, covered in blood, but healed. Was he real? Could he really be here? Or was I just losing my mind? Wait ... he was a phoenix. I reached out a shaking hand. My fingers touched wet cotton. Awe crashed over me as I launched myself into his arms. I clung to him as I sobbed into his chest. "I love you." I barely managed between sobs. "Please don't go away again."

He held me tighter than he ever had before as tears poured down his face. "I'm alive, I'm here. I love you. It'll be okay."

"You guys can do this." Zeke knelt beside us. "You're both strong. And you have each other."

I pulled back from Ethan and looked up at one of the pieces of my heart. "Don't lie to me. Not now."

Zeke closed his eyes as more silver tears fell down his cheeks. Those icy-blue eyes met mine. "You can. You have to. For us."

I shook my head as Ethan held me close.

"You have to live for us," Isaac said, his voice a barelythere rasp.

"Hermano ..." Ethan gasped.

Isaac shook his head. "It's okay, brother. It's going to be okay."

"I'll never see you again." Ethan croaked as his grip on me tightened.

"That's the way it's gotta be." Isaac's voice shook. "See the world. Make your band a success. Love Lexie. Do everything we won't be able to."

Unable to take it, I buried my face in Ethan's neck as we cried.

"Father," Mila said.

"It's over?" a man's voice asked.

I struggled to breathe with the loss coursing through me.

"Yes," Mila answered.

"Good," the man said.

"Can you save them?" Mila asked.

That brought me back enough to lift my head and turn to them. His square face was dour and tan. Death didn't look like a skeleton. He looked like a normal human being who worked outside a lot. Dark hair, dark eyes. His jaw reminded me of someone. Dad. He looked vaguely like my father. Not much, only enough to show relation. But that didn't matter right now. "You can save them?"

Death's dark gaze met mine as he arched an eyebrow at my question. "Do I have the power to restore them? Yes, of course I do. Will I, however? No."

I broke apart again in Ethan's arms. We clung to one another, that flame inside of me winking out. I grew cold.

"Father, please." Mila got to her feet. "She saved the world, surely that's worth a boon."

"Mila, I can't just grant boons whenever I feel like it," he countered. "You know it doesn't work that way."

"She's the last, Papa," she pleaded, her brows drew together, tears pooling in her own eyes.

"Even if I wanted to, I can't, Mila. I'm sorry." His lips pressed into a thin line as a weariness seemed to appear around his eyes. I pulled back from Ethan and turned to them as a memory surged through my mind. "I'll become a Reaper."

Ethan's grip on me tightened as Death and Mila turned to me.

"Pardon?" Death asked.

I took a deep breath and wiped my face. "Bring them back and I'll become a Reaper when I die."

"Lexie ..." Ethan breathed.

Death thought it over as my pulse pounded in my ears. Stone crumbled around me. Smoke drifted in thick wafts.

"You could become a Reaper and still see them," he countered, "without me having to deal with the balance of life and death."

"I need them alive. All of them. Uma, Zeke, Miles, Asher, Isaac. I can't ..." My voice cracked and choked off as even more tears fell. "Please?"

"Papa." Mila drew his attention. "You owe me."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Fine." A dagger appeared in his hand. Death dragged the tip across the meat of his palm. I half expected nothing to happen, but black blood pooled and flowed down his wrist. He held out the blade towards me, handle first. "A blood oath and you get your friends back."

I didn't hesitate. Snatching the blade and slicing my hand was done in almost one motion. I held my hand out to the man. Death's cold hand wrapped around mine, mixing our blood together. "A Reaper. Do you agree?"

"I do," I whispered.

Death squeezed my hand once then let go of me. In the blink of an eye the guys' souls disappeared. Zeke wheezed. Miles groaned. Ethan and I rushed to check on everyone. They were alive!

"Hermano," Ethan rasped as he scrambled across the debris to his twin.

"Fucking hell," Isaac grunted as Ethan reached him. "I'm not leaving you."

Asher groaned as he came to.

Zeke's breathing was rough as blood began to pour from around the glass in his shoulder.

Miles was pale and still unconscious, but there was now a rise and fall to his chest.

Asher moved to Miles' side and picked the cement up off his hand.

I moved to Zeke and tried to stop the bleeding without touching the glass.

The only thing that mattered was that they were alive and breathing. Sirens sounded in the distance, growing closer by the second.

The fire department, ambulances, and police arrived. With a blast that loud and destructive, I was honestly amazed they weren't there sooner. Quickly, everyone was loaded into ambulances. While Death had brought them back, he didn't heal them completely. Zeke and Miles were by far the worst off. Ethan and I drove to the hospital in Zeke's now busted-up Jeep.

We arrived and I was struck with déjà vu as the nurses and doctors rushed from section to section, taking care of our friends. Our family.

Numbness had settled in as we waited. We watched as they put Zeke on a ventilator. Sent Miles for emergency surgery. Isaac and Asher both needing stitches over their backs but otherwise they were fine. Uma joined us to wait. Apparently, she had strengthened her barrier enough to be thrown from the blast without being killed.

Eventually even Hades joined us, in dog form. Burnt and bloody, Uma had volunteered to take him to a 24-hour vet office to get patched up.

It was in that state of limbo that my phone beeped.

I pulled it out and looked at the cracked screen. It was a text.

Jake: Come to the abandoned hospital or Jake dies.

I sighed. Yeah. Perfect timing, as shole. The loves of my life are in the emergency room and you expect me to come running. I wanted nothing more than to stay here with Ethan, waiting for news about the guys. But I couldn't. I had to go. I gritted my teeth as I texted back.

Lexie: I'll be there.

"Ethan." I tucked my phone back into my pocket. "I have to deal with my ex."

Ethan turned to me, his mouth a tight line. "Right now? No fucking way. Let Evie find the piece of shit and deal with him."

I shook my head. "I can't, he's got Jake."

Ethan's body practically vibrated with the swirl of emotions he had to be feeling. "Fine. Let's go."

"I need to do this on my own." I met his gaze. "I need you to be here to protect the guys. Just in case, somehow, Jadis made it through."

"Lexie." He scowled.

"Please?"

He clearly struggled with that for several heartbeats before he nodded.

I kissed Ethan quickly before leaving the hospital.

A strange calm filled me as I hit Evelyn's contact info before reaching Zeke's Jeep.

"Are you all right?" Evelyn answered the phone, almost breathless.

"Yeah," I said in a dead pan voice. "But Dylan has my friend Jake and he wants to meet. This ends now."

"I can't interfere with him_yet," she warned. "Not until you have him admit it. Call for Zahur when you do. We're taking care of the police at the house right now."

"I will." I jerked open the door and climbed inside. "Just get to the old abandoned hospital off the highway north of town. I'll take care of the rest." I hung up the phone.

As I drove, purpose thrummed in my veins. Dylan had Jake. I had lost the guys—sold my afterlife for them—and this fucker was the last loose end. The entire reason for all of this.

By the time I pulled up to the building, I was ready. To face him. To take him out if need be. It was time to be done with this chapter of my life.

I parked the car. Took Zeke's flashlight and headed into the decaying building.

I made my way down the rickety staircase, past the vines that covered the damp, moldy walls. A soft glow showed around the half-closed door at the end of the stairs. My fingers tingled, my chest tightening as I pushed open the door. I went still. It wasn't Dylan.

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hat the fuck?" I muttered as I stepped into the room.

My jaw dropped. Eric leaned against the altar across the dirt floor, draped in a dark cloak.

He grinned. "Oh good, you made it."

Stunned, I shook my head. "You?"

"Yeah, me." That grin stretched across his face as he tossed the phone onto the altar.

"Where's Jake?" I demanded.

"I'm right here." Jake's voice spun me around. He was standing in a blind corner near the door.

Heart hammering, I leaned forward to go to him but stopped short. He wasn't tied to a chair. He wasn't restrained. I backed away from him. He wasn't ... It clicked. He wasn't a hostage. "You?"

Jake's eyes shadowed. "I'm sorry, Lexie."

I gritted my teeth as I moved back again so I could keep them both in my sight. "Who closed the Veil?"

Eric raised his hand. "That would be me."

I shook my head. "How? Why?"

"You had it right," Eric said as he picked up a lighter and lit a stick of incense on the altar. "We were trying to save Dylan's dad." I shook my head, still stunned. "Dylan ... isn't a part of this?"

"No," Jake said, his voice quiet. "I just got him to grow the flowers we needed for his project."

My mind was racing as the pieces fell more and more into place. Unable to speak, I just stood, rooted in place.

"I didn't like it either,"—he swallowed hard— "but his dad is dying, and that man practically raised me. We can't lose him."

"You have no idea what you've done." I turned my gaze to Eric as he began lighting candles in a circle on the floor. "And how did you do all this? Where did you learn magic?"

"My mother was a witch," Eric explained as he turned his back to me and lit another candle. "After she bailed on me, she left enough of her books to put me on the path to finding the right materials."

"Why?" I bit out between my teeth.

"Because Dylan, Jake and I were all buddies as kids." Eric straightened and turned back to me. "And why not?"

Rage coursed through me. "Do you have any fucking idea what you did? How many souls you've destroyed? How many people have died because of the Veil closing?"

Eric eyed me for a moment. "I'm sorry, did you really think that I ever gave a shit about any of that?"

"You fucking selfish prick," I bellowed. "You fucked with things you can't even comprehend." I turned to Jake. "Did you tell him? That he almost ended the world?"

Jake nodded as he stuffed his hands into his pockets.

My body shook with unspent anger. "What the hell is wrong with you two?"

"I didn't know what he was doing, Lexie," Jake said. "I didn't know how bad it was."

"And once you did?" I snapped.

Jake just stood there in silence.

"Did you set me and Riley up?"

Jake looked down at the dirt. That was answer enough.

"You fucking destroyed her life." I shook my head. "She's a vampire now, Jake. As a vampire, her soul will die when she dies."

"I know, and I'll regret it the rest of my life." Jake lifted his head, his eyes pleading, but my heart was already hardening to the very sight of him.

"To be fair, they weren't supposed to take her." Eric moved back to the altar as the scent of sandalwood slowly filled the basement. "That was all Jadis."

"How the hell did you hook up with Jadis?" I asked, stalling. Two against one weren't odds that I had counted on, though Jake might not put up a fight if it came down to it.

"I was working on a way to deal with you when she found me." Eric put herbs into a pestle and began to crush them. "And I really have you to thank for that. She's a great source of information." He turned back to me, still crushing herbs. "Well, she was."

"So, she is dead." I couldn't help but be relieved.

"She didn't come back from Huntington's house." He set the pestle down and picked up a knife.

I backed up a step towards the door.

"Lexie, we only need some of your blood," Jake said as he moved to block my retreat. "Eric says with it he can create a potion that will save Dylan's dad once and for all. Then this can all be over. No more soul traps, no one else gets hurt."

Eric tested the edge of the blade. "Well, I may have understated what we'd need." His eyes met mine with a sick glee. "We're going to need your soul."

I scoffed. "Let me guess, you're behind all the deaths in town, too. All the missing?"

Eric smirked. "You're not as dumb as you seem."

"Y-y-you *killed* those people?" Jake turned to him in horror, an arm wrapped around his stomach. "That's not

what we talked about!"

"Shut it, Jake," Eric spat before turning back to me. "Your soul is different. You have a link to the Veil, and if Dylan's dad drinks that, well, it'd have to work."

"Which will drain the Veil again, shut it, and end the world."

He pointed the blade at me with a smirk. "Not if we don't stop souls from crossing again. That energy will keep flowing right into Dylan's dad."

Jake shook his head. "You can't kill Lexie."

"Then your father figure dies," Eric countered.

I raised my hand. "Uh, I'm not going to just stand here and let you kill me."

The evil grin that flitted across Eric's lips sent a chill down my spine. "Look around you."

I looked at the walls, searched the dirt covered floor, and found nothing.

"Oh, sorry, let me help." Eric waved his hand. A soft breeze moved through the basement, stirring the dirt around me. I closed my eyes until it settled back down. A circle was painted in the dirt. I had stepped right into it. Heart pounding, I reached out and hit an invisible wall. Fear clenched my heart in a vise.

Eric moved across from the white line. "You see, this circle cuts you off from magical energy and keeps you in place. You're stuck."

I dropped my foot back into a better stance. "You really don't know me very well."

Eric chuckled as he began transferring the lit candles from the dummy circle to the one surrounding me. "You know kickboxing. That's no secret." He straightened and met my gaze. "That's another thing this circle does. It'll drain you until you die, then hold your soul here for me."

Adrenaline surged through me as I took in the runes surrounding me. Shit, shit, shit.

"Lexie, I didn't know," Jake said as tears filled his eyes.

"Go to hell, Jake," I bit out between my teeth.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Jake hurried out the door and up the stairs.

Coward. I turned to watch as Eric continued to move the candles. My chest grew tighter as weariness washed over me. It grew with every candle he added. Fuck! Think, Lexie. I could use Veil energy, but that could close the Veil again. What was here in the circle? Earth, air. A weight seemed to fall over my shoulders, bringing me to my knees. My eyelids grew heavy as the life drained from me like the tide. I fell to the dirt and watched him go back to the distiller in the corner.

Earth and air. What did I know? Breathing grew difficult as I racked my brain.

It had been at the end of a lesson when Uma explained it. "You can't cut anyone off from the earth and the air. They don't answer to human whims."

I closed my eyes and fell into that silent space inside me. I shifted my hands out to my sides, palm up, feeling the air tickle my skin. The air grew chilly as the energy was pulled from it. It became easier to breathe. I opened my eyes. Goosebumps rose while energy rushed through me, strengthening me. My breath came out in a fog against the dirt.

I buried my hands in the moist, rich soil and dropped my barriers the rest of the way. All that energy filled the earth beneath me. "Intermissium."

The basement shook. Dirt dropped from the ceiling as Eric steadied the alchemy table. Long, thin cracks formed in the earth around us, one right through the paint line, breaking the circle.

That pressing weight lifted off me as the world stopped shaking. Eric turned and met my gaze as I pushed myself to my feet. "Nice try, motherfucker." Still in that quiet place inside me, I brought a ball of ice to life in my hand. "Now, let's play."

He sparked a fire in his hand. His arm pulled back, his face a snarl. I ran to the right as Eric brought his arm forward, throwing the ball towards me. Dropping to my knee, I slid across the dirt under the streak of fire and popped back up to my feet, still on the run. I side-armed the ice orb at him. Eric dove to the left, rolled in the dirt and came back up. Grabbing the blade off the altar, I changed directions back towards him.

He threw another shot of fire towards my face, but it was useless. I'd brought my arm up, conjuring a shield of gold light just in time to knock it away. He pulled his own blade out from behind his back and came towards me. I feinted right, ducked Eric's swipe and drove the blade deep into his side, just under his ribs. It slid in sickeningly easy. 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. I helped him down to the ground. I had stabbed him. Oh fuck. My shaking hand let go of the blade as blood continued to soak his shirt. "Zahur." I swallowed the bile back as horror filled me. "Zahur!"

A strange pop sounded as Eric began to wheeze.

Evelyn was beside us in an instant. "Who is this?"

"He closed the Veil. I didn't mean to ..." I looked up at her, my hands trembling. "Save him."

Her cognac eyes met mine. "He closed the Veil, you're sure of it?"

I nodded. "He admitted it."

Evelyn turned from me to Eric.

"Take me to jail," he wheezed. "Don't let me die."

Evelyn's gaze narrowed. "There's no jail for you." In one smooth motion she jerked the blade from his ribs and slashed it across his throat. Blood poured from the gaping wound with a sick gurgling sound. His breathing stopped. The light in his eyes went out, his body stilled.

Horror shook me as I looked up at Evelyn. "Why?"

Evelyn scowled at me. "This isn't a game, Lexie. People have died because of him. Souls have been destroyed."

I knew that, but still.

Evelyn's face softened. "As long as he was alive, he'd be a threat to the Veil."

I turned from her and was sick.

Hands held my hair back as another rubbed my back gently. "That's it. Let it out." The deep voice was gentle.

"Who was the boy outside pacing near the cars?" Evelyn demanded when I finally stopped retching.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my trembling hand. "His accomplice. He-he-he didn't know what Eric was doing. He just wanted to save someone."

"I'll go get him now," the man said.

"No, I'll deal with him." Evelyn got to her feet. "You send her back to the hospital."

When I finally lifted my head, I met dark eyes. Dark skin, chiseled jaw. Something about it was familiar. "Zahur?"

He gave me an understanding smile. "Yeah. Are you alright?"

I shook my head. Evelyn just slit Eric's throat in front of me. No, I wasn't alright.

His eyes narrowed as he lifted my chin and examined me. "You look like you're in a bit of shock."

"I can't imagine why."

"I don't want you driving in this condition." He got to his feet and pulled me to mine. "You were at the hospital, yes?"

I nodded, still a little shaky.

He lifted his fingers, poised as if to snap. "Close your eyes."

I didn't even bother asking, I simply obeyed the request.

He snapped.

I waited three heartbeats before I said, "Was something supposed to happen?"

He didn't answer.

Peeking beneath my lashes, I was stunned to find myself standing outside the emergency room under an awning, rain pounding the pavement beside me. I took several shaky breaths before I stepped out into the storm. I scrubbed my hands in the rain, washing the blood from them, though a part of me was sure it would never come off. Raw and completely emotionally spent I shuffled my way back to the waiting room. Ethan was sitting in the row closest to the entry.

Cold to the bone, I sat down beside him in silence.

He didn't take his gaze off the emergency room door as his hand moved to take mine. "Is it over?"

I squeezed his fingers tightly. "It's over."

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had only seen Jake once after that day in the basement. Zahur had popped me through the ether again to stand outside the bars of his cell. Jake's eyes were red-rimmed, his hair everywhere, his face pale. It was clear he was torturing himself. Instead of feeling pity or sympathy I could only look at him, numb.

He lifted his head and met my eyes. "I'm so sorry, Lexie."

I scoffed. "You were going to let him kill me, Jake."

He buried his face in his hands. "I was going to go back in, I swear."

"You spied on us for him," I stated. "You knew where our families were. At least what direction they were going."

Looking a little green, he nodded. "I thought it was just information Eric needed."

I clenched my fist, the urge to pound his face in shaking me to my core. "He passed that information on to Jadis. You almost got them killed."

He dropped his hands, sniffed, and met my gaze. "I'm sorry. I know it's not enough to say it, but I can't do anything else."

"I trusted you," I bit out. "And you almost got me killed. Almost got all of us killed."

"I swear I didn't know that Eric was planning that." He got to his feet and moved to the bars. "He said blood."

"And you didn't ask questions?"

He hung his head. "No, no I didn't."

"You knew. Deep down, you knew what Eric was capable of," I surmised.

He nodded. "He'd always been a little weird when we were kids. I thought his talk of magic was bullshit."

"Until you needed something."

He met my gaze. "Yeah."

"Were you ever my friend?" I asked, desperate to know. The question had been turning inside me for days, keeping me up at night.

His eyes grew wide. "Yes, Lexie. I love you. You're one of my best friends."

I scoffed. "That you left to die."

"Can you say you'd have done differently? To save the guys?" he hollered.

Without ever flinching or taking my eyes off him, I said, "I did. Didn't anyone tell you? When I took out Jadis, I killed the guys too."

His mouth hung open as he took a few staggered steps back. "What?"

"I killed the men I love. To save the world," I bit out between my teeth. "And I had the same choice you did. Doom the world or save the people I love." I shook my head. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill billions to save a few."

His eyes narrowed on mine with a mad light in them. "Then maybe you truly aren't able to love deeply."

"No, I do. I love completely, hopelessly, I'm just not selfish enough to do what you did," I said. "I heard about your sentence. Living on probation in the gargoyle village for the rest of your life sounds about right for what you did. At least, the parts you say you knew about."

"I never meant for any of it," he whispered. "I shouldn't have left. I should have gone back in for you."

I looked at him. Really looked at him. The light that was Jake seemed to be gone. His shoulders sagged. Grief lined his face. It wasn't anger that filled me. He'd never amount to anything he could have been, and it was due to his own determination to circumvent the laws of nature. Things died. That was the one constant in this world. There's no getting around it. No running from it. You could either understand and live your life, or you could hide. I chose to live.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Goodbye, Jake."

WE SPENT the rest of the week in the hospital going between Miles' and Zeke's rooms. After eight hours of intensive surgery, Miles should be able to keep the functionality of his hand. He'll have some numbness in two of his fingers, but he said it's better than no hand at all.

It didn't take long before Zeke was taken off the ventilator. In his attempt to cover me, he had taken several panes of glass to his back. One of them nicked his lung. By the time he woke up he only had an oxygen mask on, and we were by his side. He simply squeezed my hand and went back to sleep. We filled him in later. I got the lecture of a lifetime, and I couldn't help but smile through the entire thing.

There was an investigation, of course. The house was decimated. It was determined that a gas leak had caused the explosion. I'm pretty sure that Evelyn and the gargoyles intervened to clean up the mess.

Jadis hadn't been seen since. One night, Ethan snuck into the morgue and checked the bodies recovered from the house. There, clear as day, was Jadis. Dead, listed as Jane Doe.

After the first night at the hospital, Hades disappeared. I did finally get a voicemail from him explaining that with Jadis gone his job was done, but he'd be back to check on me once in a while. I still had mixed feelings about him, but I knew he'd do good wherever he went next.

Eventually, everyone moved back to their houses, except Miles. Since Sylvie had moved closer to work, Miles moved in with Zeke, taking Sylvie's old bedroom. The two of them squabbled almost daily. Asher and Jessica were able to go home as well. Repairs and renovations hadn't taken as long as they had expected.

I moved back to Rory's, though to be honest, I frequently showed up to one of the guys' houses in the middle of the night and climbed into bed with them. Not always, only when the nightmares of Eric got too much. When the blood seemed too real on my hands.

The police continue their search for Hades in his human form. Not surprisingly, they still hadn't found him, but to be fair the entire police force was still busy looking for the people that were still missing. A large number of bodies were found at the warehouse but not all of them.

Life got back to normal. Well, what I remembered of normal, with the addition of one night a week set aside for group date night.

Dylan's dad had passed away a few months after everything had come to a head. When we found out, Asher had insisted on going to the funeral, and I couldn't not go.

After the service Ash and I pulled up to Zeke's place. We spotted a familiar figure standing outside by Zeke's Jeep. Zahur. Asher went quietly inside as I made a mental note to check on him tonight.

I walked over to stand in front of Zahur. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "Well, Atticus has forbidden the twins from getting a dog, so naturally I'm giving them Kita."

I snorted. "You're trolling him?"

"He needs it." He eyed me. "How are you doing?"

I smoothed my palms down the front of my black dress. "It's weird, going back to normal after everything."

He tilted his head to the side. "But good?"

I thought about it. I wasn't special anymore, and I was okay with that. The ghosts were able to move on without me, which was actually a relief. It had been quiet since all the dust had settled. Amazingly so. "Good. Except for the nightmares."

He nodded. "Good."

I grinned. "Thank you for all your help. I couldn't even have gotten started without you."

He smiled. "I gave you a few pointers, that's it."

"No, really." I shifted on my feet. "You saved everyone by helping me."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "I didn't save anyone. You did. You did the work, you had the drive. I simply gave you the tools."

My cheeks were burning by the time Zeke came out with Kita on a leash. His face was solemn as he handed over the leash to Zahur. "Don't forget, she's still a bit skittish. Introduce her slowly to the kids."

Zahur took the leash. "I will. She'll be staying with Jade, Quinn and I until she gets used to everyone."

Zeke nodded. "Good idea."

Zahur met my gaze with a smile. "Don't you have a life to get back to?"

"Actually, she has to study." Zeke turned to me with a smug look. "The SATs are coming up, and she has to score high if she wants to have her choice of art school."

I glared at him. "I was told it was group date night."

"Yeah." Zeke smirked. "A 'get Lexie to study' date night."

I shot him a look full of the promise of retaliation.

Zeke's smirk morphed into a grin, the shit.

"Art school?" Zahur began to scratch behind Kita's ears.

"Yeah, I'm still pursuing tattooing, but I think art school first will help me become a better artist." I shrugged as if it weren't a big deal. As if I wasn't nervous about my chances.

"Good." Zahur grinned as he straightened from the Jeep. "You better get to it, then." He raised his hand and snapped his fingers, blinking out of existence right in front of us with a pop.

Zeke shook his head. "If only he could teach me that trick."

"Oh yeah?"

He looked down at me. "No more flying."

I snorted.

"How was the funeral?" Miles asked as we walked into the house.

I shrugged. "It was a funeral. Dylan broke down and his friends were there to help."

"Everyone but Jake," Ethan said as he passed me my journal.

I sighed as I tucked it under my arm, going to the kitchen table. He was right. Jake was officially a missing person.

"How was Asher?" Miles raised an eyebrow.

Asher had broken down and cried too. "It got a little rough, but I think it was good for him to get some closure."

"Just him?" Isaac asked softly.

I gave him a small smile. No, not just Asher. Seeing Dylan gave me my own sense of closure. And a bit of guilt. I had been so sure that it was him.

"Give Asher some time and we'll go check on him," Isaac said as he joined us. He leaned down and kissed my temple. "How about you?"

I shrugged. "It was weird. I know he's dead because of me, but I also had no other choice."

Ethan came back into the kitchen, this time with an SAT study guide in his hand. "He's dead because of cancer, Beautiful."

"Yeah." I shrugged. My eyes went to the book in Ethan's hand. "So, we're studying? You guys know this is a bait and switch, right?"

They chuckled.

Isaac wrapped his arm around me as everyone settled in. "Don't worry, Red. It's not the end of the world—this time."

Life had gotten messy, and there were still going to be times that were hard, but this was our life. Together.

This journey began as mine, but it had turned into ours. The past few months the guys have been reading over my journal. Writing in parts of their own from their own perspective. So, it only seems right that you hear from them one last time.

It was a crazy trip, but I'd still do it again without question. Face your fears, your trauma and be happy. It's the best revenge you can ever have. - Z.

You don't have to live up to anyone's expectations except yours. Don't be afraid to be your own person. Make your own path. - Asher.

Ask for help when you need it. There's no shame in it. - Miles

In the darkest times, you learn who your true friends are. - Isaac $\,$

Remember, you are always enough- Ethan.

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