THE VEIL DIARIES

WENTHE DEAD COME HOME

B.L. BRUNNEMER

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<u>Miles</u>

Lexie

<u>Jadis</u>

Evelyn

To my wonderful people; Chrissy, Melissa and Susan! You guys are there for the late nights, the low points and the high. I could never have gotten this one done without you!

Also, to the wonderful staff at Grand Forks Chiropractic for being so patient with me when I forget my appointments because I'm working. Told you I'd add you guys!

CHAPTER 1

let the tattoo shop door close behind me as I rushed across the parking lot. Asher was back. Smiling, I climbed into my Blazer and slammed the door shut. Last month, Asher had his first shift into a werewolf. Since then he'd been at Astrid's house so she could mentor him through it. His entire life and body had changed. He needed to re-learn everything about himself. No one had really seen him since. I started the car and peeled out of the parking lot while practically bouncing in my seat.

There had been some calls and Skype, but that didn't cut it when you'd just started dating one of your best friends. Especially one you'd been crushing on for months, as well as crushing on and dating his four best friends. Yeah, it was complicated. Things were still new for all of us.

My pulse beat in my throat as I pulled onto his street. Butterflies took off as I parked, shut off the car and ran for the front porch. Not bothering to knock, I simply shoved open the white door.

Asher was walking out of the kitchen doorway as he lowered and tapped the screen on his phone. Those ocean eyes met mine. Everything stopped. His sandy blond hair was shorter than it had been a month ago. The bags under his eyes were gone now, his face that boy next door kind of handsome. Wide shoulders and that almost extra foot of height on me... I took it all in in a heartbeat while never pulling my gaze from his. A smile spread across his face, lighting him up as I ran to him.

He came toward me, dropping the phone to the floor before he caught me in the air. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he held me tight in his. Warmth and happiness bubbled through me as I wrapped my legs around his waist. I took a deep, shaky breath of vanilla and cinnamon. Something inside me settled. Asher was home. Just like that, a month of not seeing him was gone as if it never existed. Light rolled through me as his face buried in the crook of my neck while he took his own deep breaths. A low growl rumbled in his chest, vibrating through me. I smiled against his skin. His wolf was happy to see me too. I think...

"Was that a good noise or a bad one?" I whispered against his throat.

He lifted his head, his nose trailing up my skin to my cheek. "Ally..."

His deeper voice sent a shiver of heat through me. I met his eyes. The light and dark blue now had a thread of silver weaving through them. Definitely a good noise.

I pulled myself higher, bringing my lips up to his. His lips moved with mine. Heat pooled as he kissed me harder, sweeping in and taking control. Thought long gone, I kissed him just as eagerly. The need to touch and be touched was almost a hunger. An entire month without seeing him, touching him, without that vanilla and cinnamon scent. He lowered me onto something soft before moving over me, his hand sliding up the outside of my thigh leaving want behind. Our breathing grew heavier as I slipped my hands under his shirt to touch scorching skin.

"Damn, Ally. I missed you."

My body clenched at the roughness in his voice. "Missed you too."

His lips began kissing down my neck again, his fingers pulling the loose V-neck of my slouchy shirt down until the valley between my breasts was exposed. His lips and tongue traced down my breastbone to bury between them. My fingers dug into his hair as my entire body went up in flames. His lips found the curve of my breast; my head fell back as a small moan slipped from my throat. His hand squeezed gently as his teeth pressed into my flesh, shooting electricity down my nerves. My breath caught as I clung to him.

At least until his teeth dug in more. Hot, sharp pain had me hissing. "Ow!" He didn't let up; in fact, he bit harder. "Ash, that hurts. Stop!" Adrenaline poured through my veins like ice water. I pushed his shoulders away, but he wasn't budging.

His silver-blue eyes met mine before he jerked away and hit the floor. His gaze held mine as the silver began to fade while horror moved in. Did he...? I pulled my neckline down and looked at the bite. There was a perfect impression of his teeth in my skin. I wiped my fingers over it... no blood. I

shifted my bra back to cover me before looking up at him as he slowly got to his feet.

His face was pale as he wrapped his arms around himself and took another step back. "Did I—"

"No, no blood." I readjusted my shirt before sitting up and putting my feet on the floor.

Asher moved back under the pass-through to the foyer.

"Ash?"

He shook his head. "This isn't a good idea."

"We just got carried away. Astrid sent me a list of the big don'ts and that was right up there in the top five." I shrugged. "I just really missed you."

His eyes were rough when they met mine. "Maybe this isn't a good idea."

My heart dropped.

"It's the first time I've kissed you since my shift and... I almost drew blood, Ally."

"I know." I gestured at my chest. "It was my boob, I'm kinda attached to it."

He went to say something but instead started laughing.

I smiled and relaxed a little. "Ash, it's going to take time. We'll need to figure out what works for us and what doesn't. We just need to be more careful."

He shook his head. "I might not have as much control as I thought."

I sent him my wicked smile. "Superman, you might not have noticed, but I wasn't exactly in control either."

He grinned as he stopped rubbing the back of his neck. Then his face grew somber. "If we're together, there's a big risk of you being converted. I don't know if I want to chance it."

"Where is this coming from?" I asked. Asher sounded like my old therapist when she wanted to bring up a subject.

"Astrid said we really needed to talk about the risks of dating." Asher shrugged. "After what just happened, we might as well talk about it now."

"Okay, let's talk about it." I ran my gaze over his still tense shoulders. "Are you going to sit down, or do I have to chase you?"

He snorted quietly as he came back into the family room. He sat down on the coffee table in front of me, his knees reaching the outside of my hips. "It is a very real risk that you might be converted, Ally," he said, meeting my eyes. "Astrid says it happens by accident all the time."

"I'm a necro," I reminded him. "Are we sure I could even be converted?"

His grin was back. "I asked Astrid. She said she'd talk to Evelyn and get back to me with an answer."

I smiled. "Asher, I know the risk. But, it's one I'm more than willing to take. And you can't make that choice for me."

"I could kill you, Ally," he reminded me. "I am a wolf inside; you can't trust him not to hurt you."

"I don't." I met his eyes again. "I trust you."

"Ally—"

"You stopped yourself, Ash."

He looked at me, doubt filling his face.

I needed to make him understand. "I couldn't push you away. I tried. You stopped yourself. You got yourself away from me before you broke skin."

He closed his eyes and hung his head. The tension radiating through his body made my heart ache.

I reached up and lifted his chin until he looked at me. "I don't play games. I don't go back and forth. I love you and I want to be with you."

His gaze was steady on my face and silver slipped through the blue as my fingers dropped from his chin.

My stomach knotted. "Asher, do you want to be with me?"

His face grew softer. "You know I love you."

"Do you want to be with me?"

His eyes were rough seas again. "Yeah."

"Then we're going to figure it out, together." I reached over and took his hand. "Running away is just going to hurt us both and make us miserable. And I don't want to do either of those things."

"You're right. But no more close calls." His fingers squeezed mine. "I know we talked, but... how have you been?"

I weaved my fingers with his and tried to smile. "Worried about having all of you in the same room again."

"Me too."

"I really missed you." My voice all but cracked.

He got to his feet, pulling me to mine. His arms moved around me carefully as I pressed against him. My eyes closed as I rested my cheek against his chest while he buried his nose into my hair. We simply reveled in the fact he was home and we were together again.

I don't know how long we stood like that, but soon Asher was lifting his head and loosening his arms. "The twins are coming."

I let him go as he stepped back toward the pass-through just before the door burst open.

Isaac hurried into the family room, all smiles. How could I describe Isaac? I smiled to myself. He was about seven inches taller than me, his wide, built shoulders in a lime green shirt on top of camo cargo shorts. His short hair was longer than usual, shaggy and blue with darker blue streaks through it. His skin had darkened over the summer bringing out his brown eyes. There was a light to Isaac that I could never really describe. His personality just shone out of his eyes turning them into a unique amber.

"Asshat!" Isaac ran into the room and tried to tackle Asher. Tried being the operative word. Asher barely moved a muscle as Isaac's toes brushed the floor while he dangled from Asher's shoulders like an unwanted backpack.

Asher chuckled and looked at him. "What are you doing?"

Isaac grinned at him. "I tried knocking you on your ass, but I guess that's not gonna happen anymore." He dropped to the floor and hugged Asher around the waist. "We missed ya, man."

Asher relaxed and patted his arms as Ethan came through the door. Ethan's eyes met mine then ran over me. He had been doing that more often lately, finding me in a room full of people before even seeing anyone else. Every time it sent heat rushing through me and made my pulse pick up. As Isaac's identical twin brother, they both had the same height and shoulders. The same straight nose and identical pouty lips. But that was it. Ethan tended to wear all black and combat boots while Isaac... well, Isaac wore whatever he wanted. Ethan's straight, black, jaw-length hair was down and tucked behind his ears. The five silver hoops running up his right ear flashed at me as he leaned against the pass-through doorway. Ethan's chocolate eyes were warm as they ran over my face one more time before he turned to Asher. "Hey, Asher."

Asher shoved Isaac away from him playfully before turning to Ethan. The light in his eyes dimmed, his smile faded around the edges. "Hey..."

Ethan grew completely still.

"Did you make any snacks yet?" Isaac called over his shoulder before he disappeared into the foyer and headed for the kitchen.

Asher turned his head toward me though he kept his gaze on Ethan. "Can you make sure he doesn't destroy my kitchen?"

I snorted before heading into the foyer and following Isaac through the door.

Isaac was already at the cookie jar in the sunlit room when I came in. I lifted myself to sit on the counter beside the jar and stole a few for myself.

Isaac moved closer to my legs until my knees brushed his hips. "How was work?"

I finished the bite of cookie in my mouth before answering. "It felt long. Like Christmas Eve when I was a kid."

He took a bite out of my cookie. "So, what's the plan tonight?"

"Food, games, hanging out." I narrowed my eyes at him and pulled my cookie out of his reach. "And that other thing."

"Going over how the dating schedule is going to work," he finished for me.

I nodded and took another bite of cookie.

His smile faded. "Red?"

I let my smile drop and shrugged. Lately, it seemed Isaac was the only one I could show how worried I was. Miles was always trying to keep the guys on track and communication flowing. Ethan was, well, Ethan, and being oddly distant. Hugs had even become rare from him. Zeke had been quiet and not sleeping again. He had buried himself in the garage and work, naturally.

He leaned over and brushed my nose with his. "We're not going to let anyone screw this up."

I rested my forehead against his. "Even me?"

"Even you."

I smiled as he leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. It had been almost a month since I had kissed him. I sank into him.

* * *

Asher waited until the kitchen door swung closed before moving between me and the others. "What the hell are you?"

I sighed. He'd noticed. That wasn't too surprising. "Remember when those witches tortured me?"

He nodded as he shifted to a defensive stance.

"They did something to me." I made a point to not move. "Ranulf noticed it on the camping trip."

His posture didn't change an inch. "Start talking."

I lowered my voice and quickly summed up what I knew. Which wasn't much.

He eventually relaxed and stepped away from the door. "That isn't much to go on."

I started to spin my rings. "Yeah, I know."

He glanced at the kitchen door then turned back to me. "They don't know?"

"Isaac does."

He shook his head. "You have to tell the others. You can't go around without knowing what kind of damage you can do."

I nodded. "I know, that's why I'm telling everyone tonight. Isaac's been watching me, but he can't do it all the time." I shrugged. "So far nothing's changed. I'm not wanting to tear into anyone, nothing different. I just feel... better."

His brow drew down as he moved closer. He began sniffing the air around me. He moved around me slowly, smelling me like a dog. I stayed still even when he got extremely close to my neck. He sneezed and backed off.

When he was done, he shook his head. "It's subtle, but there's a scent. I noticed the change mostly in the way you walked."

I raised an eyebrow. "The way I walked?"

He nodded. "You moved smoother, it's something I noticed about shifters in the last month. They're more... graceful is the only word I can use to describe it."

"Ranulf and Astrid agreed that I'm not a shifter." I raised an eyebrow. "But I smell?"

He nodded, his eyes un-focusing. "There's your cologne, which by the way makes my nose itch. And under that, there's a hint of smoke of some kind."

I shook my head. That really didn't tell me much.

"You need be extremely careful with Ally," Asher said, drawing my attention again. "You don't know what kind of damage you could do."

"I haven't even hugged her in over a week," I muttered. And I hated it. I missed touching her, seeing that happy look on her face when my fingers stroked down her back.

"Good." He turned to look at the front door. "Miles is here."

"He's going to interrogate you." I grinned as I started toward the kitchen.

"Watch yourself," he reminded me before I pushed open the kitchen door. I really didn't need the reminder.

* * *

Lexie

ETHAN WALKED through the kitchen door, his shoulders already tense. Isaac backed up away from me to lean against the island.

"Miles is here. He'll be having his usual 'are you okay' talk in the family room." Ethan jumped up on the counter beside me and took a handful of cookies.

"So, we have a while?" Isaac took the last bite of the cookie in his hand.

We chuckled. Asher wouldn't get to leave that couch until Miles understood everything he had to watch for with Asher as a new werewolf.

"Then let's order some pizza." I pulled out my phone to call. "I'm starving."

"Don't order pizza," Asher shouted from the living room. "I'll make a couple."

I went still. Asher had always had amazing hearing but now, how far could he hear? "Okay. I guess he's not pretending to not hear us anymore." I set my phone down. "Is Zeke coming?"

The twins shared a look.

"Probably not. He's dealing with some stuff." Ethan turned back to me. "I thought you two were talking to each other?"

I reached into the cookie jar and pulled a few more out. "We are, but I haven't seen him lately."

Isaac shrugged. "He sent Miles his schedule for school earlier this week."

"Miles will fill him in." Ethan bounced his heel off the cabinet under him.

The door to the kitchen opened. Miles came through the door and spied the cookies. Angled jaw, high cheekbones and wavy brown hair. Miles was cute. His rimless rectangular glasses only made him look older and, well, yummy.

"Asher is ordering pizza," Miles announced as he met my gaze with warm eyes.

I gave him a welcoming smile even though he'd been rather stand-offish since we came back. He kept our talks light and if I asked if he was alright, he'd change the subject. Very not the Miles I knew, but he kept refusing to talk about it.

"Wait, what?" Isaac turned to him as the door closed.

Miles pushed the glasses up his nose. "Apparently, Jessica has been staying with friends the last few days. She's coming home in a couple of hours and cooking would take him too long."

Well, that made sense, but... "Why has she been at her friend's house?"

The door opened as Asher came in and spotted the open cookie jar. His gaze narrowed on me. "Already at the cookies?"

I smiled my wicked grin. "Not me, I'm innocent. It was the twins."

Asher shook his head as he came around the island and snagged the jar from us. "I don't buy that for a second."

Everyone chuckled.

"Also, I don't know why she's at a friend's house." Asher set the jar down away from us.

"She stayed with us a few nights while you were gone." Ethan turned to Asher. "She said she kept hearing weird noises outside."

Miles' brow furrowed together creating a wrinkle. "She said the same thing when she called and asked if she could sleep in Asher's room at my house."

I raised an eyebrow. Jessica wanted to sleep at Miles' house. That was beyond strange. I pulled out my phone and texted Zeke.

Alexis: Hey, did Jessica ask you to crash at your house while Ash was gone?

It didn't take long for him to respond.

Tough Guy: Yeah, two or three times a week. Sylvie ended up crashing at Asher's a few times.

I read his answer out loud then looked up at the others.

"So, between all of us, she had someone spend the night or slept elsewhere most of the month?" Miles asked, a wrinkle forming between his eyes.

The twins nodded.

"That's weird." Asher rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll ask her about it tonight. So, what did I miss while I was gone?"

"Most of the supernaturals in town have found places to live," Miles began, tapping his fingers along the counter. "Except a couple of shifter families and the vampires."

"Dupont is still at your house?" Asher raised an eyebrow.

Miles nodded. "Spring Mountain isn't a big city like New Orleans. It's harder to buy a place or even rent one if you can't go out during the day."

Ethan shook his head. "I still don't like that he's at your house."

Miles scratched his chin. "I've already had an offer accepted on a large piece of property for them just outside of town. After it's in my name, I'll sell it to Samuel and his vampire nest for the same price."

"How long is that going to take?" Isaac asked before he crossed the room to the pantry and opened the door.

"They'll be out this week," Miles stated.

"What have they been doing for blood all this time?" Asher asked as Isaac came back to stand next to Ethan and opened a large bag of chips. My stomach growled, reminding me it had been a while since breakfast and those cookies weren't going to do it. Ethan took a handful of chips before he handed me the bag.

Miles sighed. "They have several donors."

The room fell silent.

"What do you mean donors?" I asked before pulling out a handful of chips and passing the bag to Isaac.

Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "There are some people who they pay to let them drink their blood."

I stopped chewing. "Seriously?"

Miles nodded.

"And they're in your house too?" Isaac asked before popping a chip into his mouth.

Miles shook his head. "No. I drew the line there. They go to meet them out of town for a feed from the vein. Otherwise, they drink from a bag."

Asher eyed Miles. "You've been talking to Samuel."

Miles sent me a look. "He's a great source of information on vampires. Besides, I'm not the only one."

Asher's gaze went straight to me. "Ally? You've been hanging out with that vampire?"

"We've had movie nights at Miles' house in the last month that did involve Sam and a couple of his vamps." I shrugged. "I've gotten to know him a little."

Asher's head snapped around, his gaze darting to the kitchen door. I was about to ask what was wrong when it was pushed open.

A tall, bulky figure moved through into the kitchen. Zeke was a mountain of muscle. Six foot five, he towered over most of us. His wide jaw and wide cheekbones gave him a dangerous look. But in truth, Zeke was... well... Zeke. And the black scruff along his jaw did interesting things to my insides. His ice blue eyes met mine making me smile.

The corner of his lips quirked up before he moved out of the doorway and put his back against the wall. "Hey."

When I pulled my gaze from him, I finally noticed the others. Asher's eyes were a little wider. Ethan and Isaac's jaws might as well have been on the floor. Even Miles' face was blank.

Not understanding, I turned back to Zeke. "Hey, you."

His eyes grew warm, his face softened a tiny fraction.

"Hey," Ethan said, his jaw lifting off the floor. "I... we didn't expect to see you tonight, man."

Zeke lifted his left shoulder and let it drop back down.

Everyone seemed to struggle to go back to normal as Asher turned back to me.

"You haven't been alone with Samuel, have you?" Asher asked, bringing us back to the topic.

I tilted my head to the side. "What are you worried about, Ash?"

"I don't want any of you getting bitten."

I grinned. "Neither do we."

Asher's shoulders relaxed.

Miles shifted, drawing my attention. "But to answer your original question, they'll be moving out soon."

I smiled. "Then you'll have your house back."

Miles' eyes shifted away from me to the sink. "Not exactly."

Asher eyed Miles. "Let me guess. Lucy. She's still at your house?"

Miles lifted his head. "Yes."

I went still as the guys shook their heads almost in unison. Lucy was a genius alchemist from New Orleans. She'd lost almost everything in the fire that took the safehouse. Apparently, she had been living there for some time. When she had nowhere to go, Miles offered her a place to stay until she got back on her feet. That was over a month ago, and she was still in his house. And she was pretty. I started tapping the heel of my foot against the cabinet door.

"You need to give her a deadline to move out." Ethan popped another chip in his mouth.

Asher nodded. "Otherwise, she's just going to stay there."

Miles nodded. "I know you're right. I just... feel bad. She lost everything in the fire."

"She wasn't the only one," I reminded him.

Asher met my gaze as we both remembered Louis. The necro had died in the same fire.

A dark silence fell in the kitchen. It was almost palpable. I chewed on the bottom corner of my lower lip.

The twins continued snacking as the awkward silence settled in the room. Miles shifted his feet while Asher cleared his throat. My shoulders grew tense just waiting for someone to say something about the elephant in the room.

"So, did everyone get their class schedules?" I asked, mostly to break the silence I'd created. Everyone jumped at the topic and pulled out their schedules.

By the time the pizzas arrived, I learned that I had one of them in almost every class this year. Miles answered the door while I followed Asher and Ethan into the family room with napkins. I started to go for the couch with Asher, but I hesitated. Where should I sit? Was it going to cause a problem between the guys?

Isaac stepped through the family room doorway carrying paper plates. He glanced around the room before looking down at me with a glint in his eyes. "You should snag Zeke's chair while you can."

I smiled up at him. I loved that twisted side of him.

He winked at me before moving into the room and setting down the plates on the coffee table. I moved around the coffee table and sat in the armchair next to the couch and Asher. Isaac passed out the plates before sitting down in front of the tv on the floor. Zeke strolled into the room and spotted me sitting with my feet crossed under me in his usual chair.

I grinned happily while he narrowed his eyes at me before taking the armchair beside mine. The scent of engine grease reached me as he settled in. My fingers itched to tangle with his. Miles brought the pizzas and set them on the coffee table.

"Eight pizzas?" My eyebrows shot up. "Why'd we order so much?"

"I eat more now, remember?" Asher answered as he opened the box on the top.

"Oh yeah." I leaned forward and started handing out napkins.

Ethan reached out to grab a piece of pizza.

A growl rumbled from Asher's chest, freezing everyone in place. Ethan raised an eyebrow and pulled his hand back.

Asher's cheeks tinted pink. "Sorry, it's a... wolf thing."

"Alright, what do you need to get around it?" Miles asked, his voice calm, as if this stuff happened every day.

Asher grabbed his plate and hurriedly picked up several slices as his face burned red. He handed it to me without looking at me and took my empty one. "Serve Ally first, then everyone else." His voice was so quiet I could barely hear him.

"So, I don't have to wait in line anymore for you guys and your bottomless stomachs?" I asked cheerfully. I shot a fist into the air in triumph. "Yes!"

The guys chuckled as Asher's face cooled down.

Everyone began grabbing slices as I settled in my chair and started eating. "I could get used to this." I turned to Asher. "Does this by any chance extend to ice-cream too?"

He chuckled with the others. His shoulders relaxed as he leaned back against the cushions. "It does."

"Awesome." I did a little dance in my armchair. "Do I have any other powers?"

The others started laughing.

Asher met my gaze; that warm silver slipped through the blue. "I'll tell you later."

My stomach flipped low and hard at the note in his voice before I winked at him and took a big bite of pizza.

"So, what was werewolf bootcamp like?" Isaac asked as he settled back on the floor.

"Exhausting." Asher grinned. "A lot of control exercises, note taking, a lot of shifting and getting to know my wolf."

I turned a little in my chair to face him more. "What's it like? Having a wolf?"

Asher swallowed his bite. "Well, it's like..." He put his plate on the arm of the sofa. "It's like this stranger is living inside you. They have their own habits, their own needs. And they're not shy about letting you know."

"So, what happens if you two don't get along?" I set my slice down on my plate to grab a packet of cheese.

He shook his head. "It doesn't really work that way. Since the first change, we're separate but not. It's like he's a more... instinctual part of me that's also my partner."

Ethan grinned. "Aw, you've found your soul mate."

Everyone burst out laughing again while Asher threw a decorative pillow at Ethan. It was almost as if no time had gone by.

"What do we need to watch out for with you anyway?" Isaac asked before wiping his lips with a napkin. "'Cause I'm assuming humping legs and mange is a bad sign."

Everyone chuckled again.

"Basically, if I shift to my wolf eyes and I'm growling then back off." Asher reached forward and grabbed a couple more slices.

"What do those eyes look like?" Miles asked.

"My eyes get lighter and turn into a weird blue-silver color."

Ethan gestured at Asher while he swallowed the food in his mouth. "Like what happened to your eyes when you started yelling at Tara. Right?" Asher nodded with his mouth full.

"By the way, how is Tara?" Miles asked me from the other end of the couch.

I lifted my shoulder into a half shrug. "She's okay, I think."

"Still not talking to you?" Asher asked.

"No, she is. Just in short sentences. I'm not worried about it." I wiped my hands with my napkin. My cousin Tara had been camping with us last month when I accidently raised a zombie bear. That's right. Zombie bear. She freaked out. I don't really blame her. I turned to Asher. "I explained everything going on to Rory, so he's up to speed on your changes and the supernaturals that have come into town."

Asher nodded. "Yeah, he called and lectured me about not telling him myself."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "Well, you have backup to get you out of any situation in town."

"Thanks."

"So, what do you look like as a wolf anyway?" Isaac reached for another piece of pizza.

Ethan's head snapped up. "Are there pictures? We need pictures of you as a wolf for the scrapbook."

"We already missed his first run as wolf," I added, turning to Miles. "Can you call Astrid? Ask her for pics of his next run? Save a few wolf hairs for posterity?"

Asher shook his head at us as we broke into laughter.

Isaac pulled out a small wrapped gift and tossed it to Asher. "Welcome home, man."

Asher caught it against his chest. While he eyed the twins, he began to tear at the paper. "What is this?"

Ethan and Isaac shared a smirk before Ethan answered. "Oh, just something to help with the transition."

Everyone watched as our new werewolf unwrapped a sparkling, blue leather dog collar. I snorted as the guys started laughing. Even Asher joined in. All the tension from earlier disappeared as everyone lost it.

I was wiping tears from my eyes when Ethan spoke up. "Read-read the tag!"

Asher was still chuckling as he flipped the tag over. He started laughing even harder. "'If found, call Alexis.' It actually has your number." He shook his head. "You guys are such dicks."

That set us off again. My stomach was hurting by the time that we settled down.

Asher sent Ethan a look across the coffee table.

Ethan nodded, his smile disappearing as he set his plate on the table. "Um, yeah... I've got something to tell you guys."

Isaac shifted closer to his brother and pressed his shoulder against him.

"I'm not exactly human anymore," Ethan announced.

Everyone but Asher and Isaac stared at Ethan in stunned silence.

My heart pounded. "Um. What?"

Ethan's chocolate eyes met mine as he swallowed hard. "Ranulf and Astrid noticed it on the camping trip. I didn't smell completely human to them anymore. They... they don't know what I am. Or what the witches did to me."

Miles leaned forward. "Is that all you're basing this on? Their sense of smell?"

Ethan turned to Miles and shook his head. "I haven't had my pain meds since New Orleans."

The silence was deafening. Ethan hadn't been able to go three hours...

Miles' jaw grew tense. "You noticed a change two months ago?"

Ethan nodded.

"And you're just telling us now?" Miles' voice had an edge to it.

Ethan's eyes started to boil. "I wasn't ready to talk about it."

I shook my head, trying to grasp what he was saying. "Okay, you're not hurting, and they think you don't smell human. That's it?"

Ethan glanced at Zeke then back to me. "When Zeke pushed me on the camping trip, my hand came down on a burning log. No burns."

I cursed. Zeke grew still.

"Are you okay?" I asked the only thing I cared about.

Ethan's warm eyes met mine. "Yeah, I still feel like me."

I nodded, still trying to process everything. "That's all that matters." Why the hell had Zeke pushed him?

Asher's gaze was still on Ethan when he reached over and slipped his fingers around mine.

A heavy silence fell as all eyes turned to us. It took me a full heartbeat before I realized why. I pulled my hand back.

His fingers tightened, refusing to let me go.

I looked up at him. "Ash."

His eyes refocused as he looked down at me. "Hmm?"

I squeezed his hand, reminding him.

Asher sighed and pulled away.

Miles' ears were pink as he checked his watch. "We should probably talk about the dating schedule. As before, we agreed that no one would be openly affectionate around the rest of us."

Everyone nodded. I resisted the urge to squirm in my chair.

"We know, Miles." Isaac sighed. "Lexie will have a date night with each of us every week."

"And it'll be after homework, so we all still get to see her every day," Ethan added. "We've talked about it a million times."

"Who is busy on school nights?" Isaac asked the group.

"I've got band practice a couple of days a week." Ethan wiped his fingers on a napkin.

"Are you still working at the climbing center?" Miles asked Asher as he pulled out a small notepad from his pocket.

Asher nodded with his mouth full.

"Isaac?" Miles asked, not looking up from his notes.

"Free all week," Isaac muttered, paying more attention than he needed to his pizza.

Miles sent Zeke a look over the top of his glasses. "Zeke?"

"Not this week." Zeke's voice was rough. "But Fridays normally."

My eyebrows shot up. "You took a week off?"

He avoided my gaze and nodded before setting his still full plate on the table. He clearly didn't want to talk about it. And I didn't push.

"Shouldn't..." Isaac glanced at me before turning back to Miles. "Shouldn't Red have a public boyfriend? You know, one of us that if someone asks her out, she can say, 'sorry, I'm dating that guy."

Miles' eyes unfocused. "That would stop any rumors that might start—"

"Fuck that," I scoffed, grabbing everyone's attention. "I'll hold everyone's hand and kiss every single one of you in front of the entire town." I shook my head. "I'm not hiding what you guys mean to me."

Smiles and grins spread around the group.

"Beautiful has spoken," Ethan announced.

We chuckled.

The front door opened. Everyone turned in time to watch Jessica climb the stairs with a duffle bag.

Asher watched her disappear upstairs, his face growing serious. "I need to talk to Jess, guys."

We got to our feet and started cleaning up. I set the one full pizza box in the kitchen while the others said goodbye. I was the last to stop at the front door Asher was holding open.

I smiled up at him before I glanced back at the guys talking on the sidewalk.

He closed the door a little more so they couldn't see us. I went to my toes and brushed my lips with his. His lips moved against mine, making my blood rush from my head. I braced a hand in the middle of his firm chest. He took a slow, deep breath through his nose as his other hand moved to cover mine. He gently pulled my hand from his chest and tilted his chin away, leaving his forehead pressed against mine. "Careful, Ally. Really careful."

I opened my eyes and pulled back to meet his. "Sorry. I just... I'm happy you're home."

"Me too," he whispered as he squeezed my hand and let me go.

I walked outside with a warm face. Ethan raised an eyebrow and sent me a naughty look before he headed toward their house. I was still smiling as I climbed into the Blazer.

* * *

Asher

I WATCHED AS ALLY WALKED down the porch steps and headed for her Blazer. My body was harder than rock as I eased my grip on the door. Deep dents were in the wood of the front door from where I had gripped it to keep from touching her. The moment she touched me, it took everything I had not to slam the door and take her upstairs. My wolf vibrated deep in my chest, agreeing with me. It used all my focus to keep us both still until she left.

I closed the door carefully and took several deep breaths until my body stopped aching. Dreading this, I walked back into the family room and sat down. My wolf rubbed under the surface, practically rolling over and showing his belly. My reaction to Ally... it wasn't normal. Astrid had been right. Something was different with her.

Jessica's footsteps moved over the aged floorboards a moment before she shut her door upstairs and started down the steps. Her step halted halfway down. "Ash?"

I put everything else out of my mind and turned to my sister. My still human sister. Her cheeks had become a bit thinner since I last saw her and

the bags under her eyes were heavier. She smiled and it was like a soft blow to the heart. She looked so much like Mom when she smiled.

"Hey, Jess." My wolf raised its head inside me, waking only long enough to recognize family before going back to sleep.

Jessica hopped down the rest of the stairs and latched on to me. Surprised, I hesitated while she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me tight. It wasn't more than a heartbeat before I was hugging her too. My little sister. I hadn't hugged her in a long time. My wolf rose to the surface and rubbed against the inside of my mind. *Fear. Protect*.

I blinked several times as I tried to understand what I was feeling. Jessica was talking about how she missed me while I tried to sort out what my wolf was seeing that I wasn't. Jessica needed protection? My wolf agreed before settling back down, allowing me to focus on my sister. "Are you okay?"

She stopped midsentence and squeezed me tighter. "Yeah, great." Her voice was high as she pulled back. She avoided meeting my eyes as she headed for the kitchen.

I followed, stepping into the kitchen as she pulled pizza from the box. "The guys said they stayed with you a lot this month."

She carefully set a piece on the plate and ran her fingers over the edge of the plate. "So?"

"What's going on, Jess?"

She shrugged, picked up the plate and turned away. "I kept hearing weird noises."

"Jess—"

"You know, you missed the start of football practice." She put the plate in the microwave and set it for a minute.

I sighed. I might as well get it over with. "I'm not playing football this year."

Her head snapped around; her eyes grew wide. "What?"

I leaned against the doorjamb and repeated myself. "I'm not playing football this year."

She blinked at me. "Why not?"

I sighed. "Because I'm done with it and I don't enjoy it anymore."

"But... but it's your ride to college."

I shook my head. "That's what Dad thinks. It's not."

She shifted on her feet while looking down at her hands. "Dad's coming home tomorrow."

I growled. Her head snapped up.

"Why?" I tried to cover.

She tilted her head to the side and sent me a look.

It hit me. "Because Coach Barstein called him."

"Bingo." She leaned against the counter behind her as the microwave dinged.

Great. Dad was coming home. My phone dinged.

Still thinking about Dad and the pain in the ass he was going to be, I pulled out my phone.

Brody: Welcome home, now get your ass out to Bickman's trail for a run.

I cursed. Brody was one of the rogue wolves that had moved to town as a favor to Astrid. He was supposed to take over mentoring me while Astrid and Ranulf took care of an issue in San Francisco.

Asher: I'll be there in fifteen.

I put my phone in my pocket. "I gotta go for a run." Before she could ask, I turned and headed upstairs.

"You just got home," Jessica said, following me up the stairs.

"Yeah, I know." I closed my door in her face and quickly changed into workout shorts and a tank.

"Does this have anything to do with you being gone for a month?" she asked.

I shoved my feet into my sneakers and quickly tied my shoes. "Yeah, I'm used to the camp's training program now. I kinda liked it. Thought I'd keep it going."

"If you weren't going to play football this year, why did you bother with the football camp?"

I opened the door to find her scowling. "I realized I was done there." God, I hated lying to her. I had never been very good at it, and by the narrowing of her eyes, it looked like I still wasn't. I hurried down the stairs, grabbing my keys on the way. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Thankfully, Jess didn't follow me outside to my truck. I headed out to Bickman's trail, which was the hardest hike you could get around here. And we were about to run it.

I sighed. This was it. This was my life now. Managing my wolf and keeping the danger to the people around me to a minimum. At least Astrid said it eventually became instinct and I wouldn't have to think about it at some point.

As I drove through town my mind drifted back to Ally on the couch. I had barely been able to stop biting her. What the hell had set me off like that? I ran through what I remembered and couldn't figure it out. And I had to. If I didn't...

CHAPTER 2

Lexie

walked into the town's café smiling. Jake was already there with his left arm still in its sling. The football star had separated his shoulder bad enough to need surgery during an accidental hit at practice a couple of weeks ago. His shoulder would heal, but his football season was over and he was already going stir crazy.

He looked up and smiled as I dropped into the chair across from him. "You're practically glowing."

"I'm happy." I couldn't seem to stop smiling.

"That's a 'got some' smile." He acted shocked.

I rolled my eyes. "I didn't get laid. But I did finally get to kiss a couple of my... boyfriends."

He leaned forward, his face eager. "Tell me more."

The memory of Asher's touch made me smile and my face warmed. "Uh... I got some much-needed kisses."

He chuckled as he adjusted the strap around his neck.

I shook my head. "Seriously, the whole look but don't touch thing was killing me."

"I wouldn't have lasted the month." He sighed. "So, Asher's home?"

"Yeah and the dating schedule begins tomorrow night." The waitress came over. I ordered an iced tea. "How's Derrick?"

It was Jake's turn to smile a big smile. "Great. Dating again is great." I smiled. "Still being jealous?"

Jake's cheeks turned pink. "No. Not at all."

I leaned forward, just as eager for details as he had been. "Do tell."

He chuckled. "He's been very sweet. I admit, I did get jealous when one of his ex-girlfriends was at a party last week, but I didn't say anything rude. I didn't blame him for it or anything. I didn't even get mad."

I grinned. That wasn't it. He was smiling way too much for that to be the end of the story. "And what happened next?"

His cheeks turned pink. "Oh, nothing, we just went and had some alone time."

My jaw dropped. "Are you two sleeping together?"

"There's not much sleeping," he hedged.

"Oh, you hussy," I teased.

He raised his eyebrows. "Okay, little miss dating five guys."

"But not sleeping with any of them," I countered.

He grinned. "And how long is that going to actually last?"

I thought about it honestly and smirked. "Probably not long."

He snickered as the waitress brought me my tea. I paid her and thanked her before turning back to Jake. "It's not that easy, I want everyone to have a better idea of how this is going to work before we throw that wrench into the mix."

"Don't you mean wench?" he teased.

I snorted into my tea. "Nice. How's your shoulder?"

He grumbled wordlessly.

"That good, huh?"

"I'm bored," he admitted. "I can't run, I can't play football. Hell, I can't even type at a decent rate right now. And I never realized that Derrick's schedule was as busy as mine before."

"I know it sucks, but if you want to keep your range of motion, then you've got to take the time to heal." I took a sip of my tea.

"I know." He grinned. "That just means that I have more time to get you and Riley talking to each other again. And..." His grin disappeared. "Dylan's dad."

"He's getting worse?"

Jake nodded. "They're not giving him much longer."

I cursed. "How's Dylan handling it?" I didn't talk to my ex, but I had liked his dad, and well, no one deserved to lose both parents.

He shook his head. "Not well, we've all been chipping in at the store so they can keep his treatments going. And we can all spend time with him."

"I'm sorry, Jake. He's such a nice guy."

He shook his head slowly. "The guy practically raised all of us."

Before I could figure out what else to say, that chill ran down my neck. I took a casual look around. A lithe ghost stepped through the windows across the café. She had been a few years younger than me when she died. Her marching band uniform still had bloodstains covering her side, staining the gold embroidery red. And I knew why. On the way to a football game several years ago, the bus crashed. Three people died, including Misty. She made eye contact with me and headed for the back of the café near the bathrooms.

"Um, I'll be right back." I got to my feet and followed the girl only I could see.

"Running away isn't going to stop me from being nosey," he warned.

I flipped him off over my shoulder before turning the corner. Misty took a hit of her inhaler. I didn't say anything, I had already told her that since she didn't have a body, she didn't have asthma anymore and didn't need it. She had simply waved me off saying it was psychosomatic and to let it go.

When she could, she said, "We took the trails that were farther out today, and we still found nothing."

I cursed. Ever since we came back from Swan Lake I'd sent souls out searching for another setup like we found at the lake. They had more time on their hands and walls didn't bother them. Only, we hadn't found anything yet. "Did everyone come back?"

She nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"We're still losing ghosts daily." And I couldn't figure out why. "I really need you guys to stay on top of who is going where and if they get back. That'll give us a place to start if they go missing."

"If who goes missing?" Jake's voice made me jump.

I spun around; the blood drained from my face as I spotted Jake. "What? Oh, Hades. I was just thinking out loud."

"Okay, weirdo." He eyed me before going into the men's room.

Shit. I turned back to Misty. "I'll see you guys tonight at the cemetery."

I went back to my spot and mentally cursed myself. I knew better than to talk to a ghost around normal people. I was still berating myself when he came back and sat down.

"So, have you talked to Riley?" he asked as he picked up his coffee.

I played with the straw in my tea. "Nope."

"She's going to be here in a couple of minutes." He shook his head. "Don't you miss her?"

"Yeah, I miss her. But it's gotten easier over the last few months."

"Lexie, you said you'd listen with an open mind," he chided me.

"I will. But frankly, I feel like I just called her on her shit." I shifted and got more comfortable.

He sighed. "I know. And honestly, I feel the same way. She even admitted to me that some of her other friends said the same thing. But you can't go in already pissed off and not willing to listen to what she has to say. That won't help."

I started to rub my temple. "Yeah, I know. And I'm trying." I liked Riley. I really did. But she hadn't believed me when I said how I felt about all the guys. She also didn't like the fact I had been thinking of dating all the guys at once. In fact, she had a very clear opinion on it.

Jake's gaze moved over my shoulder. "Here she comes."

The door of the café opened and a tall girl with lavender hair walked over. Riley had a pretty, round face which was now tense as she sat down in the chair next to Jake. "Hey, how's the wing?"

"Annoying." Jake grinned. "How are the cousins?"

"The same." Riley's face loosened up before she turned to me. "Hey."

"Hey." I started tapping my fingers on my thigh, wishing one of the guys were here.

So..." She shrugged. "What was your decision?"

I barely resisted the urge to flip her off. "That's what you want to know? Not, what have you been up to? How've things been? Or even talking about our fight? Just straight to if I'm dating the guys."

Riley crossed her arms over her chest. "Look, I thought I knew you. You are a funny, pissy bitch that I love to hang out with."

"You bailed on us." I refused to answer until I said what I needed to say. "You got a boyfriend, and you bailed."

"Deep breaths, girls," Jake reminded us. "This isn't about blame or who did what. This is about talking about how you feel. 'I feel' statements."

"I *feel* like one of my friends ignored me. I'm hurt that she didn't return my calls or texts for *months*." Anger boiled in my chest, anger I didn't realize I still had.

Riley started picking at the fabric on the arm of her armchair. "I shouldn't have done that. I just..." She met my eyes. "I got carried away. I shouldn't have dropped out of contact. You're right about that. So, I'm sorry for not returning calls or texts."

Some of my anger fizzled. "Thank you. I'm sorry I kinda blew up at you at the fair."

"You got really defensive," Riley said.

I thought about it. Had I gotten defensive? I chewed on my thumbnail as I went over it again. "Okay, I can see that. What you were saying made me feel like I was doing something wrong."

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "If that's all it took, then maybe that should tell you something."

My shoulders grew tense as anger bubbled up again.

"Riley, you said you would state what you're worried about in a positive way," Jake reminded her.

Riley looked at him and nodded before turning back to me. "I'm worried that you haven't thought that much about this."

I let out a deep breath. Just tell her, she'll either understand or not. "Not thought about it? It's been on my mind for months. Ever since I realized it, it has kept me up at night. I've had panic attacks over it. I've been terrified it would tear them apart from each other. I've felt everything from guilt to planning on going into homeschool so they'd never have to see me again if they decided to not try the dating option. Believe me, I've thought about this."

"She'd wake up in the middle of the night after having a nightmare about it and call me," Jake added. "All of them dating has been in the works for some time."

"Okay, you've put a ton of thought into this," she conceded. "But that doesn't mean it's right or even okay."

I closed my eyes as my back tensed up even more. After several deep breaths I opened my eyes. "What's so wrong about it?"

"What?" Riley looked at me as if I'd grown a second head.

"If we all agree on rules, if everyone consents, if we trust each other enough to give this a try... why would it be wrong?" I asked carefully.

The café was oddly silent as she thought about it. The clink of dishes, the hiss of a coffee maker were the only sounds.

Eventually she sighed. "Okay, when you put it that way, it's not. Not on paper. But using those guys like this—"

"What did you just fucking say?" I bit out through clenched teeth. The tension between us practically crackled.

Jake intervened before Riley could say something. "Deep breaths, Lexie."

I took several deep breaths while Riley's eyes unfocused.

When she focused on me again her face was a calm mask. "That came out wrong. But Lexie, you hide behind those guys. Ever since January."

Everything I was went still. My heart even seemed to stop beating as she continued.

"You stick them around you like guards and hide from the world." She shook her head. "You barely try to make new friends anymore."

I swallowed hard. She knew about what happened at the cabin. I had told her. But right now, she was on very thin ice. "What does January have to do with that?"

"The guys make you feel safe." She licked her lips. "And I think you're mistaking that for being in love."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because Zeke can trigger you and you don't want to deal with those memories. So, maybe, subconsciously, you're reaching out to the other guys to help you heal enough to get to Zeke."

I clenched my fist and held onto my control as emotions tore through me.

"You've thought about this a lot," Jake said as he glanced at me, checking to see how I was reacting.

"Well, yeah, my aunt's a shrink and I asked her if it was possible for someone to love more than two people." She shrugged. "She said yes, but she said this is more likely."

I ignored them while my mind raced. Is that what I was doing? I thought about each of the guys and how they made me feel. Yeah, I'd always had a connection with Zeke. But it wasn't just him. It was with all of them. Each one a separate strand to my heart. I was willing to sacrifice myself for Isaac. I would have done the same for any of them. I was willing to drag somebody to the Veil and leave them there to die to find Ethan. And I'd do it again. For any one of them. I loved them all. I lifted my head and met Riley's eyes as I felt it all the way to the center of who I was. "No. That's

not what I'm doing. I'd rather lose them all than treat them like that." I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my thighs. "And the fact that you don't know that about me worries me."

"I thought I knew you." Her voice grew harder. "But doing this to them, using the others as a stepping-stone to Zeke... that's not the person I thought you were."

That anger turned cold and slipped away as I held her gaze and made sure I spoke clearly. "I'm in love with them. Head over heels, way in over my head, heart pounding, crazy to try, wildly in love with each of them. As terrifying as it is to love that many people that much, to let that many people in... I'm not going to walk away from it because *you* can't wrap your head around that."

Her eyes narrowed on mine. "So, you are dating them?"

I gave her my mischievous shit-eating grin. "You bet your ass I am." I got to my feet and headed out the door, leaving all the doubts I'd ever had at the table with Riley. They weren't mine anymore. I was in love with my guys. That was that.

I PULLED up to the house just in time to watch movers carrying a couch into the house next door. My cousin Tara was laughing with some guy around our age at the property line. Her straight blonde hair was back in a ponytail, her pretty face smiling in the fall sun.

The boy I'd never seen before. There was nothing that stood out about him at all. Though... a new family on the block? It made me jumpy.

When I opened the front door, Hades was waiting for me with his tail wagging. I scratched my baby's ears. Hades was still my huge love of wrinkles and skin, even though he'd been drooling a lot more often than usual. The Neapolitan mastiff had finally stopped growing when he reached my hip.

"Hey, baby." I rubbed his ears. "Did you have a good day?"

Hades gave that half woof that I took for a yes.

"Hey kid," Rory greeted from his bedroom door as he walked out with wet hair. "Have you seen Tara? We have that dinner with my dad tonight."

I set my bag down on the kitchen table. "She's out front talking to someone. Our new neighbor, I think."

He nodded as he picked up the mail off the table and started going through it.

I moved to the table and ran my fingers over the back of a chair. "So, who's moving in?"

He lifted his head, his face patient. "I've already done the checks. The Greens just got to town. It's a father and son. He's an accountant and his son is going to be a senior this year."

I started tapping my finger on the chair. "They're just moving to town?" Rory met my gaze. "Yeah."

I started to tap faster. "There's a lot of people moving into town lately."

Rory nodded. "I know. But all we can do is live our lives and keep an eye out."

I stopped tapping; he was right. "I know. It just makes me jumpy."

"I've got friends on every shift, so if anything weird happens in town, I'll know," he reminded me.

"Yeah, I guess. Look, I've got some new news," I said, hating to have to tell him. But Rory needed to know what was going on in town.

He set the mail down, giving me his full attention. I explained quickly what Ethan had told us yesterday. In the end, he was not happy.

"He should have told us sooner." His lips were pressed tight.

"He told us when he was ready to," I countered. "We can't be mad at him for that. His entire life changed and he didn't even know."

He nodded then looked me over. His brow furrowing. "How are you doing? I know the constant hiking has been tiring you out. And the late nights aren't helping."

I shrugged. "Tired. But okay, I guess. I can keep this up for a couple more weeks before I start to have problems."

His face grew hard. "I don't want you to have problems. That Veil alarm will wake you up, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but I've been pulling double crossings all month just to get the Veil back to where it was when that asshole showed up. It's finally there and... I think the walls are clearing."

His brow drew down. "What does that mean?"

I hesitated. I could be wrong, but I didn't think I was. "I think the Veil is getting close to opening again."

His eyes grew wider. "That's amazing, Lexie."

My face warmed as I smiled slightly. "I haven't told the others yet because I'm not a hundred percent about it, but the walls are changing a little at least."

Rory's face was serious as he met my gaze. "Speaking of the boys." Rory's face was serious as he met my gaze. "Have you talked to the others about bringing Maria, Jessica and Sylvie in on what's been going on?"

I ran my fingers over the top of the back of the chair. "Not yet."

He tilted his head to the side. "Don't you think we should? With more and more supernaturals coming to town?"

"I know, I just..." I shrugged. I didn't want Sylvie and Maria to look at me as if I was a freak. I'd had enough of that in my life already. But with every new face in town, the risk to them got higher. "I'll talk to them about it tomorrow."

The front door opened; Tara poked her head inside. "Come on, Dad. We're going to be late!" She popped back out with a smile on her face.

"She's happy." Rory grinned as he picked his keys up off the table.

I turned back to him. "She's getting to meet her grandpa for the first time. She's excited."

His face turned serious. "Are you sure you don't want to come today? He's your grandfather too."

I shook my head. "I still have research to do. Besides, it's Tara's turn for family time."

He came around the table. "What do you do when I walk out that door?"

"Lock the front door with the deadbolt, set the alarm and deadbolt the back door," I repeated robotically. "Then check all the windows to make sure they're closed and locked."

He clenched his jaw. "Where's the shotgun upstairs?"

"Linen closet. Middle shelf. Fully loaded with the chamber empty."

"Where's your bat?"

"Next to my desk."

"Good." He took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't like leaving you here alone." Rory had good reason to be paranoid right now. Three women had been found murdered in the last month. The entire town was on edge; Rory was pulling extra shifts just like the rest of the cops in town.

"I'll be okay. I've got Hades, I won't wear headphones or blare music. And if I get scared, I'll call one of the guys to come over," I promised. Hell, if I didn't have so much to do, I would love to have one of the guys over now. But our dating rules were rules.

"Good." Satisfied, Rory picked up his phone and headed out the door.

True to my word, I locked the front door, turned on the alarm, locked the back and checked every window in the house. When I was finished, I headed into my room with Hades.

My room was tiny, and the walls were now lined with bookshelves. It was small but it was mine and it had a door. I smiled to myself as Hades got on the futon and laid down before I closed the door.

I sat down in my chair and sighed. Teachers, classes and homework, oh my. It all started again soon. Add in all the hiking... No, I wasn't looking forward to it. I opened my laptop and brought up my research on the odd symbol we had found in the woods around Swan Lake.

After the last month, I could honestly say I knew what it wasn't. Not a protection symbol or circle, not a summoning spell, but I still had no idea what it was. I pulled up my latest research from last night and started again. I knew I was in for another long day and night.

* * *

Miles

I CONTINUED to tap my fingers as I read the paperwork again. It was from my father. Basically, he was wanting to give Mother control of all his accounts, businesses and properties. In the event of his death, everything would transfer to me. Everything but the shipping business. My stomach knotted even more.

Mother had already signed. If I signed, I'd be agreeing to take everything when he died.

What was his game? He had to have a reason. He never did anything without a reason. Absently, I pulled out the drawer on my right and popped a stick of gum in my mouth. He knew what I would do with the shipping company if I ever got my hands on it. I'd shut it down. Create a huge problem for myself. But from what was delivered tonight... I searched the paperwork again. The shipping company wasn't even mentioned. I was

trying to figure out what he could possibly want from me when Ethan came into the office. Yips and giggles echoed up the hall from the family room.

"Hey, are we watching a movie?" Ethan asked as he came up to the desk. "'Cause those cubs aren't going to wait much longer to watch Pixar."

I tossed the papers back down and nodded, still lost in thought.

Ethan spotted the letter and the papers. He picked them up before I could put them away. "What's this?"

I stayed silent as he did a quick read. When he looked up from the papers he was frowning. "He's trying to give you everything?"

I nodded. "Except the shipping business."

Ethan sat down in the chair across the desk from me. "The business you didn't want?"

Still trying to calculate the odds of a trap, I nodded.

Ethan dropped the letter back onto the desk. "So, this would be exactly what you'd be willing to agree to?"

I nodded again.

Ethan scowled. "That stinks."

"Exactly." I began rubbing my right temple. "I'm trying to figure out his game."

"He's been calling, right?" he asked, leaning forward on his forearms.

I nodded.

"Then call him and ask."

I lifted my head. "What?"

"He's been wanting to talk to you for months now." Ethan shrugged. "That's leverage. You might actually be able to get an answer."

It wasn't a bad idea, but it meant talking with my father. "I'll think about it."

Ethan got to his feet. "Think about it later, man. We've got baby cubs to watch until their parents get home."

* * *

Lexie

MY PHONE RANG.

"Yeah?" I answered without thinking about it.

"You're still awake?" Zeke's gravelly voice slipped through my ear. It jarred me back to the present. I checked the time; it was almost one a.m.

"Yeah, I was trying to find something on that triangle and lost track of time." Again. I leaned back in my chair. "Why are you awake?"

He sighed deeply. "I can't sleep."

"Your head's too noisy?" I asked, softening my voice.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" I shifted in my chair to get more comfortable. "I haven't seen you for a few days, well, before last night. I've been wondering what the odds of a successful raid on your house would be."

He let out a short, breathy, barely there laugh. "Yeah, it's..."

"It's what?"

He let out a deep, slow breath. "A couple of weeks ago... it's been ten years since I found my mom."

All the air left my lungs in a rush. Zeke's mom had been murdered by his dad, who then killed himself. Zeke had been eight when he found them. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Tough Guy."

"You didn't know." His voice turned to the soft one he used with me sometimes. "It's... I'm just going to be in and out of touch for a while. I've gotta work through shit, so... I just... I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you or some bullshit."

"Thank you." My heart warmed. Zeke warning me ahead of time that he was going to drop out of touch? That was new. "Anything I can do to help?" "Tell me about your day, Baby." His voice was a dry rasp.

I frowned down at my desk, not really seeing it. His voice was so tired... "I can come over?" Rory might get mad about it, but he'd get over it.

"Not this late, I don't want you falling asleep on the road. Just tell me what you did today."

I dropped the subject. "Well, I woke up with a big, hairy dog butt in my face."

"What?"

"Hades' new sleeping habit has him climbing under the covers and leaving his butt hanging out next to my head." I started playing with my pen. "I'm seriously rethinking letting him sleep in my bed."

"Your nightmares would come back," he countered, his voice growing warmer and softer.

I smiled. "I might be willing to chance it. Imagine if Tara had slipped him some broccoli and he got gassy."

He chuckled. It was a small laugh, but a laugh all the same.

"I'm seriously scared for my health."

"What else?"

I gave him a summary of my day, exaggerating the funny parts to make him laugh. Eventually, we came back to the reason he called.

"How have your dreams been?" I started to roll my pen on the desk.

"Bad." He didn't elaborate and I didn't push. It was frustrating sometimes not to know why he was having bad dreams or even what he was dreaming. But it was Zeke, he'd tell me in his own time. And I refused to push.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could help." I started to chew on my thumbnail.

"You are." His voice grew quieter.

I smiled. He was falling asleep. "Everyone is home, Tough Guy."

"Yeah..." His voice slurred.

"We're all safe and sound in our beds," I whispered. "I've got Hades in my room. And the house alarm is on."

"Uh-huh..."

"It's safe to sleep." No matter what happened, no matter if he'd checked in with the others, he always worried about us. My heart filled with warmth as his breathing grew even and deep. "Goodnight, Tough Guy."

When he didn't answer I hung up the phone and stared at it. The anniversary of his mom and dad's death... fuck. I'd need to check on him tomorrow, or go over, something.

I pushed my hair out of my face and focused on the laptop again.

I scrolled down the page and went still. Then blinked several times to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

I stared at the image on the screen in disbelief. I rubbed my eyes and opened them again. No, I wasn't hallucinating. I had found it. I hit print and leaned back in my chair, hardly daring to believe it. It wasn't much of a victory, but it was still a step toward finding this prick.

I took off my glasses, got up and climbed into bed without even changing. I was more than ready to go to sleep. Instead, I closed my eyes and dropped.

I landed in the Veil easily, I didn't even stagger anymore. The grass brushed the top of my thighs as I started through the trees. The Veil had

changed in the last month. Crossing large groups of the dead twice a day had had a huge impact. The new area of burnt grass and burnt trees was gone. Instead a meadow of wildflowers and wheat grass stretched across the scar of the old Veil and had given new life to it. A ring of trees circled the outer edge, against the walls of the Veil. The walls.

I smiled to myself. The thick, gray fog-like muck that had coated them was lighter now. More like a sky of storm clouds just waiting to move on. The pit was still surrounded by red rock and dead things, and I didn't know if it'd ever change. Maybe that's just the way it was normally? I moved to my pillar of an alarm and sat down on a large rock. And waited.

Every night since we came home from the lake, I'd sat here. Waiting. Watching. The asshole came back once. He, or she, could do it again. And I'd be ready.

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CHAPTER 3

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Ethan

urning. Flames licking my skin, charring every part. Hot... so fucking hot...

I jerked awake in my bed. Sweat rolled down my body, plastering my sweats to me. My eyes stung, the light coming through the window too bright. Heart pounding in my chest, I bolted out of my bed and into the bathroom.

When my eyes adjusted to the light, I washed my face with cold water. Images flew through my head. Fuzzy images. I tried to remember but they slipped through my fingers like water. Again. These dreams...

Taking deep breaths, I lifted my head and caught my reflection. My brown irises were gone. A tawny gold glowed instead. My eyes continued to sting as I tried to remember how to breathe. What the fuck?

* * *

Isaac

Still half asleep, I shuffled into the bathroom and came up short. Ethan was there in his sweats, with his hands braced on the sink and taking deep

breaths.

"What's up?" I finished yawning before I actually looked at him. His eyes were no longer brown. The glow filling them had me take a step back. "Holy shit."

Ethan shook his head. "I don't know what happened, I was in the middle of a nightmare and woke up like this."

"Well, we can add funky eyes to the list," I declared. Nothing obvious had changed with Ethan yet, except his back healing. Why would something change now?

"Boys?" Ma called from downstairs.

Ethan shook his head, the blood draining from his face.

I stepped out and closed the bathroom door before heading down the stairs just in time to stop Ma. "Yeah, Ma? What's up?"

She eyed me. "You're never this awake in the morning."

I shrugged. "I feel good. I got a full night of sleep."

She eyed me. "Right... anyway, I have news for you two. Can you get your brother?"

"Actually... uh, he's in the bathroom and there's cursing going on." I latched onto the first thing I could think of.

Her smile faded. "He's probably constipated from those painkillers; I'll pick him up some prune juice on my way home."

I bit back a grin. I couldn't wait to tell Ethan he had to drink that stuff.

"Anyway, I have news about your dad," she announced.

My smiled disappeared.

Her face was carefully blank as she said, "He's getting out in a couple of days and your grandparents are on their way to Great Falls to pick him up. They're wanting to have dinner with you two before then."

"Do we have to?" I asked, hating the idea already.

She gave me an understanding smile. "I know they haven't been really active in our lives, but they do send you boys birthday and Christmas gifts every year. They're good people."

"Just because you're related to an asshole doesn't mean you are one," I said, paraphrasing one of the self-help books I'd read.

Her eyes narrowed on me. "Where did you hear that?"

Shit. It was now or never. "I've been reading some... self-help books."

Her eyebrows rose. "Are they helping?"

I nodded. "But... remember when you asked me to go to therapy after we lost Sophie?"

"Yeah."

"Can I take you up on that now?" I asked, looking down at the floor.

"Of course." She tried to wrap her arm around my shoulders. "What's going on, honey? Is there anything I can do to help?'

Relief swamped me. I had been dreading this talk for almost three weeks. "I just need to talk about some stuff. You know, like, I always thought I'd go into MMA after high school, but since the last fight... I don't think I want to anymore."

She squeezed my shoulders. "It never hurts to talk to an unbiased person." She kissed my cheek. "I'm proud of you, honey."

My cheeks grew warmer. "Thanks."

"I'll call to get you an appointment as soon as they have an opening." She dropped her arm and headed for the table beside the door. "I'll see you both tonight. Have a good day, you two."

The door closed behind her leaving silence.

I knew he was there before Ethan came downstairs. 'Cause of course he'd hear me talking to Ma. I sighed. Now he was going to give me shit about seeing a shrink.

"You're going to see a therapist?" Ethan eyed me as if he'd never seen me before.

"Your eyes are back to normal," I said, hoping he'd drop it. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine. Now answer the question."

"Yeah." I dragged my fingers through my hair. "I've got shit to figure out."

Ethan grinned. "Good."

I shook my head. "What?"

"I said good."

"You're not going to give me a hard time?" Who was this guy?

He shook his head. "There's no shame in asking for help when you need it."

My gaze dropped down to the floor as my emotions swirled. I don't know why I didn't expect him to understand. Ethan never judged before, why would he now?

"You do know if you tell them about being possessed by a demon, they'll throw you in the mental hospital, right?"

I chuckled and lifted my head. "I know, but I can talk about what led to it. No supernatural stuff."

He hugged me suddenly. His arms were hard around me but at the same time almost weak in relief. Surprised, I hesitated only a second before I hugged him back.

"I love ya, jackass," he muttered before pulling away and heading back up the stairs.

I smiled to myself. That really didn't go how I thought it would.

* * *

Lexie

I PULLED into the parking lot of the school. Ignoring the looks of everyone I ran past, I hurried to meet the guys at our usual table in front of the cafeteria.

When I got to the table, I slammed the paper down on the tabletop making them all jump. "The Triangle of Solomon."

Miles' brows drew together as he leaned forward to look at the printout.

"What?" Ethan blinked.

"The symbol." I tapped the paper frantically. "I found it last night. It's the Triangle of Solomon!"

Several people at the nearby tables sent us funny looks.

"Quiet down, Red," Isaac said, "or you'll blow our cover."

"It's not an exact match, but close." Miles looked up at me. "What does it do?"

"It's a ghost trap," I announced quietly as Ethan scooted over so I could sit beside him.

Everyone but Miles blinked at me. Ethan, however, dropped his hand into his lap before sliding it around the middle of my thigh. His fingers squeezed. I made sure to keep my face blank. Ethan hadn't touched me much since the camping trip. I soaked in the heat of his fingers, missing him.

"A trap?" Isaac picked up the page. "What's the bait?"

"No idea." I was just happy to have finally found the stupid triangle.

Miles looked up from the paper. "This is a big step. Now we have an idea of what's happening to the ghosts."

"Yeah, but where do they go after that? When they're stuck?" I tapped my finger on the table again. "What happens then?"

"I don't know, but we'll find out," Miles promised.

Isaac's eyes narrowed on me. "You pulled guard duty again last night, didn't you?"

I shrugged as I took the last deep drink out of my travel mug.

"Guard duty?" Asher's gaze darted to me.

"Yeah, Red's been spending time in the Veil every night. Guarding it in case that prick comes back," Isaac explained as he grabbed my travel mug, opened it and poured more of his coffee from his own into my empty one. Ethan quickly added the last half of his.

I gave them a thankful smile. "They'll come back. I want to be there when they do." And I'd make them regret it. Which reminded me... "By the way, Rory wants us to talk about telling Maria, Jessica and Sylvia about what's going on in town."

My announcement was met with exchanged glances between the guys.

Asher began rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't know about that."

"I know," I agreed. "But there are a lot of dangerous people moving to town. And as time goes on, it's going to get worse."

Miles nodded. "That is a good point."

"Yeah, but won't they all think we're nuts?" Ethan grinned.

I snorted. "Welcome to my world."

The guys chuckled.

"I get telling Ma, but Jess?" Isaac shook his head.

"Yeah, she'd think we were insane and then she'd tell everyone," Ethan muttered.

"I don't want to tell her," Asher admitted. "Something is going on with her, my wolf is worried about her. I don't want her thinking she can't come to me right now."

"Okay, no Jessica." I turned to the twins and Miles. "What about Maria and Sylvie?"

The twins looked at each other and had one of those twin conversations. Creepy and silent, but it made me smile.

They turned back to us in unison.

"Yeah, we could tell Ma." Ethan cringed. "She might need proof and lose her shit, but it'd be a good idea."

Miles turned back to me. "Then we'll start with Maria. I'll talk to Zeke about Sylvie."

I took a deep drink of my coffee.

Miles turned back to the others. "First week of school. Everyone ready? Do we need to go over the rules again?"

Everyone but Asher groaned.

"No. We've gone over them a hundred times." Isaac rubbed the tired from his face. "We have them memorized."

"No touching," Ethan stated.

"No kissing," Isaac added.

"No drawing attention of any kind," Asher finished for them.

I shook my head. "I still think it's ridiculous."

Miles gave me his patient face. "We agreed it was best to try and avoid having everyone's relationships noticed for as long as possible."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "I'm not exactly subtle, Miles."

His eyes softened. "I know. But please try?"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes as the bell rang.

I was listening to the teacher's first day spiel and staring at the empty desk in front of me. Zeke wasn't in our first period history class. I missed him. I had hoped to run over and see him for a few minutes this morning, but after finishing at the cemetery there wasn't much time left. And I couldn't be late on the first day or I'd never hear the end of it.

Rory had made his expectations clear last night. Don't ditch, pass, and keep your head down. He was hoping to avoid the wrath of the vice principal this year. The woman seemed to hate me.

The empty desk brought me back to the present. The guys had told me not to expect Zeke at school this week. Hell, even Mr. Jones had even given me Zeke's books and a file of homework for the week. It was strange.

Some girl walked into the classroom and made a beeline for Mr. Jones. She handed him a pink call slip and headed out the door.

Mr. Jones glanced at it then looked straight at me over the rim of his glasses. "Lexie, they need you in the office."

Curious, I picked up my bag and headed out into the hallway. Why the hell was I going to the office? School had literally just started.

Muttering under my breath, I headed to the administration office.

I walked in and went to the woman at the counter. "I've been summoned," I said in my most dramatic voice. When she looked at me as if I were crazy, I smiled. Hell, I thought it was funny.

"Delaney?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Follow me." She led me through the office to the vice principal's door. As she knocked, I barely resisted the urge to curse.

"Come in."

She opened the door. "Alexis Delaney is here to see you."

"Send her in." Mrs. Weaver sighed.

I rolled my eyes as I walked past the receptionist and met Mrs. Weaver's gaze.

"Have a seat," she said absently as she looked through something on the computer screen.

I sat down in the chair across from her desk.

She turned and eyed me. "It's a new year, Lexie."

I waited for her to elaborate but she didn't. "Yeah. It's a new school year."

She smiled smugly. "Are we going to have as many troubles as we did last year?"

I began to bounce my knee. Last year had been a year of hell. At least the last half of it. And she still fucking blamed me for it? I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Be good. I promised Rory.

"You mean, am I planning to be stalked, kidnapped, and beaten again?" I tried to keep the hostility out of my voice, but by the way her eyes narrowed at me, I doubt I was successful.

"No, I don't plan on having a year like the last." I grinned. "In fact, I'm hoping to have a nice, quiet senior year."

Her lips pressed together into a thin, hard line. "Are your friends going to be late to classes this year?"

I eyed her. "I don't think so. I worked really hard in therapy this summer and I haven't had issues in crowds since last June." I kept my voice respectful and polite.

Her fingers began to tap on the desk. "Should we expect your guard dog?"

I hesitated. This one was a bit tricky. "At the moment, no. My friends tend to stay close by in crowds and that helps a lot. But if something triggers me, I may need him."

She watched me with unblinking eyes. "So, we're going to have a nice, quiet year?"

I nodded with wide, innocent eyes. "That's the hope."

She watched me for several heartbeats before sighing. "That's good. Because you're starting the year on notice."

I leaned back against the chair. "The year literally just started. What could I have done since the beginning of first period?"

"I won't tolerate your shenanigans this year. One step out of line, and you'll be gone." Glee sparkled in her eyes. "Now, we have a new guidance counselor joining us. As part of your academic probation, I want you to speak to her once a week until we reassess your probation."

I gaped at her. "Seriously?"

She nodded regally. "Yes. And your first appointment is now."

Stunned, I tried to wrap my head around this. "So, your answer to me being a problem is to miss a class once a week and see the school counselor?"

"I'd hurry if I were you." She grinned.

For fuck's sake. It made no sense. I bit my tongue and picked up my bag as I got to my feet. "Where's the office?"

She didn't even look up at me as she answered. "Right across from Counselor Higgins' office."

I closed the door behind me and muttered curses as I walked through the administration building until I found the door.

I sighed before knocking.

"Come in," a woman's voice called.

The office was full of boxes, books, and even a large plant in the corner. I closed the door behind me. The woman turned her high-backed leather desk chair toward me.

My stomach dropped. Jadis.

Emotions boiled inside me, anger and fear rising to the top. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

She smiled a big smile. "Working. Making a difference one problem child at a time."

I dug my fingernails into the strap of my backpack. "Oh, and I'm sure you do it out of the kindness of your murderous heart."

Her smile faded. "I have my own reasons for doing the things I do."

I raised an eyebrow. "So did Hitler. That didn't mean he wasn't a monster."

She leaned back in her chair and ran her gaze over me. "You might as well have a seat. Your sessions with me are thirty minutes a week until further notice."

I dropped my bag to the floor and sat in the old wooden chair across from her desk. "What are you after?"

She picked up her coffee mug. "I'm here to try to get through to you."

I rolled my eyes. "Recruit me, you mean."

"Call it what you want." She smiled again. "I'm trying to save the world."

"Nah, that's what I'm doing," I countered. "You're just killing people and wreaking destruction wherever you go."

Her smile dimmed. "Then agree to work with us, and I'll leave town."

It was tempting. Simply lie and get them out of here. But I doubted it would be that easy. Not with this bitch.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We also like to keep tabs on our experiments. When they finally go off, well... they're quite the show."

"Experiments?" I huffed. "That's the life of one of my best friends you fucked with."

She took a sip. "Indeed, it is. Or it was."

I began calculating the odds of staying in school if I decked the new guidance counselor on the first day. Probably not good. But I was sick of her smug face. Out in the real world, I could leave. But here? I was stuck. Mrs. Weaver made that very clear.

I began to examine my nails as if she didn't bother me. I was stuck here, but that didn't mean I had to freaking listen.

"You should work with us, Lexie," she stated, leaning back in her chair with her mug in her hands. "We could change the world. Make it better. With your help, we can get the supernatural world under control."

"You mean hold the world as a prisoner so you can get your way like a two-year-old holding their breath." I shook my head. "No thanks."

Jadis continued talking. "We're the best option out there, Alexis. You could have power, position. You'd never have to worry about anything for the rest of your life."

Uh-huh. "And does this worry-free existence include being held prisoner in your basement for the rest of my life?"

The bell rang. Homeroom was over, but I refused to budge, I wanted to hear her answer.

Her lips tightened for barely a heartbeat. "Of course not. You'd be free to live however you see fit." There was a cheerful note in her voice that I just didn't trust.

"Would you be willing to swear an oath on that?" I pushed it. Wondering how far she'd go. "Sign a spelled contract?"

She looked down at her coffee and swirled the contents. "Perhaps, but I would be putting someone in charge of you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so I wouldn't be free after all. Someone would oversee me?"

She lifted her head and met my gaze. "Everyone has a boss, even witches."

There it was. "A boss? So, what? They'd tell me what to do, who to cross and who to let rot?"

She took a sip of her coffee. "Basically. We need to keep a balance going. Just enough souls crossing to keep the barriers from cracking but not so many that the Veil opens."

I clenched my fist. "And screw the rest."

She gave me a sad, sympathetic smile. "A necessary sacrifice."

Everything about her screamed sincerity, from her expression to her eyes and voice, but I had seen her work in New Orleans. I wasn't about to fall for it. "And you get to play God."

She shook her head. "I'm not God."

I tilted my head to the side. "I didn't say that. You want to play God. After all, you know what's best for the world."

"I know the best path for the supernatural world," she stated. "Not the normal world."

I shook my head. "Quite an ego you have there."

She took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

"It's not ego if it's true," she countered. "I could help us move forward in a united force of positive change."

I leaned forward. "And while we're this positive force of change, how would you decide who gets to cross?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

I shrugged. "Would you have a waitlist? What souls would be priority? The rotting ones or the still sane ones? What criteria would you use?"

She set her cup on the desk. "Whoever has the right level of energy to maintain the balance."

"So, whoever is rotting will continue to rot," I surmised.

She nodded slowly. "Not by choice. But this is a chance to steer the supernatural world toward peace and prosperity."

I sat up straight in my chair again and took her in. Every hair in place, every line of her clothing perfect. She looked open, welcoming. Everything about her said she was telling the truth as she saw it. And she probably was. But there was no true warmth in her smile. She was empty and cold. What could have happened to her that destroyed her heart and tainted her soul? Or was she born like this? Well, whatever made her this way wasn't my problem. The result was. "That's the witches, what about the others."

"Others?" Her brows drew together.

"The shapeshifters. Other races of supernaturals." I had heard about Florida. They wiped out all but witches and killed those that wouldn't join. "What would you do about them?"

"They will be treated as their own counsel," she hedged.

Oh no, I didn't buy that for a minute. "What would you do?"

Her smile faded. "Not all of the supernatural world is good, Alexis."

"And who gets to be the judge of what is good or bad?" I asked softly.

She shook her head, her lips forming a tight, sad smile. "Someone has to."

I waited several heartbeats for her to elaborated but she didn't. I shook my head. "I'd let the world burn before I trusted you with a pencil."

Her face flashed rage at me, her mask slipping only a heartbeat before it was back. "You're out of your element, Alexis. There's no shame in needing help."

Having heard more than enough, I got to my feet and slung my bag over my shoulder. "Let me make one thing clear. This element... is my home. I live it, I see it, I breathe it. At this point, the Veil is what I know. You're the

tourist here." I turned and strode out of her office, more determined than ever to take the bitch down.

By the time I reached my math class, I was calmer. I walked in past the late bell. The teacher gave me a chiding look and shook her head. Ethan raised his fingers in the air to get my attention. I hurried to the empty chair beside him.

Apparently this classroom didn't have desks, only two-person wide tables. I dropped my bag to the floor and sat down beside him.

"What happened, Beautiful?" Ethan whispered as he handed me the syllabus for the year.

"I was called into the office," I answered as the teacher went back to the lesson. "Mrs. Weaver wanted to make sure I wasn't going to cause problems this year."

He scoffed as he moved his arm onto the back of my chair. His spicy cologne reached me, calming me down. "What a bitch."

I shifted over a little, pressing my back into his arm, needing the contact. "The interesting part was being sent to a new guidance counselor." Mrs. Hubert continued to lecture everyone while I turned to Ethan. "It was Jadis."

His eyes narrowed. The fingers on his other hand started to twirl his rings. "This is a bad joke, right?"

I shook my head.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So, they've got eyes in the high school."

"It makes me wonder where else they might have people here or in town," I whispered.

"Lexie and Ethan," Mrs. Hubert's voice snapped.

We both jumped and turned to the front of the class.

Mrs. Hubert pushed her glasses up her face. "Are we interrupting?"

We muttered sorry in unison and faced the front of the class. When she went back to lecturing, we both bit back giggles. Ethan began slowly running the side of his thumb up and down my arm.

Movement in the corner of my eye had me turning my head. Riley was in the second row, watching us together. Her face puckered. She shook her head and turned back to pay attention to class. I rolled my eyes and went back to half listening to the teacher.

Class was almost over when a familiar voice moved through the room. "Mrs. Hubert."

I watched as the blood drained from Ethan's face, his eyes growing wide. No. No...

I turned to look at the door, hoping my ears were playing tricks. But they weren't. Jadis was standing just inside the door. I slid my hand around his upper thigh.

"Yes, Ms. Hill, what can I do for you?" Mrs. Hubert asked.

"I need to speak with you about a pair of students," Jadis announced, looking directly at both of us.

I squeezed, letting him know I was here. His face was deathly pale as he processed that the bitch who tortured him in New Orleans was here. In our math class. His body become rigid as tension rippled through him. I pressed my leg harder against his, then moved my entire side against his. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Ethan kept his breathing even. Only his hand squeezing the back of my chair hard enough to make it creak let me know he wasn't doing well.

"Please, continue. I can wait until class is over," Jadis said pleasantly before she folded her hands in front of her, looking like she was the most patient person in the world.

Mrs. Hubert went back to explaining the structure of the class.

His body grew more and more rigid every moment that Jadis watched us. I even began to wonder if he was going to make it without losing his shit.

"Lexie." He turned to me. My heart stopped. Almost like a burning inferno, swirling, glowing bronze threatened to devour his pupils. Shit.

Not willing to wait for disaster, I surged to my feet, shouldered my bag, took his arm and shoved him to his feet. He grabbed his bag and went with me without a fight. I kept myself between him and Jadis as we started to pass her.

"The Veil may be your territory. But the real world is mine," Jadis whispered with a satisfied smirk.

I ignored her and focused on getting Ethan out of there. It wasn't until we were halfway across campus that we slowed down.

I turned on him. "Ethan?"

His face was still pale, sweat beaded on his forehead. His hand shook as he ran his fingers through his hair. Voices echoed down the hallway.

I snatched his arm again and pulled him into the janitor's closet.

Ethan went to the small sink and splashed water on his face while I tried to grasp what had just happened. The cinderblocks echoed the sprinkle of water. The cement floor was spotless. The high windows let in a lot of light. I frowned. Why was the janitor's closet nicer than the bathrooms? Focus, Lexie!

His eyes had changed. I hadn't imagined that. My ribs seemed to press against my lungs as I tore off a couple of paper towels and handed them to him.

He ignored the towels as he braced himself on the sink while taking big, deep breaths.

I stayed quiet until he looked up and met my eyes in an old, rusted mirror. They were chocolate again.

"Ethan?"

"I'm okay." His smoky voice grated in his throat as he straightened.

"Don't bullshit me." I moved to his side.

He looked down at the sink again as he swallowed hard.

"Your eyes changed," I whispered.

"Yeah." He straightened and turned to me, his expression lost as he met my gaze. "I'm scared, Lexie. I don't know what they did to me."

Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face into his upper chest.

He hesitated only a heartbeat before he slipped his arms around me and held tight. "I don't know what I am."

His tears ate at me as I held him desperately. "You're my Snoopy."

"Always." His voice cracked as he held me tight. Darkness swept through me on an icy wave, dimming the world a bit. They did this to him. No. Not now. This was about Ethan. Later... I ignored it for now.

After some time, he pulled away. My arms dropped to my sides as he wiped his face before lifting his head.

He began to spin his rings. "If you can't... thinking about it is one thing, but if you can't handle this in real life..." He swallowed hard. "I'd get it if you walked away."

It took me almost a full minute to understand what he was saying. "Oh, knock that shit off. You know I'm not going anywhere."

He let out a small laugh as his posture relaxed. "I thought I'd at least give you the option." He met my gaze. "It's terrifying, but... I'm not hurting, Lexie."

"I know, Snoopy." I reached up and ran my fingertips over his jaw.

He shrugged. "For the first time in a long, long time, I feel like me again."

"It's strange, but that makes me a little happy," I admitted. Ethan wasn't hurting. We'd work with everything else. Whatever the price. I pressed my lips to his.

When he lifted his head, his eyes sparkled like chocolate diamonds. "I shouldn't..."

I smiled a big, happy smile. "I miss touching you."

His resistance melted away as he lowered his head and softly pressed his lips against mine. I sighed and sank into his warm body. Everything else faded away as his fingers slid up the back of my neck but stopped at my hair. His kisses were soft and timid. Not like him. I wanted my Ethan. I pressed myself flush against him before I lightly pressed my teeth into his upper lip. He inhaled deeply through his nose. His fingers buried into my hair at the back of my head a heartbeat before he took my mouth and kissed me for real. His tongue demanded access, his hand made a fist of my hair, sending hot shivers down my spine. I moaned in the back of my throat. There he was.

It had been almost a whole month since I had been with anyone alone. Everyone had been being so careful not to touch me around the others. Now, it was all I wanted. Craving the feel of his skin, I ran my fingertips down over his shirt and the ridges of his chest, stroking the little dips between his muscles. He groaned before his other hand moved down my back, his fingers leaving sparks along my nerves. His hand went to my ass, his fingers tightened and lifted me against him, forcing me to my toes. I whimpered as his hold pressed his rigid length against my lower stomach. Just the feel of him made my breasts heavy and aching for attention.

His hand in my hair pulled my head back some more. I moaned low in the back of my throat as he moved down my throat with lips and just the press of teeth. That damp heat pooled between my legs and I shifted my hips against him, needing relief. His hand slid up from my ass to my back, leaving goosebumps behind. His hand continued to slide up under my shirt, moving from my waist to my ribs, the side of his palm brushing the side of my breast. My core clenched as he moved down my collarbone with his dancing tongue.

Breathing heavily, needing more, I reached between us and pulled my shirt up over my breasts and unhooked the clasp between my breasts. Suddenly my sensitive skin was against his shirt. He moaned deep in his chest as I arched back over his arm to give him access.

Burning hot kisses moved down my breasts while I dug my hands into his hair. His eyes glowed again as he looked up at me a heartbeat before he popped my pink, pebbled nipple into his scorching mouth. I cried out, closed my eyes, and moved my hips against his length. When his tongue stroked me, I whimpered and dropped my forehead to the top of his head. His hand covered my other breast, his hot fingers stroking gently until he reached my nipple. He squeezed hard, making me gasp and my knees turn weak. Heat, his touch, his mouth, the press of his skin against mine.

"Snoopy..." I breathed. More. I needed more of him.

He stopped tasting my skin, his warm breath sliding over the valley between my breasts. His fingers cupping my breast shook.

The bell rang, signaling the end of class. The world came back into sharp focus. We were at school. Oh my God... in the janitor's closet! My face burned as I met his gaze. His face was flushed a dusky rose, his breathing still heavy as he smirked.

A giggle popped out from my lips. We both broke down and giggled as we got control of ourselves. I quickly closed my bra.

Ethan straightened, his arm pulling me flush against his chest as his free hand pulled my shirt back down to cover me.

His gaze stayed on my covered breasts. "Who bit you?"

My face burned as I tried not to squirm. "It was an accident."

His eyes were still warm as he examined my face. "Asher?"

I nodded.

"He almost drew blood."

I shrugged. "We'll figure it out."

"And he's telling me to be careful," he muttered under his breath.

"What?"

As he began to answer, the closet door opened. We both jumped.

Miles was frowning as he closed the door behind him. "So, we're ducking into closets at school now instead of going to classes?"

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"Miles—"

"This isn't the right way to keep Mrs. Weaver from looking over our shoulders all year," Miles pointed out.

"She's already looking over my shoulder." I narrowed my eyes at him. "How'd you know where we were anyway?"

He grew still, his fingers began to tap his thigh. "I... put tracking programs on your phones before we got back from camping."

I stared at him, surprised. That I expected from Zeke, but Miles? Never.

"You've been tracking us for a month?" Ethan's eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

Miles shrugged. "Yes, it comes in handy. Now, what are you two doing in here? And are you aware of how close you are to being caught?"

I shoved my hair out of my face. "We were about to text you guys."

He shook his head, his expression stern as he turned to Ethan. "What you were about to do is get caught ditching class to make out in the janitor's closet."

Okay, he had a point.

But Ethan didn't care. "Oh, stuff it, Miles. We have bigger problems than that."

"Jadis works at the school now," I stated.

He grew still as a statue. "Pardon?"

"Jadis is my new guidance counselor." I made sure to say it clearly this time.

Miles pinched the bridge of his nose. "Alright, you can explain when we get to the assembly."

"Assembly?" Ethan groaned.

"Yes, the administration wants to talk about the deaths in town." Miles sighed. "We'll meet the others there and you can explain what happened to everyone." He opened the door as Ethan and I went to leave, only for us to walk out right into a group a people. Not just any people. No, it had to be Faith, Ethan's ex. Her eyes grew wide as her gaze darted to the janitor's closet, then to Ethan's hand wrapped around mine. Her jaw dropped.

"Well, that'll be fun," Ethan muttered as we passed the girls and headed for the gym.

"I've got ten that says it's around school we're having threesomes in the closet before the end of the day," I whispered.

"I'm not taking that bet." Ethan snorted.

"This is not a good start." Miles sighed as we turned the corner.

I slowed until I could wrap my other arm around Miles'. "They're going to notice and judge no matter what. So, we might as well enjoy fanning the flames a bit."

He sighed as he turned to me with a soft look. "Lexie, you're touching us in front of each other."

I squeezed his arm before letting go of them. This rule was starting to irritate the hell out of me.

By the time we reached the crowd going into the gym, Miles had moved ahead of me while Ethan had dropped back behind me. Just like clockwork. Miles led us through the crowd and up the bleachers to the others.

"Prepare for rumors, men." Ethan grinned as I sat in the row in front of the others.

"What'd you do?" Isaac groaned.

"We got caught coming out of the janitor's closet." I grinned up at him. "And ran right into Faith."

Isaac chuckled, and then didn't stop. Asher sighed behind me then held out a five-dollar bill between me and Isaac.

Isaac was still laughing when he took it. "We didn't even make a whole day."

I shook my head and waited for him to calm down.

Miles didn't bother to address the bet. "Jadis is Lexie's new guidance counselor."

Isaac stopped laughing immediately.

"Seriously?" Asher shifted behind me, the backs of his fingers running down my spine in a slow caress.

His warmth tempted me into leaning back a little more. "Yep. She even made an appearance in our class."

"What the hell is she doing here?" Isaac asked.

I bumped his shoulder with mine. "She says she's keeping an eye on her 'experiment."

Isaac turned to me. "Tell me you decked her?"

I shook my head. "Sadly, no. I promised Rory I'd keep a low profile."

"Damn." Isaac sighed.

"Did she say anything else?" Miles asked, his head tilting to the side. "Anything that would give you an idea of what she's up to?"

I shrugged. "She tried to recruit me."

Mrs. Weaver came into the gym with Jadis and several other teachers.

A deep growl rumbled from behind me. Without thinking, I scooted back and pressed my back against Asher's inner thighs. He took a sharp breath in before his hands slipped up to my shoulders and squeezed gently. I relaxed under the comforting weight.

"Lexie." Miles' voice was firm.

Grrr. I moved forward as Mrs. Weaver held up a microphone.

"Good morning, students," Mrs. Weaver said. "This is an assembly about how to stay safe, so please pay attention."

The entire gym went silent.

"You keep slipping," Miles whispered.

I rolled my eyes. "It's a little hard when I would have done the exact same thing before New Orleans and not one of you would have had a problem with it."

Mrs. Weaver was still talking. "As you probably know, there have been several deaths over the last month. First, if any of you want to talk about your fears or feelings on these matters, please know our counselors are here for you." She gestured toward Jadis and Ms. Higgins. "You all know Ms. Higgins, but I'd like to introduce Ms. Hill."

"That was before, this is now," Miles reminded me.

I clenched my jaw. "So, I can't comfort one of my boyfriends?"

A boy in front of us glanced back before leaning to talk to his friend next to him. Shit! Mrs. Weaver continued some spiel.

"See what I mean," Miles chided.

Yeah, I got it. But damn. "I kinda suck at cloak and dagger, Miles."

"You'll have to get better at it. We all will," Miles countered absently as he turned to look at the door.

"Ease up, man." Isaac shook his head.

"I might be better at this if I got more practice before school started." I shot back in a hushed voice.

"Oh, damn." Ethan chuckled and shook his head.

Miles turned back to me, his brows drawn together. "You agreed with us to postpone."

I raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but I didn't think that meant—" That's when I noticed Rory at the door to the gym. "What's Rory doing here?"

Everyone turned to find my uncle in his patrol uniform, patiently waiting just inside the gym.

"Here is Officer Delaney with some safety tips," Mrs. Weaver announced to the school.

Rory confidently strode across the basketball court. He took the microphone and turned to the crowd. "Hi, everyone. I'm Officer Delaney, you may have seen me around town. Or have even gotten a ticket from me a time or two."

The crowd chuckled.

"As you have all undoubtedly heard, several women have been found murdered in and around town." His voice grew warmer. "Now, I'm going to be honest with you guys. You're smart. You're almost adults. This is a tense situation that has affected everyone in town, including officers such as myself. We're all working hard trying to find whoever has done this."

Everyone shared looks.

"First thing I want to make you aware of is, if you get pulled over, don't immediately start digging through your glove box for your registration and insurance info. Wait until we ask for it. Instead, keep your hands on the wheel in plain view. This will stop any kind of misunderstanding that you may be reaching for a weapon or trying to hide something." Rory turned as he spoke so he could see the entire crowd hanging on his every word. "There are certain actions that put officers on alert. The less you do, the less likely there will be a misunderstanding."

Jadis tilted her head to the side, her brows drawing closer as she considered Rory.

"Second, when you're out and about, be aware." His voice grew firmer but kept its warmth. "Don't be looking at your phone, don't be looking at the ground as you walk. Pay attention to the people around you and your environment. People like this, they thrive on attacking individuals who are not paying attention. They want your guard down so they can take you by surprise. That's makes sense, right?"

There were yeahs, yeses and head nods throughout the gym.

"Do not go with anyone who you do not know," he stated, still turning on the spot. "Normally, I wouldn't mention it. It's common sense. But when I say know, I mean one on one. If a fellow student in an arm cast comes up to you and says, 'Hey, let's go somewhere,' what do you do?" Rory grinned as if he didn't expect an answer. "First thing you should do is think. Have you ever talked to this person one on one before? Did you ever introduce yourself? Or do you only know them through reputation and rumors?"

Again silence.

"There is a difference between knowing *of* someone and *knowing* someone." Rory turned in place, making sure to see both sides of the gym. "You need to stop and think and look at the situation."

Rory turned back to our side of the gym. "It's not being rude to say no. If a situation has you feeling uncomfortable, there's a reason. Get out of it. Understand?"

Almost everyone nodded. Rory had the crowd in the palm of his hand.

"I'm sure a few of you at least have found yourselves in situations where you were being pressured to do something you may not have felt comfortable with?"

"Homework!" someone shouted. The crowd chuckled.

Rory smiled good naturedly. "Not quite what I'm talking about. If someone tries to make you go somewhere with them, make a scene. Scream. If you're on an empty block, hit cars to set off the alarms. Make noise. Silence is what these people thrive on, what helps them get what they want. Because if they are trying to take you somewhere, it's because they don't have good intentions. Don't worry about making a scene or being wrong. You can always apologize later. You might be embarrassed but you'll be alive."

Rory turned to Mrs. Weaver. "Now, for the next two weeks at the local gym, we're offering free self-defense lessons to help anyone who's interested. All you have to do is show your student ID and have your parents sign the waivers. The information packets will be on a table by the door, so be sure to grab one on your way out." Rory handed the microphone to Mrs. Weaver.

Everyone in the gym applauded. It was the most I'd ever heard from an assembly.

Mrs. Weaver waited for everyone to quiet down. "Thank you, Officer Delaney. Now..." I watched Jadis as the vice principal droned on. Something about that woman just made you not want to listen. Jadis was with the other teachers, a smile plastered on her face.

Why was she here? It wasn't just for me or Ethan. Probably both of us. What else could she want? I racked my brain and started with what I knew about her.

She liked power and control. She wanted it bad enough she was willing to kill people for it. Control over supernaturals? What would she need to get that?

Force. She'd need practically an army to overthrow the Witch's Council as a whole. She pulled it off in Florida but then went to—

I sat up straighter. She went to New Orleans. That was weird. If I was going to try taking over the country, I'd start in one state and then move slowly out. Keep my base strong and well protected.

But Jadis didn't do that. She jumped three states to go to New Orleans. Louis and Juan.

That had to be it, right? Louis had been a necromancer. The only other one I'd ever met, and his son. They also tried to take Juan.

Could they be after whoever closed the Veil?

I lifted my gaze and watched Jadis with her plastic smile. She turned her head and locked her gaze with mine. The smile grew brighter. I was right. Wasn't I?

I ran over it again in my head. I had no proof. Only theories, assumptions, and a gut feeling. I dragged my hand through my hair and sighed. I still had nothing to go on. Fuck.

WE WERE FILING out of the gym and away from the crowd when I went to tell them what I was thinking. Only, I didn't get a chance.

"Lexie, you have to learn to control yourself," Miles said quietly.

I looked up at him baffled before I realized what he was talking about. "Miles, I don't care if people find out."

"I understand that," he countered. "But not everyone is as comfortable with this as you are."

It was a comment I hadn't seen coming. I stopped in the middle of the hallway and looked up at him.

His emerald eyes met mine, his mouth a hard line as people walked around us.

"Are you embarrassed about this?" I asked, stunned.

Isaac squeezed my arm before he shared a look with Ethan then moved a bit further down the hallway to give us some illusion of privacy.

His brows drew together. "About what?"

This wasn't the right place or the right time, but shit. I had to know. "Me?"

His brow relaxed as his eyes widened a little. "No."

Relief left me almost dizzy. "About what we're doing?"

He let out a deep breath. "Lexie, this isn't the place."

He was right. I knew he was. Shaking my head, I started down the hall again. "We've got biology class. We'll see you at lunch."

Isaac walked with me toward what was left of our class.

"He didn't mean it that way," Isaac said as we picked two seats in the back of the bustling classroom and sat down.

"I know," I muttered.

Isaac settled his arm around my shoulders on the back of my chair. His fingers squeezed my shoulder. "Something's up his ass. He's been quiet lately."

I pulled my notepad out of my bag along with a pen. "Yeah." I braced my elbows on the table and looked down at my paper.

"It's okay, Red."

I nodded as I started doodling mindlessly. What if Miles changed his mind? What if he realized he didn't want this? He had been spending a lot of time with Lucy...

Mr. Baxter began class. It was the usual first day stuff condensed down to five minutes, since ten was all that we had left in class. Mr. Baxter wasn't one to give busy work, so we only had to pay attention for the layout of the class, then we were free to do whatever we wanted.

Isaac pulled the pen out of my hand.

Surprised, I jumped and turned to him.

He held up the chewed pen. "You're about to have ink all over your face."

I shrugged and immediately began chewing my thumbnail.

He took my hand, pulled it from my mouth and kept it. "It's me."

I met those amber eyes and gave up. "I don't want to make you feel bad."

His brow drew down for several heartbeats before he smiled. "Do you love me?"

A smile slowly moved across my face. "Absolutely."

He moved a little closer and whispered, "You know how I've been reading a lot of self-help books since we got back?"

I nodded.

"I asked Ma to send me into therapy."

My jaw dropped. "Really?"

He nodded. "I need to figure shit out, and part of that is dealing with this whole dating thing."

My eyes stung. "Don't go for our situation. Go because it'll help you."

His smile grew even warmer. "I am, Lexie. This will just be a bonus."

I practically melted into a puddle. I loved it when he used my name like that. "Damn, you're too cute."

He chuckled, that light growing brighter in his eyes. "I try."

I let out a slow breath and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too." His cheeks turned rosy. "And I want to be here for you."

I started to chew on the corner of my lower lip. "I don't want you to feel like you aren't enough for me."

His smile didn't even fade as his fingers tangled with mine. "As long as you keep reminding me that you love me, I think I can deal." That mischievous light was back. "And kisses. Lots and lots of kisses."

I chuckled softly. "I think I can do that."

"So, what has you chewing the hell out of your pen?"

I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Are you going to be embarrassed about me dating everyone? If it gets out?"

He scowled at me. It was the oddest face. His lips were twisted, his brow was drawn down. Everything about it screamed that he thought I was crazy. "Fuck no."

I looked in his eyes and tried to figure out if he was lying. "Are you sure?"

"Look, we both know I've got my issues with this." His face relaxed. "But I've wanted to be with you for months. To be able to touch you, to kiss you... for once, I'm not going to get in my own way."

A warm smile slowly crossed my face. Isaac had been working hard all month trying to understand why he does what he does. We'd been talking every night about what he read. About him. He was finally realizing how much he tore himself down. He never wanted to go back to that place, and

frankly, I would give almost anything to stop that from happening. In the last month he'd changed. And it wasn't for me. It was for himself. For his life.

And it was beautiful to me.

Whispering caught my ear. I turned in time to spot Faith at the end of the row in front of us, eyeing us with a pinched face. Not caring anymore, I winked at her.

Her face grew pink as her lips pursed. I went back to my conversation with Isaac, knowing full well I just made it worse.

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Miles

iles, there is no gum in my class," Mr. Jones announced. I continued to tap my pen on my notepad.

"Mr. Huntington." Mr. Jones' hard voice pulled me

back to the present.

He stood over me, scowling and holding the garbage can. Oh, damn.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." I took out my gum and put it in the trash.

He simply shook his head and walked away.

My phone dinged.

Ethan: What's crawled up your ass and died today?

I reached for another piece of gum only to barely catch myself. Instead, I answered.

Miles: Nothing. I just don't believe we should give the gossipers any fodder.

I was about to put my phone down when it dinged again.

Ethan: And it has nothing to do with that paperwork last night?

I began bouncing my knee.

Miles: Of course not. We agreed to not have PDA until we are sure everyone can handle it.

Ethan: Everyone was handling it, except you.

I ran it back through my head. Damn, he was right.

Miles: It has nothing to do with last night.

Ethan: You're being an ass to us lately.

I scowled at my phone.

Miles: I am not.

Ethan: Man, if you can't handle us touching her or her touching us then you need to say something.

I didn't answer. He was right, I just didn't want to admit it. But he knew me too well.

Ethan: You know I'm right. You need to talk to her about this.

I tucked my phone into my pocket. That wasn't the whole issue. Part of the problem was that I didn't care that she was touching the others, or if they touched her. And that was what bothered me. Other people would take notice and they'd care. They'd judge and eventually insult her. And I didn't know how I would respond to that.

I shook my head and went back to my notepad full of schematics. There were other things to worry about. Things in town were getting strange, and with Jadis here, things were going to be only getting more dangerous. I examined my plans again. This could help.

* * *

Lexie

I TOOK the last bite of my sandwich just as the bell rang and groaned around my full mouth. I needed to stop talking so much at lunch.

Asher sent me a sympathetic smile. "Come on, Ally. We've got art class."

I shoved the trash back in my bag as I chewed and slung it over my shoulder. Asher fell in step with me as we waved bye to everyone else.

When I finally could, I looked up at Asher. "So, you're in art class."

He nodded, making a point to look anywhere but at me.

I grinned. "You hate art class."

He shrugged as we turned the corner in the hallway. "Maybe"—he looked down at me—"but I like watching you work."

My face grew warm as he reached down and took my hand in his. It was such a small thing, but it seemed enormous. Something I'd seen other couples do in the halls a thousand times. Something that a part of me never thought we'd do. Happiness filled me; I knew what it had taken for us to get

here, I was going to enjoy it while I could. I squeezed his fingers as we moved through the halls.

We let go when we reached the classroom door and headed inside. "Is that the only reason you're taking this class?"

We found our old spots from last year and sat down.

"Maybe," he muttered as he put his bag down.

I bumped his knee with mine. He leaned forward a little, his arm dipping under the table. His fingers found mine and threaded with them. I fought a smile as I squeezed his fingers.

His blue eyes were his usual waves, not a speck of silver in sight. I couldn't seem to pull away from his gaze.

"Welcome to art class!" Mrs. Archer clapped her hands but even that wasn't enough to tear my gaze from his. "This year, this is an advanced class. I'll be expecting a lot more from each of you. Better work, more meaningful work."

That caught my attention. Asher blinked and turned to the front.

Mrs. Archer smiled. "If that makes you nervous, there's the door."

I eyed Asher.

He cringed. This wasn't going to be easy for him.

"Now, show me what you can do," Mrs. Archer demanded. I smirked as I headed for the pastels.

Shallow. She said my work was shallow. I continued to curse on my way out of class. Asher's arm wrapped around my back to settle his hand on my hip, keeping me beside him as we walked through the halls.

"I thought it was great," he offered as he steered me around a couple of girls who were giving us curious looks.

"That wasn't the problem," I muttered. "She said there was no substance in the drawing. Nothing but fluff."

His fingers tightened on my hip as he gave me a squeeze. "She said she was expecting more."

"But shallow?" I guess I could see it. It was a beach scene that I had done for today's assignment. I get it, there was no reason behind the picture. It was just a pretty picture.

"I know, Ally girl." His voice was warm as he pulled me to a stop outside of the library. "But it's the first day. And you've been saying how you were hoping for more of a challenge in art class this year."

I squirmed as I faced him. "I know, but, fuck."

He smiled before he bent down and kissed me quickly before straightening to his full height. "Get to class, Ally girl. I'll see you after."

I grinned up at him and opened the door while he headed to weight training.

When I walked into the library the door slammed shut behind me, echoing through the rows of books and earning me a glare from the librarian.

I shrugged and sent an apologetic smile before going to one of the larger tables. A free period for study hall had seemed great, but all I wanted to do was go home at this point. I sat down across from a familiar face, laid my head down on my forearms, and took several deep breaths.

"How's your day going?" Laura asked in her soft voice. Her mousey brown hair reached her shoulders. Her pretty face was hidden, again, behind that hair.

I lifted my head. "I don't even know how to answer that right now."

Her eyebrows went up. "Oh, so it's that kind of day?"

"It's an odd day, yeah," I admitted.

She chuckled. "So, what did you do this summer?"

Started dating all my best friends, fought a demon over Isaac's soul, was the reason one of my friends was tortured and two are no longer human... "I got a job at one of the tattoo shops in town."

"Is it interesting?" Laura put her pen down.

"Yeah, I'm learning a lot. My boss is going to let me start tattooing some leather for practice." I smiled. I was really excited about it. I began to pull out my books.

The door opened again. Jordan strode in. He had a nice face with an angled jaw and straight nose. His hazel eyes spotted me. He gave me a small wave before going to his own table and pulling out his books.

"So, what did you do this summer?" I turned back to Laura.

She started leafing through big, thick old books. "I did a lot of scholarship research for college. I'm starting to apply now."

"Shit." I buried my face in my hands. "The S.A.T.'s are this month."

"You haven't taken them?" She gaped.

I dropped my hands and shook my head. "No, and I've been so slammed I haven't had a chance to study yet."

"That's okay, as long as you get started on it." By the cringing of her face I could tell it was not good.

I opened my history book. "At least I know where I'm applying for next year."

"Good, but don't forget scholarships. You'll be amazed at how many you could get."

I nodded. That made sense. Okay, I could do this. "So, what scholarships are you going for?"

"Oh, there's a few research essays that I'm working on." She shrugged. "Heavy subjects."

I raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "One is on the occult and its effect on people's belief systems."

I plastered a happy smile on while I was gaping on the inside. The occult... "Sounds fun."

She chuckled.

Over the next hour I got started on my homework for the week. One thing I did like about my teachers this year was that they gave me all the homework at the beginning of the week. Except math.

By the time the librarian told us we could go, I had gotten a good portion of my homework for the week done for history and biology.

As I was packing up my books and reading glasses, Jordan appeared at my table with a sweet smile. "Hey, Lexie. We've missed you at the gym."

"Hey." I gave him a friendly smile and continued packing my bag.

"Are you ever coming back? Mattie's going on and on about a rematch." He grinned.

I chuckled. "If things ever slow down, then yeah."

"Uh..." He scratched his earlobe. "You look beat, do you... want to go get some coffee? It'd help keep ya going."

"Oh, um..." I zipped my bag closed and looked up at him. "I kinda..."

He nodded, his cheeks tinting pink. "You've got a boyfriend?"

"Yeah." I swung my bag over my shoulder. "Several actually."

His brow drew down, his confusion obvious.

"Thanks for asking, though. See ya later." I started for the door, grinning. Yeah, the day kinda sucked but the look on his face might have been worth it.

I headed out to my Blazer and found most of my boyfriends there waiting for me. Boyfriends. Boy. Friends. As in plural. I was still getting used to it. And still internally squealing with delight.

"What trails are we on today?" I asked as I tossed my bag inside.

"You're taking St. Mary's and Virginia with Zeke." Isaac turned to me. "He'll meet you at the trailhead."

I nodded. "Good, we really need to find some new setups."

"Especially with Jadis in town," Asher muttered.

"I won't be able to help today," Miles announced.

Everyone stopped and turned to him.

"You're not coming?" I asked slowly.

Miles shook his head. "I'm sorry, something came up that I need to deal with."

We waited for him to elaborate.

"What's going on?" I finally asked.

Miles swallowed hard. "I would like to keep this to myself for now."

A heavy silence fell.

"Are you serious?" Asher gaped at him. "You're always saying that we need to communicate."

Miles turned to Asher, his lips pressed together. "I know, this is just private."

Private? What could be so private that he wouldn't tell us? Lucy's face popped back into my head. I shoved it right back out. Miles wouldn't be blowing us off for that, this was too important.

I bit back my irritation and kept my voice chipper. "Private, right. First Zeke wouldn't tell me what was bothering him, now you aren't going to tell me what's going on." I sighed wearily. "I'm tired of secrets." They always caused problems and usually ended up as a black eye on someone's face.

He avoided meeting my gaze by looking at the ground. "I know."

"But you're still not going to tell us." I didn't even have to guess.

He nodded. "I'll be back in time for our date tonight. I've already made reservations, I'll text you the time."

"Three steps forward, two steps back," I muttered under my breath before I turned to the others. "Okay, let's split up the trails. We'll get two done today I guess."

Ethan raised a finger into the air. "Asher and Isaac will need a hand. Their trail branches off into three directions."

The guys agreed.

"That means the three of us will take Staton Lake." Isaac turned to me. "Did you bring Asher's leash?"

The guys chuckled a little. I even smiled a little.

Asher grabbed Isaac by the shirt and shoved him toward his truck. "Very funny, shithead."

Isaac and Ethan snickered all the way to the truck.

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CHAPTER 5

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he hike in was mostly quiet. We searched the woods uphill of the trail, looking for anywhere that might hide a setup like the one we had found at the lake.

Hades jumped through the underbrush wagging his tail. The birds chirped and the wind sent the trees dancing. It was everything I needed. A little peace and quiet to cool my irritation down.

"What's wrong?" Zeke stepped over a log.

"I've been cooling off." I kept searching the woods for anything that was strange. "Miles is kind of pissing me off."

He shook his head. Hades ran back to us with a stick. "Kind of? You've been quiet for almost an hour."

I smiled and threw the stick for Hades. "I don't really feel a need to talk around you." I shrugged and looked up at him. "It's nice."

His lips pressed together for a moment before he made a point to look through the woods.

My heart sank. "You want to talk, and I just ruined it, didn't I?"

"There's something I need to talk to you about." He hesitated before he reached out to take my hand. My hand disappeared in his large, warm paw.

I squeezed to let him know I appreciated it. "Then tell me."

He swallowed hard, the blood draining from his face. "When we get to the falls."

It wasn't long until he led me back down across the trail and into the brush. When he lifted a low branch out of the way for me, my jaw dropped.

There in the rocks, like some photo, was a ten-foot waterfall pouring into a large basin before sweeping downstream.

"Wow." It was stunning. Hades ran for the water. He splashed in and began to pounce near the shore.

Zeke walked out onto the large rocks near the water. "I thought you'd like it."

The green trees were changing to reds, browns and golds. Fall started to show early in the mountains. Add in the waterfall and it was spectacular. Peace settled through me. I loved fall here. The colors changing across the horizon made my fingers itch for my pastels. Instead, I joined him on the rocks. "It's beautiful."

His shoulders were rigid, his hands clenching into a fist until his knuckles turned white. His jaw clenched and unclenched as he stared unseeing into the woods.

My smile faded. "Zeke?"

His head snapped up. Shadows swirled in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I took a step toward him.

He stepped back.

I stopped where I was. "Are you mad at me?"

He shook his head.

Dread filled my chest. "Zeke?"

"I have to tell you something," he said, his voice a rough rasp, "but I don't know how."

My stomach knotted. "If you already cheated on me, you're a dead man."

The corner of his lips lifted then just as quickly dropped. "You know there's no one else I want."

Warmth washed through me, at least until he looked down at the ground again.

"You know you can tell me anything." I moved closer and looked up at him. "And it won't go anywhere."

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I know." He lifted his head. Tears filled his eyes as he met my gaze. "That's not what I'm worried about."

My heart dropped. "Zeke. Talk to me."

His eyes ran over my face several times before he nodded. He moved away from me, taking deep breaths before he sat down on a large outcropping of stone. "You know it's been ten years since my mom died."

I moved almost close enough to touch him. "Yeah?"

He clenched his fist as he kept his gaze on the ground. "And you know I haven't been around a lot lately."

"Yeah, you said it was because of the anniversary." It was completely logical.

"That's not what's hitting me so hard." His voice grew rougher. "I want to tell you, but..."

I didn't like this. My Zeke would always look me in the eye when he needed to talk. "Zeke, look at me."

He shook his head. "I can't look at you and tell you what I need to tell you."

My knots grew knots in my stomach. "Okay."

"You know I went into foster care," he said, just above a whisper.

I nodded.

"While Sylvie was doing everything she could to move, it was taking time, so, I was placed in foster care for a month." He clenched both fists again.

When he didn't continue my heart hurt. "Did something happen?" He nodded.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," I reminded him.

"I'm going to need you to stay with me one night soon, Baby." He lifted his head and met my gaze. "And I want you to know why. Why I am this way. Why Miles doesn't let people know where he lives, why no one knows where I live. I want you to know."

"Okay." I leaned a little closer, hoping he'd feel my body heat and remember I was there. That he wasn't alone. That I was listening. His head dropped, his gaze on the rock under his boots.

"A couple of weeks in... I was asleep." His voice shook in the silence. He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I woke up to four drunk grown men in my room. One of them was the foster father."

My lungs grew tight, I didn't move. Everything I was waited for him to say what he needed to while I prayed it wasn't as bad as I was starting to think.

"He..." He swallowed hard as his eyes unfocused on the stone. Tears began to stream from his eyes. "He liked little kids."

My throat tightened as my heart shattered. My own tears fell. Someone had... I fought the instinct to reach for him until he was done, like he said.

His entire body trembled as he took a shaky breath. "And if that wasn't fucked up enough... so did his friends."

My stomach rolled with horror at what he was describing. How could anyone... What kind of sick motherfuckers... "Zeke..."

He closed his eyes and shook his head, sending more tears to sprinkle on the rock. "Let me finish."

A deep pit burned in my chest. Aching, raw sorrow burned. I clenched my teeth together and tried to keep my breathing steady.

"When Sylvie picked me up, she asked what happened as soon as I got in the car. She took me straight to the emergency room. Rory arrested the fucker, but his buddies... he never gave them up. I still don't know who they were."

I took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. "Can I touch you now?"

He scoffed at the ground. "Are you sure you want to?"

"Of course," I whispered.

He lifted his chin to look at me without making eye contact. Disbelief etched every line of his face.

"It wasn't your fault," I whispered.

Fresh tears fell down his face as those tortured eyes met mine. "I know."

"And it sure as fuck doesn't affect your worth. Or who you are," I croaked as more tears fell. "Ya hear me?"

Some of the shadows disappeared from his eyes. Not a lot, but some. "I hear ya."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed every inch of me against him as I tried not to imagine the fucking shit he had gone through. I held him even tighter.

He pressed his forehead against my skin and took several deep breaths as his trembling arms slipped around me. "I'm sorry I lost my shit with you in the hospital." His shoulders shook as his arms tightened on me. "My exam was... I fucking lost it when I thought you went through that alone."

"I love you," I whispered, not knowing what else I could say. So I kept telling him. Over and over. Until eventually, my neck dried. And his arms loosened their death grip.

"I love you too, Baby," he whispered. "Please... will you stay with me when... when I need you?"

My eyebrows shot up. "Duh."

He snorted.

We held each other even longer as I thought about everything I'd learned over the last year. I used to think demons were the ultimate evil, but they'd just eat your soul. Humans on the other hand... they'd tear you apart, piece by piece. Those were the real monsters.

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CHAPTER 6

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Asher

was upstairs folding laundry when the front door closed hard. I tilted my head as Dad's muttered curses reached my ears. And judging by the way his heart was racing, he was pissed. I left the laundry as dread took root in my gut. My wolf woke up and raised its head inside me.

I took several deep breaths and soothed him back down. This was going to be hard enough without him being awake.

"Asher!" His shout rang in my ears. "Get down here!"

My wolf stirred again, waiting. Calm, calm, calm. You can always walk away. Reminding myself of that got me down the stairs and into the family room.

Dad was pacing the length of the room.

My wolf lifted his head inside me. *Weak*. He lay back down with his head on his paws. Weak? What was he talking about? Dad's gaze met mine. "Why did you ditch tryouts this year?"

"I didn't ditch them." I straightened my shoulders. "I'm not playing this year."

"The hell you aren't." His face grew red with rage. "I've already talked to your coach. He's going to let it slide as long as you bust your ass the rest of the year."

"Then you wasted your time." I slipped my hands into my pockets. "I'm not playing this year. I'm done."

"Why?" he demanded.

I hesitated. He wouldn't believe me if I told him the truth. There was no way. "I'm just... done. I don't want to play anymore."

He scowled at me. "You don't want to do it anymore? That's it? That's the only reason?"

"Yeah, Dad." I sighed. "I'm sick of it. I was done last year but I played anyway because of you."

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he spat. "This is your ride. This is your future! And you're throwing it away."

"Nothing is the matter with me!" I snapped back. "I'm just finally sick of being someone I'm not!"

"You ungrateful—"

"Yeah, I know. I'm ungrateful that my father has decided my entire life for me without even knowing me. I'm ungrateful that you can't even be in the same house as we are. I'm ungrateful for everything! I've heard this list before." My wolf rose to the surface, moving inside my chest. My eyes stung, telling me I'd switched to my wolf eyes. I needed to get out of here. "I'll be at Miles' until you're gone."

"You're not going anywhere!" He grabbed my arm hard.

My wolf was there instantly. A deep growl reverberated in my chest, and I turned and shoved him away from me. The drywall dented and cracked. His eyes were wide as I strode out of the house.

It didn't register what I had done until I was at Bickman's trail. Run. I needed to run. I dialed Brody.

* * *

Miles

CLEAN. The living trust was clean.

I walked out to the parking structure after several hours of sitting in the office. Twersky, the best lawyer in Missoula, said it was clean. His lawyer

and his people ran every check imaginable. Checked out every angle. Used every resource I had. Only to find nothing.

I got into my car and stared at the steering wheel. He even provided for Mother. She'd receive a third of everything. What was his game? There were no conditions, no debts, no traps. It wasn't like him.

It stayed on my mind as I drove back to Spring Mountain.

It was dark when I pulled off the highway and into Zeke's long driveway. By the time I parked I was rubbing my temple, hoping to fight off a headache.

A wide shadowed figure moved out of the garage. The bags under his eyes were still dark. The scruff on his face was almost a beard again. Not surprising considering what week it was. But something was different. Something in his shoulders, posture... I couldn't put my finger on it.

Racking my brain for what it was, I waited for him to reach my car.

"When was the last time you slept?" I asked, surveying his face.

He shrugged. "I managed a couple of hours last night."

"When did you eat last?" I asked, running down our usual list.

He thought about it. "Um, dinner last night with Sylvie."

"You're going to eat something before I leave." My voice told him to not even argue.

He shook his head. "Aren't you supposed to be going to dinner with Lexie tonight?"

"Our reservations aren't for another two hours."

"Where'd you go?" he asked.

I took advantage of his curiosity. "Eat something and I'll tell you."

He cursed before he started toward the house.

I followed a few steps behind him into the house. "Sit down, I'll make you a sandwich."

Zeke groaned as he went into the kitchen. "No thanks, I'll make it."

"Sandwiches I can handle," I assured him.

He scoffed. "I'm not risking it."

He began to make a sandwich while I leaned against the sink.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was a dry rasp.

I began to tap my fingers on the tiled counter. "Lexie figured out what the triangle we found in the woods is."

He looked at me over his shoulder, his eyes bright. "Hmm. What was it?"

I summed it up for him and that we'd continue searching.

"That's good, we're getting closer to the fucker." He sighed and went back to making his sandwich. "That still doesn't answer my question."

"Some contracts came up that I needed to get my lawyer's eye on." I quickly added, "She's worried about you."

Zeke watched me without blinking.

"She knows you're dealing with something that she doesn't know about." I tried again. "And she knows I'm dealing with something—"

"She's said something?" He raised his eyebrow.

"No, she doesn't know anything. She's getting frustrated."

Zeke's gaze narrowed on mine. "I'd be pissed too."

"You might want to call her tonight and see if you can smooth things over."

He scoffed. "You know who you're talking to, right? I don't smooth shit over. I'm usually the reason it's fucked to begin with."

My tapping increased in tempo. "I didn't say you had to tell her anything—"

"Bullshit." Zeke growled as he pushed away from the counter. "You want to hide your shit behind mine."

He started walking off.

I closed my eyes. "She won't walk away from you."

Zeke stopped in the doorway.

I needed him to understand. "If you tell her, it won't scare her. But with me..."

Zeke turned on me. "It's not your fucking secret, Miles. It's your dad's."

"I know." I shook my head, everything jumbling in my chest. "But yours won't put her in danger."

Zeke clenched and unclenched his jaw. "Neither will yours."

I caved. "I got papers from his lawyer. He wants me to sign a living trust."

Zeke simply waited.

"He's giving everything to my mother and I. Everything except the shipping business."

Zeke scowled. "Isn't that good?"

"What's he doing with the shipping business?" I asked, dreading the answer. "He can't just walk away from it."

"It's not your responsibility. It's not your problem, Miles." He shook his head. "That asshole made his choices. You made yours."

He was right. I knew he was. It was just hard to know what to do. "She knows we're keeping things from her, and I can't tell her."

The look on his face was the promise of murder. "When I tell Lexie about my past, it'll be when I'm fucking good and ready. That's *my* relationship with her. How fast we go or what we know about each other isn't for *you* to decide or control. That's between me and her." He turned and strode toward the door. He jerked it open then went still. His raging eyes met mine. "And I already told her."

He what?... "You told her?"

"Yeah." He shook his head. "Today. On that hike."

Stunned, I couldn't believe it. Zeke told her....

"You have to trust in her sometime, Miles."

I shook my head automatically. "It's not that I don't—"

"Stop fucking lying to yourself," he barked. "You've been holding out on her, scared she'll leave if she finds out about your dad."

"Zeke," I warned.

He met my gaze, unflinching. "Tell her."

I clenched my fist. "You told her everything?"

His eyes narrowed on me as his face grew hard. "Yeah. And it's not even close to the same fucking level, Miles."

I looked down at the floor as a heavy weight settled in my chest. He was right. It wasn't the same as Zeke's past. "When the time is right."

He scoffed, making me raise my head.

"You've got the same damn control issues as your dad. You're not going to move us around like pieces on a chess board so you can fucking hide from Lexie. You need to work on your shit. And you need to grow a pair." He stormed out, slamming the door hard enough it rattled the windows.

Shit...

* * *

Lexie

I CHECKED MY PHONE AGAIN. It was nine o'clock and still no Miles. Okay, Miles had been late before for things, but this was our first official date. Hell, I didn't even really want to go out tonight. After crossing another hundred souls at the cemetery, all I wanted was my pajamas, my dog, and a book. But Miles had texted a time that he'd pick me up. Besides, we needed to have it out. Sighing, I got to my feet and headed upstairs to my room to change as I hit Miles' contact button and called.

I caught myself in the mirror on the back of my door. The indigo jersey knit dress hugged my curves and did great things for my hair color. Miles' text had said something about a dinner reservation. So, naturally in a panic, I asked Tara to lend me a dress. She had been so happy she practically beamed as she dragged me into her closet and dressed me up like a doll. I fingered the soft fabric as the phone rang in my ear. I had to admit, I liked the cut of this wrap dress.

"Yeah?" Miles' voice was breathless and irritated.

"Hey," I greeted, biting back a flash of irritation. What the hell had he been doing that was more important than our first date in over a month?

"Oh, Lexie." His voice warmed and grew smoother. "Sorry, I was in the middle of unpacking crates."

I barely held back the bite in my voice as I started to undress. "What crates?"

"All the equipment for the lab came in today." He grunted. Wood broke on his side of the line.

"What lab?" I finished untying the dress and let it hang open, forgotten.

"The alchemy lab." He started to catch his breath. "I told you about it."

I racked my memory as I used my shoulder to keep the phone to my ear while I pulled off the dress. Nothing, nada. He didn't tell me. I unhooked the front of my bra roughly. "No, no you didn't."

"I'm sure I did." He turned away from the phone. "Lucy, can you clear a space for the vat?"

"Sure." Lucy's voice was chipper.

I clenched my jaw. He was working with Lucy? Pretty, genius Lucy? "You're working with Lucy?" Every doubt I ever had about Miles came roaring to the front of my mind. I never gave them much thought or attention, but with the way he was acting they'd been getting louder and louder.

"Yes, she's helping me open the crates and clear the flower beds in the atrium." He grunted as wood splintered again.

I was pulling out a plastic tub from under my bed when I paused. "You're clearing out the atrium?"

"Yes, we might as well." He took a deep breath. "My mother isn't coming back. And the house is in my name now."

Clenching my teeth, I pulled my pjs out and shut it. My irritation sparked again. It wasn't my house. I really shouldn't have any input. But I loved that atrium. A few days after we came home from camping, I had had a shitty day at work. The kind that just got worse and worse as it went on. While waiting for the guys to show with the pizza, Miles had turned on some music and danced with me, surrounded by those plants. It was one of my favorite memories in that house. "Whose idea was it to strip the atrium?"

"Lucy's," he answered, then continued with his thought. "You should see some of this equipment. It's enormous."

I bit my tongue as I pulled on my cotton pj bottoms and cami, while he continued to tell me about equipment I hadn't heard of before. By the time I was done dressing, he was in full excited lecture mode. Usually I loved that about him, but not tonight. "Miles, what day is it?"

He stopped mid-sentence. "Um, Monday."

I waited for him to remember. The man had a photographic memory for fuck's sake.

"You do remember that school was today?" he asked, his voice concerned.

He wasn't going to remember. My heart sank. I knew I shouldn't take it personally. I knew it was a mistake and he didn't mean anything by it. But it still fucking hurt. I swallowed hard and made a point to keep my voice the same. "Yeah, I do. I better go check on the Veil and get my usual four hours of sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Alright, sweet dreams." Miles' voice was the soothing timbre I usually loved. Right now, it just made me mad.

"You too." I hung up and barely resisted throwing the phone at the wall. I sat down hard next to Hades. What the hell was with Miles? Did having Lucy in his house remind him of what he was giving up by sharing me and my time? Did he change his mind and just didn't know how to tell me? Or

was I just not smart enough for him? Each question tore a deeper gouge in my heart. I picked up the dress and headed to Tara's door.

After a light knock, she opened the door a little and peeked out. "How was it?"

I handed the dress on the hanger to her. "He didn't show up."

She frowned. "What do you mean, he didn't show?"

I shrugged and headed for the bathroom. "It looks like he got caught up in a project. It happens. Thanks for lending me the dress."

"Anytime," she said before closing her door.

I had just finished washing my face when my phone rang on the counter. It was Miles. My chest ached deeply. I sent him to voicemail. I couldn't keep up the stupid charade that everything was fine between us. Knowing I wasn't going to get to sleep anytime soon, I went back into my room, closed the door, and picked up a book. After turning on my desk lamp, I cuddled up with Hades. His head was in my lap as I stroked his ears and tried to get into the book instead of driving myself crazy.

But I kept reading the same lines over and over. Finally, I gave up and picked up my phone.

"Hey, hot stuff. What's going on?" Jake teased.

I took a deep breath. "I need someone I'm not dating to tell me I'm being crazy."

His voice instantly changed from cheerful to serious. "What's wrong?"

I looked down at the end of my bed and stroked Hades' ears. "Miles stood me up."

"That fucking shit!" His outrage made me grin a little.

"He got into a project, it's not that unusual to be honest." I sniffed. "But then add in that he's been distant, we've been fighting, and the genius pretty girl is staying in his house until she gets her own place."

"Damn, that's doubt-palooza."

"Yeah." I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. "Am I just being paranoid?"

He hesitated. "I know he's been distant the last month. Anything else besides him getting caught up?"

I licked my lips. "Yeah, we haven't really talked about anything since we got home except about how to make this polyandry thing work, and problems that could come up. And he hasn't called me Angel for a couple of weeks."

"Wait, nothing else? Not about dates? Not about what he's been up to?"

I scoffed. "He didn't even tell me about this project until tonight."

"Oh damn." He went silent. "What are you guys fighting about?"

I swallowed hard. "About keeping our relationships hidden in public. I'm not exactly subtle when I have one boyfriend, let alone five."

"Oh..."

"I'm not being paranoid, am I?" I didn't even really need to ask.

"No, sweetie, you're not." He sighed as he shut something on his side. "I'm sorry, but you need to talk to him about it."

I shook my head. "I think I'm too tired to even try tonight."

"Then go to bed and enjoy some naughty dreams tonight," he teased.

I chuckled. "Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Jake."

"No problem, chickee. I'll talk to you tomorrow." He hung up the phone while I took some deep, calming breaths. I picked up my book again.

Ten minutes later my phone rang. I sent Miles to voicemail again.

Not even a minute later, my phone dinged. It was a text from Miles. I didn't even look at it. I tried to get back into my book. Hades shifted so that he was mostly draped across my lap, his version of super cuddling.

There was a sound downstairs. A minute later, the front door opened and closed. I didn't give it much thought as I continued to stare blankly at the book on my bent knees.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door.

"Come in." I looked up expecting Rory.

The door opened showing me Miles. His hair was everywhere, as if he had run his hands through it recently. He was wearing a nice green button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of slacks. He looked handsome. But it was the determination set in every line of his face that had me holding my breath.

"I'm sorry, Lexie." He moved to my bed and sat on the edge facing me. "I completely forgot. I was on my way out the door when the delivery truck arrived and then I just got—"

"Caught up with the project," I finished for him, my irritation slipping through my voice. "With Lucy. I figured." I went back to my book.

"Yeah," he continued, as if he didn't notice my mood.

"It's too late for the reservations I made"—his hand moved to my hand on the book— "but we could go get ice-cream. We'll be back before curfew." I snapped the book shut and looked up at him. "It's already past school night curfew, Miles."

He pulled out his phone and scowled at it. "You're right, it is. That doesn't mean I couldn't go to the store and come back."

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip and watched him put his phone back in his pocket. "How long does Lucy have until she moves out?"

He turned back to me and hesitated. But he began tapping his thigh. That was all the answer I needed.

"She's not. Is she?" My voice grew hard.

He shrugged. "She's teaching me about alchemy. She's the best in her field right now. It's like learning physics from Einstein himself. It's an incredible opportunity."

I got it. I really did. But at the same time, I missed my Miles. "So, she's not leaving."

"No, not as long as she's teaching me," he admitted. "She's doing me an enormous favor, the least I could do is let her live with me a while longer."

My chest ached a deep, throbbing pain. Fuck it. "Is that really the reason? Or do you not want her to leave?"

He grew still, his face blank. "What does she have to do with this?"

I eyed him. Then shook my head as weariness washed over me. I rubbed my hand down my face as I realized tonight wasn't a good night. I finally had Miles' real attention, and I was too fucking exhausted to find out what was going on. "You know what, I'm just really tired. I think I'm just going to try to get some sleep."

He blinked at me. "Alright." He got to his feet and leaned over me to kiss my temple. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night," I barely managed as he closed the door behind him. I waited until the front door closed before I threw my book to the floor and shut off my lamp, almost breaking it. I curled up around Hades and tried to sleep. Fuck the Veil. Tonight, I was going to get some sleep.

I SHIFTED and rolled over in my bed. Again. I couldn't fall asleep. I checked my clock. It was almost midnight. Great. Every time I closed my eyes I went back to the janitor's closet with Ethan. Only this time we weren't interrupted.

What would Ethan be like? He'd always pulled my hair whenever we were really kissing. Would there be more pinches like the one to my nipple? I chewed the bottom corner of my lower lip as I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I wasn't naive, I'd heard of pain being used during sex. I just never thought I'd like it. And I really had.

What else would he have done? I shifted to my back and looked up at the ceiling. The ache in my body had me saying fuck it. I rolled back over and opened my middle drawer just as my phone vibrated. I smiled. It was Ethan.

"Hey." My voice was soft.

"A month." Ethan's voice was irritated.

"What?" I picked up my small, silent vibrator and lay back down.

"I've held back for a month," he said. "You're my girlfriend and I shouldn't even be touching you until we know what I am."

"So, today was an accident?" I grinned, everything else fading into the background.

He chuckled. "I don't want to hold back with you, Lexie. I'm not shy about anything."

Heat rolled through me, making me take a deep breath. "Then just be you."

"I want nothing more than to bury myself inside you right now," he whispered in his smoky, toe-curling voice.

I closed my eyes as that voice rolled over me. Throbbing began between my legs making me want to move. "Fuck, Ethan."

"I told ya." He exhaled hard.

I smiled my wicked grin. "Keep talking."

He caught his breath. "You're okay with phone sex?"

My heart raced as excitement bubbled along my skin. "I've never done it before, but as long as we're not overheard..."

"Fuck..." He groaned. "Beautiful, I want to slip my hand into your panties and run my fingers over you."

My head dropped back as I hit the button for my vibrator then slipped my hand under my underwear and between my legs.

He inhaled in surprise. "Is that a vibrator?"

"Uh-huh."

"Are you already wet for me?" he asked, that voice running down my spine like fingers.

My fingers slipped through my folds. "Fuck yeah." I stroked myself with my toy. "My fingers slowly run down your chest. Down your stomach to brush against you."

"Imagine my tongue, running across you," he countered.

I pressed my vibrator exactly where I wanted it. Sparks shot up and down my nerves as my hips moved against my hand.

"My hot breath blowing across the inside of your thigh while my hands grip your thighs tightly, keeping you where I want you," he whispered. "My tongue playing with your clit. Stroking it slowly."

"Oh, shit." My body coiled tighter.

"My fingers slip inside you while I continue to stroke you, enjoying the taste of you on my tongue."

My body trembled as I imagined him between my legs, those chocolate eyes looking up at me. I moved my vibrator over. "Snoopy..."

"My fingers slide out slowly, then back in as my tongue strokes your clit." The last whisper of that soft, smoky voice threw me over the edge. I barely remembered to push my face into my pillows as I blew apart. I cried out into the pillow, my entire body shaking as waves of pleasure crashed over me. A low, guttural groan filled my ear as I continued to spasm. My core clenched and unclenched, achingly empty as I took several deep, shaky breaths.

When I could, I wet my lips. "That fucking voice of yours..."

He chuckled softly in my ear making me shiver again. "You should hear yours when you're close."

I turned off my vibrator. "Oh yeah?"

"Your voice got husky and soft," he whispered. "And the sounds you made when you came? Fuck. I didn't stand a chance."

I smiled as I looked up at the ceiling. "You finished, huh?"

"Fuck yeah." Satisfaction practically purred from his voice. "Now, if only I could make that your ring tone."

"Don't you fucking dare." I smiled a big smile as my face burned.

He chuckled softly. "I won't, promise."

I started to relax into my bed. "So, you've been holding back?"

"Yeah, well, I hadn't told you about the whole not human thing yet. And I figured no dates also meant..."

"No phone sex." It made sense.

"Beautiful, you know I like touching and being touched," he sighed. "I barely thought twice about calling you for phone sex."

"Are you asking me if you being as physical as you like to be is going to be too much for me?"

"Yeah, not a lot of girls are that open about this stuff." He shifted on his side of the phone. "And, well, I didn't know how you felt about a little pain."

I licked my suddenly dry lips.

"No one's ever done that before. Right?" Ethan's voice had me relaxing against my mattress.

"Done what?" I knew what he was talking about, but I had to be sure.

"Pulling your hair. Gripping you a little too hard," he said without embarrassment.

My face burned. "No. Never before."

"And did you like it?" he asked softly, that smoky voice rolling over me.

"Yeah." I couldn't help it, I looked up at the ceiling. "It's... confusing."

"What's so confusing about it? You liked it, what's wrong with that?"

I had nothing to be embarrassed about. It was time to tell him. "It's confusing because of what happened at the cabin in January." I swallowed hard. "Ordin grabbed my chest and between my legs really hard. It hurt."

The line was silent for several heartbeats.

"But you like when I pull your hair and squeeze a little too hard." Understanding filled his voice. "I can see how that would make it confusing as hell."

"I know it's not the same, but..."

"It weirds you out a little?" he asked softly.

I lowered my voice. "Yeah."

He sighed. "It's not just you. I went through the same thing when I finally realized what I like."

"What do you like?" The question slipped out before I knew it.

"I realized a year ago I was a bit more intense than most people." His voice grew even softer. "My girlfriend at the time said I scared her sometimes."

"How?"

"I was more rough than she liked, I guess. She didn't like when I'd pull her hair or bite her lip," he sighed. "We broke up and I've been doing research since."

"Did you pull Faith's hair?" It slipped out.

"No way. I didn't... I kept that part of myself hidden from her," he huffed. "I know it's normal, I guess a part of me just doesn't believe it yet."

"Do you feel like a freak too?" I whispered.

"A little. The point is, there's nothing wrong with you if you liked it from me. I'd never..." He struggled to find the words.

My fingers fidgeted against my stomach. "I know you'd never really hurt me. And maybe that's why I did like it."

"That might be part of it."

"I just..." I tried to figure out how to say what I was thinking. "It makes me nervous and a little confused."

"Same here. I want you to know that if you don't want to explore it, that's okay. If you do, I'm here."

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. "You'd be okay if I said I never wanted you to do that again?"

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm not going to push for you to do something you don't want to do, especially not when it comes to sex."

I smiled as the tension left my shoulders. Was it something I wanted to explore? Maybe. With him. "Let's take things one step at a time."

"Well, we really shouldn't," he muttered. "We still don't know what I am and if I could hurt you like Asher can."

I grinned. "Your phone survived."

"It did." His voice grew warmer.

"So, we could do this again." I smiled my biggest smile.

"If you like." The warmth in his voice told me he was smiling too.

"Next time, I get to do the talking."

He chuckled. "Deal."

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CHAPTER 7

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watched the wild cornflower bloom in seconds. Smiling, I took a good look around the Veil. It was a completely different place. The grass and flowers were so thick that there were places you couldn't walk through. The burnt stumps were gone, replaced with towering trees. Pine, birch, ponderosa... You name it and it was here. The entire Veil was a canvas of color. Alive and thriving.

Except around the pit. That was still a barren stone ring. It didn't bother me so much anymore.

I made my way through the thicket to the very edge of the Veil. The first time I came the walls had been covered in a dark-gray sludgy smoke. Now... I smiled again. Only bigger. The smoke was almost completely gone, the opaqueness giving way to a translucent shimmer. The stars that surrounded the Veil peeked at me through the thin barrier. As I watched, something moved on the other side.

I stepped back.

The light came toward me.

I moved further back, dropping into a defensive stance.

The wispy figure of a girl came into focus as she continued straight toward me. She stopped at the boundary, hesitating only a moment before she pressed against the other side and slipped through. My heart slammed. First her hand, then her foot. A second later she was in the Veil.

Holy shit! The alarm didn't go off. I looked up at the large vine-covered foghorn. It sat silent. I turned back to find her beaming at me.

"Hey, I know you," I said, stunned.

"I'm Courtney, remember? You yelled at me for peeking on one of your boys in the shower," she chirped happily with a big smile.

My mouth fell open. "How... how did you get here?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, I was at this gay bar watching a couple hook up in the bathroom when this light just popped up."

"And you just followed it?" Is that how this worked?

"Well, when I looked at it, it..." She smiled. "It felt like home."

I looked up at the Veil wall, not daring to believe it.

A gold ball began to fall from the Way to us.

She eyed me. "So, did you ever pick a guy?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm dating all of them."

She giggled. "Good. They were all crazy about you even back then. Anyone dead or alive could see that."

A gold door formed a few feet away.

"You know, people are going to think it's wrong," she said, drawing my attention away from the door. "They'll try to make you fit in a box."

"Fuck 'em," I answered without thought as the door opened.

"It's kinda fun being wrong, isn't it?" She smirked as she walked backward toward the door.

The door opened showing a large group of rather hot and sexy guys running around in swim trunks. Well. Some. The others were... without. A couple were even kissing.

"You only live once! Go live your life and enjoy those boys while you can!" She sent me a cocky grin then ran through the door. Everyone greeted her enthusiastically. The door closed behind her.

I stood there, my mouth hanging open for several minutes. What the hell did I just see?

I PULLED myself out of the Veil, bubbling with energy. I opened my eyes and found myself alone. For the first time in almost a year, there wasn't a huge group waiting for me in the cemetery demanding that I move them all on now. The Veil was open.

Almost giddy, I ran to my Blazer and jumped in. A set of books I didn't recognize were in the passenger seat. I stopped and searched the area through the windows. No one was around. Someone had to have left them while I was in the Veil. Okay, first things first. The Veil was open!

I tore out of the cemetery and hauled ass to Miles' house. Miles had sent out a text early this morning for a family meeting before school. I hadn't asked questions at five in the morning.

I pulled into the gravel drive and jumped out. When I ran into the house, I didn't slow down. "Guys!"

Zeke was the first one I saw on his way out of the kitchen, his face drawn. I jumped. He caught me against his hard chest with his arm under my legs and held me off the ground. I grabbed his face and kissed him, thrumming with happiness. His lips were stiff for barely half a heartbeat before he relaxed, his scruff scraping against my cheeks. A heartbeat later, he stiffened again and pulled back.

He scowled up at me. "What the hell, Lexie?"

I ignored his annoyance and smiled a huge smile. "The Veil is open."

His scowl disappeared. "What?"

"It's open! The dead can cross on their own now!" I practically screamed in his face.

"You're sure?" he demanded.

I snorted. "Yeah. I came back from the Veil and found the cemetery empty. Empty!" I kicked my legs happily.

Relief filled his face as his hand held the back of my neck and brought my lips back down to his. I slipped my arms around his neck and sank into the heat of him.

"We're standing right here," Isaac announced.

I gave Zeke one last kiss on the cheek then pulled back to find the others in the hall too. "Oops."

Zeke chuckled softly as he put my feet on the ground.

Miles sighed. "That's one less thing to worry about at least."

My smile began to fade. Zeke let go of me.

"This is huge!" Isaac came toward me with that enormous smile. He swept me up in his arms and held me tight. I kissed his cheek so he wouldn't feel left out.

"Yeah, don't take that smile away," Ethan added as he wrapped his arms around me and his brother. He squeezed us and kissed my forehead. The twins began to jump up and down, taking me with them.

I couldn't breathe by the time Asher came out of the kitchen in his school clothes.

His relaxed smile let me know that he heard.

The twins let me go and stepped away.

Asher pulled me close. My fingers curled in his shirt without thought. I took a deep breath of vanilla. He must not have had breakfast yet.

Miles cleared his throat. "You're right, it is huge. But we do have other things to worry about. And we are *all* in the hallway at the moment."

I pulled back from Asher and turned to Miles. Where the hell was my Miles? My sweet nerd? But before I could say anything, my bedroom door opened.

"What's going on?" Lucy stepped into the hallway from my bedroom. Or her room, for now. Lucy closed her pale pink robe as she joined us. The alchemist was around our age. Her long, straight brown hair was mussed from sleep. Her round face was pretty with her pert nose and large, light blue eyes.

I hesitated.

"Lexie got the Veil open," Miles announced for me.

I bit back a pang of irritation.

Lucy practically glowed at Miles. "That's great. That'll lower the threat from Jadis."

Asher squeezed my shoulder. "Breakfast is done, come on. Let's get this meeting on its way."

"Oh, food. Thank God." Lucy groaned as she headed for the kitchen.

I stayed put as the others started for kitchen. Okay, I couldn't begrudge her breakfast; it wasn't as if she was going to be at the meeting. I headed into the kitchen after the others. That's where the coffee was, and after the initial rush, I needed it.

I was just finishing mixing cream and sugar into my coffee when Asher set a full plate of food on the counter beside me.

Curious, I looked up at him. "So, is this a protective instinct or a taking care of me instinct?"

That half grin popped up again. "Taking care of you."

I smiled. "Thanks."

He winked at me before going to get his own plate.

Once everyone had their breakfast, we filed into the living room. Even Lucy. Great. Apparently, she was a part of the family now too. I bit back the jealously threatening to choke me. The girl had done nothing wrong. This was just me being insecure. Once I talked myself down, I followed the boys.

Miles took the center of the couch, and Lucy sat beside him. Asher was all but scowling at Miles as he sat at the end of the other couch. I sat down on the raised hearth and tucked my feet underneath me. Zeke sat beside Miles on the end of the sofa closest to me. Isaac took the floor at the other end of the coffee table and he sent me a wink before setting his plate down.

"Why the hell do we have to meet this early?" Zeke growled before he all but drained his coffee.

"Because there is a lot going on right now and we need to try and figure things out." Miles left his plate on the table and nursed his coffee.

"And it couldn't have waited until after school?" Zeke countered.

"My eyes changed twice," Ethan announced.

"Changed how?" Lucy asked as she leaned forward. Something about the curious light in her eyes rubbed me wrong. Who the fuck was she to him that he should tell her?

I wasn't the only one thinking the same thing. Ethan shot her a look and said nothing.

Lucy's face turned pink as she hunched her shoulders a little.

"Look, you're nice and all," Isaac intervened before his twin could say something offensive, "but I don't know you that well."

"She's here to help," Miles reminded us.

Isaac scowled at Miles. "And my brother doesn't want to talk about the shit happening to him in front of her. Deal with it."

Miles eventually nodded.

"I'm going to go back to my room," Lucy said, in a soft voice. She picked up her dishes and rose.

"You don't have to." Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "We can simply talk about it later."

She shook her head a little. "No, this... this is family stuff."

No one denied it or even tried to stop her as she went to the kitchen and dropped off her dishes before heading to her room.

"Okay, Jadis is here and Ethan's eyes changed," Asher said once her door closed. "Anyone else have anything they need to share?"

Miles began to tap his thigh.

"Miles." Zeke sent him a knowing look.

Miles glanced at him before looking down at the coffee table. "My father's lawyers brought me the paperwork for a living trust. Basically, my

father is trying to give everything to me and my mother. Except the shipping business."

The others sat with mouths slightly open. Obviously, they knew something I didn't. Again.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

The guys turned in unison and all of them had surprise written across their faces.

"You haven't told her?" Asher scowled.

Miles grew pale. "No."

My heart dropped. "What haven't I been told?"

Miles began tapping his fingers in that staccato rhythm.

The guys continued to watch Miles, clearly expecting him to speak. Miles stayed quiet.

As every second went by, my chest grew tighter. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. I snapped. "Fine, I'll just leave." Furious, I got to my feet and stormed away. Slamming the door as I left, I started toward my truck. Just as I got to the driver's side, the front door opened again.

Miles raced into the gravel driveway. "Angel."

"Don't fucking Angel me!" My voice echoed across the foggy grounds as I turned on him. "You'd think after over a year, I'd deserve a little more information than Lucy."

"Lexie, why are you so angry?"

"You've been different since we got back!" I snapped.

"No, I haven't been." His face was blank as he continued toward me.

"Bullshit." I opened the driver's door so I could climb in but instead turned back to Miles. "Hell, you talk to Lucy more than me!"

"I talk to you all the time."

"You don't really talk to me anymore. It's all about how this group relationship is going to work and shit."

His mouth pinched into a tight line. "I'm trying to protect you."

"From what?" I growled back.

"Lexie..." His voice was patient.

I shook my head, blood boiling. "If you want out of this relationship so you can get with Lucy then just fucking tell me."

"That's the third time you've brought her up. What does she have to do with anything?" His voice was full of confusion but I didn't care. I was fed up.

"You tell me," I bit out between my teeth as I took a step closer. "Why did you stand me up on our first actual date to unpack a lab with Lucy?"

"Oh fuck," Zeke muttered from the doorway before closing the door.

I kept my eyes on his. "What was so important about unpacking a lab that wasn't even important enough to tell me about it in the first place?"

"You're being ridiculous." His eyes narrowed on me.

I scowled at him. "I'm being ridiculous? You blow me off to do stuff with her. You didn't bat a fucking eye when she sat in on a *family* meeting. You talk to her more than you talk to me."

"She lives with me." His voice held an edge of ice to it.

I shook my head. "Does she even know I'm your girlfriend?"

My eyes stung as I stayed silent. Dreading his reply, I refused to move on. I needed his answer.

Eventually he spoke. "I don't believe so."

It was like a blow to the chest. It took my breath away. "Why?"

"Why would I tell her?" Miles asked his knuckles tapping his thigh.

I scowled at him. "Because she likes you, Miles. Even you're not that oblivious."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He pushed his glasses up. "You're being jealous for no reason."

Was he not listening? I had just laid out every reason why I felt this way. The changes in him over the last month. It all sat in my chest like a boulder, making it harder and harder to breathe.

I turned to get in my truck.

Before I could get inside, Miles slammed the door shut. I turned back to him, stunned at the completely blank look on his face.

"What should I do? Throw her out of my house onto the street?" he asked, his voice harsh. "What the hell do you want me to do?"

I stood there, rooted in place. Miles cursed in front of me. He was either losing it or angry. I eyed his face. I couldn't tell which.

The tension drained from his body. He even took a step back from me. Then another. He tore his gaze from me and looked out at the rolling lawn. Sunlight moved across it, raising a morning dew from the grass.

My throat tightened as I looked at the driver's door.

Silence echoed across the front yard.

"I want you to be honest with me." My voice cracked. "Like you're always demanding of the rest of us."

His fist clenched at his side as he continued looking out at the morning dew. "I can't. You could get hurt."

I turned back to him, stunned. What did he fucking think was happening now? "I know I'm not a genius."

Miles' head snapped back around. Those hunter-green eyes met mine.

"I know I can't keep up with you intellectually. But I still deserve the fucking truth." I swallowed hard. "If you don't love me anymore, just tell me so I know where I stand."

His lips parted slightly and the breath left him in a rush. Disbelief slid over his face. He took those last steps to me and his hands cradled my face as his lips took mine. He kissed me deeply, desperately, need rising fast until I met every stroke of his tongue. Holding nothing back, I kissed him as if it was the last time while tears fell down my face to roll over his fingers. When he eventually pulled back, he pressed his forehead against mine, his nose brushing mine.

I kept my eyes closed, waiting for the end. Waiting for goodbye.

"Loving you is the only thing I'm certain of in this world anymore," he whispered, his voice rough.

Relief swamped me. I wrapped my fingers in his shirt.

He held me against him tightly. "No one could ever replace you. Not for me."

I swallowed hard and took several deep breaths as I soaked him in.

"My father subcontracts with the mafia in New York," he whispered. "They helped him set up the shipping business, and in return he allows them to use his business for smuggling. It's why I won't touch that business. I thought they might come after you if you knew. I can't risk you."

I jerked back from him and scowled up at him. "That's *it*? That's why you were being all fucking weird?"

He nodded slowly as he stepped closer again. "You're more than smart enough, Angel. You see things in a way I never could. In a way I never have." He bent his neck and brushed his lips over mine. "I love you, Alexis. Never doubt that again."

I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight. He kissed my temple before burying his nose into my hair.

"You drive me crazy," I muttered.

He chuckled. "I know."

Which made me laugh. When we pulled away from each other we were both smiling.

His hand moved to my lower back and he walked me back to the house.

The guys were waiting for us in the living room.

"Are you two good?" Isaac asked carefully as we took our spots again.

"Yeah." I picked up my coffee again. "Sorry about that."

Miles turned to the others. "She knows."

"About fucking time," Zeke bit out before taking a bite of potatoes.

"Could he be trying to leave the business?" Isaac asked, as if Miles and I hadn't just blown up.

"There's no out for him, so I can't see that." Miles shook his head. "We need to get back on topic."

"What was the topic again?" Asher asked, his voice tired.

I snorted. "Jadis is in town."

"So, what does she want?" Ethan asked.

Miles turned to me. "When you met with her, how did she seem?"

I shrugged. "Calm, antagonistic, egotistical. You know, her usual psychotic self."

The twins chuckled.

Miles' face, however, didn't even twitch. "We need to be serious, Lexie."

I finished my sip. "I am. I told you guys everything yesterday."

"Well, Lucy had some ideas about what she might have been up to," Miles said. "We could use the help."

I fought back the urge to curse. This was never going to work if I didn't trust Miles. He loved me. "She was on a simple recruit speech. But I think she's only trying to get me to their side as a plan B."

Miles' eyes narrowed on mine. "What do you mean?"

"I think they're after whoever closed the Veil in the first place."

"What would that get her?" Ethan asked before taking a bite out of a sausage link.

"Well, think about it." I turned to him. "She wants to control every supernatural species in the world. What better way than to hold that world hostage?"

Isaac's eyebrows shot up. "You mean, do what I say or everyone dies?" I nodded before taking another sip of coffee.

"What are you basing your hypothesis on?" Miles asked.

"Because she wants control and only two people have access to the Veil right now. Well, until this morning."

"Good point. But there's no proof, just observations and assumptions." Miles stroked his chin with his thumb, his gaze unfocused. "We should see about adding potions to your belts."

"Belts?" Zeke scowled. "What belts?"

Miles focused on us again. "Lucy has several potion mixes that work just as well as spells in a combat situation. We're hoping to arm everyone with them so that you can fight back if there is an attack. They'd sit on a belt at your waist."

"It would be great not to be cannon fodder," Isaac said with mock enthusiasm.

Ethan snorted. "Speak for yourself, I'm apparently fireproof."

Isaac and I snorted.

"Come on, you three," Miles scolded. "Do we all agree that finding the person who closed the Veil is the number one concern?"

"Yeah," everyone said in unison.

"Okay, Jadis and her cronies are here," Zeke stated. "Anyone else have anything they need to share."

Miles began to tap his fingers on the arm of the couch. "Asher? Don't you have something to share?"

"Something happened?" I began rubbing my temple.

Asher sighed. "Yeah. During a fight with my dad, I was trying to leave and he grabbed my arm to stop me. Nothing he hadn't ever done before. I... I shoved him into the wall. Hard enough that it cracked and dented the dry wall."

My heart dropped. "Is everyone okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, he was just shocked. I went for a run. Let's get back to what else Jadis might be up to."

"It could be Ethan." Isaac said. "Right?"

"Well, we are in a prime summer tourist spot," I quipped. "Maybe she's here for the lake."

The twins chuckled. Zeke snorted.

"She could be doing it to fuck with our heads or get her hands on Ethan again. Maybe even just throw us off our game."

I shook my head. "They're after who closed the Veil. I'm sure of it. I think fucking with us and Ethan is a bonus to them."

"Fucking Witch's Council." Asher started to rub the back of his neck.

"No, remember?" I shrugged. "Evelyn couldn't find any connection. It looks like they're a group just using the name, so they might be a complete unknown."

"Either way, we need to find this fucker before they do," Zeke stated.

"At least we have a head start on the trails and the symbol," I muttered.

"Do we?" Miles asked.

I turned to him. "What do you mean?"

Miles leaned forward, drawing everyone's attention. "She made sure that you knew she was here. She could have stayed hidden. She *let* us know she was here."

My shoulders grew tense. I knew I wasn't going to like what came out of his mouth next.

"They could have been here for weeks. Following, watching us, searching," Miles said.

Yep. I didn't like it one bit. "You said your investigator said we weren't being followed."

Miles nodded. "Yes, he did. But he's only human. There are probably magical means to eavesdrop or track someone."

The guys cursed and started going over what our choices were, what we could do about Jadis.

I looked down at my empty mug. Nope. Not enough. "I'm going to make more coffee." I picked up my mug and went into the kitchen.

Taking deep breaths, I went about setting the pot up for fresh coffee then hit the button.

Jadis was in town. Her cronies probably were too. She changed Ethan. She was probably looking for the fucker who closed the Veil. She wanted to control every supernatural in the world. We needed to find this asshole first. And we still had nothing.

The answer slipped out of the dark, ruthless part of me. The place I didn't like to go. The place I didn't even like to look at. I thought it over again. I cursed and ran to the false pantry. Throwing open the door, I hurtled down the steps to the basement. "Sam!" My voice echoed off the walls of a long, bare hallway.

A door on the right side of the hall opened. His curly mahogany hair was mussed, his silver eyes half lidded.

Samuel scowled at me through those half open lids. "You know, that's extremely rude. It's late as hell right now for vampires."

I didn't beat around the bush. "Jadis is in town."

He arched an eyebrow as footsteps came down the hall behind me.

"I think she's looking for the fucker who closed the Veil." I pointed at him. "We need every resource we have looking in the woods for that symbol and setup, starting a search in town and branching out to every possible hiding place."

Sam's eyes opened all the way. "If she gets control of the Veil—"

"She'd control the supernatural world," I stated simply. "But there's no proof."

"Even so, that would be a disaster. The shifters could probably take the days if Asher asks them to. Me and mine can take over your searching at night"—Samuel met my eyes—"if we weren't spending so much time going out to feed."

"What do you want, Samuel?" I didn't have time for the run around.

"The right to feed in town." His voice was deadpan.

"Only if they're over eighteen. No killing, and they better not remember shit," I decided.

"Lexie!" Isaac's shocked voice didn't even deter me.

"And if you get a shot at that bitch Jadis, take it."

"Ally?"

I turned to find Asher, Isaac, Ethan and Miles looking at me as if I had lost my mind. Zeke's face, however, was brimming with approval.

"I am done playing her game," I bit out. "She hurts the people I love, fucks up their lives, and I'm supposed to just take the high road?" I looked at each of them. "Fuck that."

"Angel..."

I ignored him as I made my way through the guys and up the stairs.

"Lexie, are you sure you want to do this? Bring the vampires and shifters into this *now*? They're not exactly subtle," Ethan said as he entered the living room with the others a step behind him.

"Subtle doesn't always work," Zeke countered.

I turned on them. "What am I supposed to do? We need to search along another hundred trails around town before we even start to move toward Bridgeport and Dulcet. And we *can't get all of them*. We could afford to

when we had time, but Jadis is *here*. She might have been here for *weeks*. Our time is up. We need to find something *now*."

"You just gave permission for the vampires to feed on the town," Asher reminded me.

"She gave them conditions," Zeke countered.

"All we have are theories and observations." I shook my head. "If we are going to get ahead of Jadis, we need all the help we can get."

The guys were silent as I waited for another objection. But they didn't give me one.

Miles nodded. "You're right. We can't afford for Jadis to find this person first."

Zeke met my gaze. "The town's going to turn into a battlefield."

"Not if we can move fast enough." I shrugged. "If we can find them first, then we can stop it before people get caught in the crossfire."

"Then what do we do with the one who opened the Veil?" Miles asked, plunging the room into silence.

"Good question." Isaac turned to me. "Do we have a plan?"

It was like a bucket of ice water. "No. No, we don't." I sat down on the couch, all the air rushing from me. "I never thought that far ahead."

"We could probably get Evelyn involved at that point," Miles suggested. I turned to him. "You think?"

He pushed his glasses up his face. "That would be something solid that she could work with."

I nodded. "She could collect whoever it is and take custody while she does an investigation..." It could work.

"That should be within her limitations." Miles' lips turned up into a half grin.

I smiled a little. Okay. There was a plan... kind of.

Zeke checked his phone. "You guys need to get to school."

Everyone but Miles groaned.

"Let's get going," Ethan said as he headed for the door. Everyone followed suit.

"We have work to do after school," Miles said. The others simply nodded.

The tension drained from my shoulders. They understood. We had a plan. We didn't have a choice but to ask for help from the other supers. If

we didn't win, everything but witches might be wiped out or worse. And we'd probably be dead.

* * *

Tara

"Now, we're going to determine everyone's blood type." Mr. Baxter held up a pin. "Every one of you have a blood typing kit in front of you. You're going to poke your finger and put a drop on the slide under the three numbers."

Smiling, I looked down at my slide and picked up the result table. From the look of the slide... I blinked and read that again.

No, that can't be right. "Mr. Baxter, I don't think I'm reading the results right."

He came over and examined my slide while everyone else talked about their results. "You, Tara, are O negative." He smiled down at me. "A universal donor, congrats."

I shook my head slowly. "No... that can't be right."

His smile dimmed. "That's what the result says."

I looked up at him. "My mom is A negative. My dad is AB negative."

Lines appeared around his eyes as he squatted down to my level and lowered his voice. "How do you know that?"

I tried to wrap my head around what this was telling me. "Dad was in a crash a few years ago, they said he was lucky they had a supply of AB negative on hand." I turned to him. "A and AB don't... make O."

The sympathy in his eyes was all the answer I needed. All the air seemed to leave the room as it hit me. He wasn't my... My throat grew tight as everything seemed to fade into the background.

Mr. Baxter put his hand on my shoulder. "Tara, go to the nurse's office and take some time."

I nodded. Mr. Baxter put my stuff back in my bag and handed it to me. In a daze, I got to my feet and left the class. If I was O... Mom cheated on Dad....

Jessica

"JASON, I'M GOING TO CLASS." I pulled my math book out of my locker. "And I'm already really late."

"It's the first week, you're not going to miss anything." He countered. "Come on, I miss you." His arms slipped around my waist, his lips pressing small kisses down my neck.

I stared at the back of my locker as he pressed against me. There was still a dull ache between my legs from yesterday and his demands. I closed my eyes and hung my head as the memory washed over me. Telling him that it hurt. His grunted response. Weariness washed over me. I was tired. So very tired of this.

I took his arm off my waist and turned around to look up at him. "Jason, I still hurt from yesterday. I'm not going to sleep with you. I'm going to class."

He dropped his hands from me. "You should have said something, then."

My jaw dropped. "I did. You told me to 'get used to it."

He scowled down at me. "I probably didn't hear you."

My temper flared. "You responded, Jason."

He shook his head. "No, no I didn't. You must have just heard wrong."

Everything stopped. I knew what happened. I knew he heard me. I wasn't crazy. "I'm... I'm going to class." I stepped out from between him and the lockers.

He snagged my arm. "No, we're going to my house." He started walking down the hall, pulling me behind him.

"No." I jerked my arm out of his hand and stepped back away from him. "I'm going to class."

Rage flashed over his face a heartbeat before his hand shot out. I fell back into the locker doors. The metallic bang echoed up and down the hall as he stepped closer, towering over me. "You don't say no to me."

Shaking down to my core, I took a deep breath. "I just did."

His grip tightened on my wrist.

"Let her go," a firm voice ordered.

We both turned to find Tara Delaney standing there, an angry scowl on her face.

Oh no... My heart sank. She didn't know what he'd do. "Tara, you need to go."

She shook her head as she strode toward us. "He shouldn't be grabbing you like that."

"Tara, don't," I pleaded, stopping her a few feet away as I shook in Jason's grip. "You'll just make it worse."

"No." She shook her head as she pulled out her cell phone. She turned to Jason. "Get your hands off her or I'll call Asher and his friends."

He scowled at her before he dropped my wrist. "You need to mind your own fucking business."

My heart pounded in my chest. We needed to get away from him, go to the office. Something. But we had to do it without Jason following.

Jason stalked toward her. He grabbed her shirt.

"No!" My heart sank.

Tara quickly dropped that shoulder back and punched him across the face. The sound of skin hitting skin echoed through the hall. She grabbed his far shoulder and drove her knee into his balls. Jason doubled over. She bent the arm that had been holding his shoulder and drove her elbow down across his face. He hit the hallway floor in a bleeding heap.

Stunned, I met Tara's pale face. It was almost as if she was just as surprised as I was.

I stepped around the groaning heap, grabbed her hand, and started pulling her away down the hall. "Let's go before he gets up."

Turning, we ran toward the parking lot.

"Where the hell did you learn that?" I asked.

"Your brother."

* * *

Lexie

ISAAC and I were in biology, just waiting for the bell to ring. With everything going on, I wanted to simply enjoy that I was with Isaac in this moment. My hand was in his hands, palm up, as he tried to read my palm

with a site he found online. The rest of the classroom faded back to a murmur as he traced a line on my palm. Tingles ran up my arm from his careful touch.

"This is your heart line," he said, his voice low and soft.

A warm smile spread across my face. "And what does it say?"

His amber eyes met mine. "That you're in love."

I raised skeptical eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

His grin was all that was Isaac. Mischievous, sexy, and filled with warmth. "I'm just reading what's there."

I moved a little closer. "And it has nothing to do with me telling you that?"

He moved a little closer and lowered his voice even more. "Well, it might have something to do with that."

"Oh, it might?"

His nose brushed mine. My pulse picked up even more as the scent of limes surrounded me.

An out of place click reminded me of where we were. I quickly searched the room. A girl in the front row lowered her phone with a smug look on her face. Trisha's chocolate hair swung over her shoulder in its braid as she started whispering to the girl next to her, who then glanced over her shoulder at us.

"Looks like we've been outed." Isaac sighed.

The bell rang.

"It was going to happen anyway." I picked up my bag and started toward the door with him.

Isaac's hand brushed mine and hesitated.

I slid my hand into his and tangled my fingers with his. His fingers squeezed mine. Out of the corner of my eye, Trisha glared at us. I simply ignored her and walked through the door and into the hall.

We began to stroll toward the cafeteria through the crowded hall.

I looked up at him. "Does it bother you?"

He smirked down at me. "Not yet. I like people knowing you're mine." He leaned down and kissed the top of my head in full view of everyone. Whispers ran up and down the hall faster than wildfire. I simply enjoyed being happy.

When we reached the table with the others, we let go of each other at the same time.

"Hey, guys." I sat down beside Asher. "How are your days going?"

Ethan snorted while looking at his phone.

Miles continued scribbling furiously into his notebook.

"Nothing new." Asher took a bite of his sandwich.

"Good." I opened my bag to grab my lunch, only there wasn't one. "Shit."

"What?" Isaac asked as he pulled out his brown bag of lunch.

"I forgot my lunch," I muttered as I put my bag back down and eyed the line in the cafeteria.

Asher opened his bag and pulled out another lunch bag and set it in front of me. When he swallowed his bite, he said. "I thought you might forget."

I smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Ash."

He winked down at me as I opened the bag.

"I've got news." Ethan lifted his head, mischief covering his face. "Lexie is apparently dating Isaac." He turned his phone to us. Sure enough, it was the picture Trisha had taken in biology. "It's all over school already."

I rolled my eyes and bit into my sandwich.

"That was faster than I thought." Isaac opened his water bottle.

I snorted as I turned to the others and went still. Asher had frowned. His gaze fused intently to the picture.

Ethan seemed to realize his mistake and turned the phone back to himself.

Asher's grip on the table left his knuckles white.

Before I knew it, my hand was on his, my thumb stroking the inside of his wrist.

"Beautiful..." Ethan warned.

I ignored him as Asher's pulse raced under my fingertip. "Ash."

Asher turned to me. His eyes were that silver-blue again. More than I'd ever seen before. Instinctively, I leaned over and kissed him firmly on the lips.

Whispers erupted around the quad.

"Lexie." Miles' warning barely registered as I pulled back from Asher.

I held his gaze. "You're mine too. Both of you."

The tension from his shoulders melted. The silver slowly slid away, leaving only the ocean.

His eyes narrowed on mine. "You have no idea what you just did."

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CHAPTER 8

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THURSDAY AFTERNOON

blinked up at Asher. "What I did?"

He nodded, an odd smile forming on his lips.

Miles was scanning the crowded quad. "Everyone get your stuff, we're going to talk."

No one argued. We simply packed up our things and followed Miles away from the cafeteria and prying eyes. He eventually led us back to the janitor's closet and ducked inside.

As soon as the door closed behind us, he turned to face us. "What do you three think you're doing? It's only the second day of school and there are already rumors."

"Well, like Red, we suck at being subtle." Isaac grinned down at me.

I grinned back.

"It's what we agreed to." Miles sighed wearily.

I turned back to him. "Maybe we realized we can't hide it."

"Can't isn't in your vocabulary." Miles pinched the bridge of his nose. I sighed. "Miles."

He dropped his hand and turned to me. "Please? Try a little harder?"

"It's been a month since any of us had time together alone. With everything going on, we're not going to get a lot of time," I explained. "I'm tired of trying to hide how I feel about you guys. I did it for a long time and I don't want to do it anymore." That's when it hit me. "No. I just don't want to hide how I feel anymore."

Everyone gave me their undivided attention.

I smiled. "I am in love with each of you. And I'm not going to hide it."

The twins grinned. Asher relaxed a little more.

However, Miles' shoulders grew tense. "But you can't make this decision for all of us. We have to agree."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you ashamed of me, Miles? Are you ashamed of all of this?"

The harsh lines of his face softened. "No. But that doesn't mean my concern isn't valid."

I nodded. "I get it. But I'm not acting like I have something to be ashamed of anymore."

Miles sighed, his eyes holding mine. "This is going to make everything more difficult."

I smiled. "I know. But I'm done pretending."

Miles' shoulders grew tense. "Lexie, *I'm* not handling it that well."

My heart sunk. This wasn't really about everyone else. That... well, that changed things. "Oh."

Miles' ears tinted pink as Asher and the twins shared a look then quietly left the closet.

"I thought you were just worried about other people harassing us." I fidgeted with my fingers.

Miles dragged his fingers through his hair. "It's a valid reason. Though it's not the only one."

"I'm sorry, Miles." I stuck my hands in my pockets. "What are you struggling with?"

"This isn't the time or the place to talk about it." He took a step back from me.

THE BELL RANG.

I muttered a curse.

Without a word, Miles went to the door and held it open for me. I guess we were done talking about this.

We headed out into the hall. Miles left without a word.

"Come on, Ally," Asher said as he took my arm. "Time for class."

When we were alone, I looked up at Asher. "So, what did I do by kissing you?"

His face was oddly relaxed as he met my eyes and slipped his hand around mine. "I'll tell you later."

* * *

Tara

JESSICA SLOWLY TWIRLED her spoon in her melted ice-cream. The small parlor was empty and quiet. She had insisted on not going home until Asher or her dad were there. Tears continued to slip down her face and occasionally dropped into her cup. The bruises on her wrist had filled in over the last hour. They were dark against the rest of her skin.

Jason was an abusive asshole. There was no doubt from what I saw in the hallway at school. I wanted to make it better, but I just didn't know how. "Are you okay?"

She gave a short, bitter laugh. "Yeah. That wasn't even that bad."

"How long has he been like that?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"For the last year or so." She wiped her face.

I shook my head. I didn't know how to deal with this. "That doesn't matter. He's that way now and no one deserves to be dragged around."

She pressed her lips together as her phone vibrated on the small table. She picked it up as if she was going to answer it. "It's him. He's going to be so mad."

He's going to be mad? I took the phone from her and flipped it over onto the table so she couldn't see the screen. "Fuck him." I turned back to her. "He's an abusive asshole who doesn't deserve even a second of your time."

Her mouth dropped open as she finally lifted her head and met my eyes. "But..."

I leaned forward. "Do you like being treated like this?"

She sank back in the chair as a wave of fresh tears ran down her face. Eventually, she shook her head.

"Then walk away," I said in a soft voice. "For yourself. For your life." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't think I can."

"Why not?"

Her voice was small. "He scares me."

"Have you told anyone?" Please tell me Asher knows at least...

She shook her head. "I can't tell anyone. They won't believe me."

Believe her? I wanted to say they would with those bruises, but she might be right. "That doesn't mean you have to stay with him."

Her eyes met mine as they filled again. "I don't want to be alone."

My heart broke. I reached over and took her hand in mine. "You won't be."

Her hand squeezed mine. "Thank you."

"You're a good person, Jessica. You deserve to find someone who loves to make you laugh and smile, not one that makes you want to cry and need painkillers." I couldn't believe she needed to be told this.

She shook her head. "I know. At least, I think I know."

My eyes burned. I couldn't believe that this crying, terrified girl was Jessica Westfell. She always seemed so confident, so in charge. She had everything I ever wanted: Popular, beautiful, and smart. I shoved those thoughts away again and focused on her. "You deserve more."

She met my gaze. "Thanks."

I squeezed her hand again and pulled back, ignoring the tingling running up my fingers.

Her eyes focused. "Why were you leaving class?"

It all came rushing back. I took a sharp shaky breath as the pressure in my chest returned. Tears began to pour as I buried my face in my hands.

A chair scraped against the floor and she was there, her arm around me hugging me tight. "I'm sorry, whatever it is, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

I buried my face in her neck and held on tight. I cried hard, almost hysterically. It wasn't long until the manager brought us pints of ice-cream.

"Are you girls okay?" he asked, worried as he set the cartons in front of us. Both were exactly the same as our orders.

My throat was too tight to do more than breathe.

"Yes, we've just both had a really shitty day," Jessica answered for us.

I sat up, wiped my face, and struggled to get myself under control again.

"Alright. If you girls need help, this is a safe space," he said in a gentle voice.

Jessica smiled. "Thank you."

He went back around the counter and into the back of the store.

Jessica turned back to me. "What happened?"

I looked up at her and said it. "My mom cheated on my dad. He's not my father."

* * *

Lexie

"The shifters called, they took the longer trails today," Asher announced as I put my bag in the back of my Blazer. "They can cover them twice as fast."

I nodded. Good, that would help.

"We're not going to be able to take a trail today." Isaac cringed.

I came back around the truck. "What? Why?"

"Today's that dinner with our grandparents." Ethan began to spin his rings.

My eyebrows shot up. "That's today?"

The twins nodded.

Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "Your father is getting out?"

The twins nodded. Everyone pretended not to notice the people sneaking glances at our group as they walked through the parking lot to their cars.

"Tomorrow. They're refusing to see him, which is why the dinner is tonight," Asher answered for them.

Isaac shook his head at Asher. "We've got to make some rules for your hearing, man."

Asher shrugged. "I can't help it."

"Noise. Canceling. Headphones," Ethan stated slowly.

Asher chuckled.

"I also have to go down to Missoula. My lawyer has some more information." Miles turned to me.

I took a deep breath and let it out. We had the shifters out today as well as the vamps at night. We could miss one trail. I hoped.

"Okay." I turned to Asher. "Well, it's me and you today and we gotta get two done."

Asher gestured over his shoulder. "Let's take my truck. I know where the trail we need to hit next is."

Everyone got into their cars and took off.

AN HOUR LATER, we were on the trail with Hades. The large dog's tail was swishing back and forth. We had been quiet most of the hike. I was too far in my head and Asher seemed to be dealing with something too.

Eventually I broke the silence. "How are you doing? With the whole wolf thing?"

He huffed. "It's hard to sleep when you can hear your next-door neighbor with sleep apnea snoring."

I snorted. "That bad?"

He nodded. "Yeah, there is no privacy around me at this point."

"Ash." I stopped walking and looked up at him. "How are you really doing?"

Hades ran back to us with a thick stick between his jaws. Asher took it and threw it for him. "I'm running a lot. Doing everything I'm supposed to. And I miss being human."

"What do you miss about it?" Hades came back and gave me the stick. I threw it as far as I could ahead of us. The black mass of wrinkles ran after it happily.

"Less hearing," he muttered. "I can hear everything. I've been using ear plugs at night to get me to sleep. It eventually works."

"Those headphones might help." I didn't know what else could work.

"I'll be picking up the headphones on the way home," he said.

His fingers twined with mine. As we talked about nothing important, he began to relax. It was nice. Almost as if we were two normal teenagers just out for a hike.

When we were halfway back, I finally got the nerve to ask. "So, what did I do when I kissed you?"

He looked down at me confused. "Huh?"

"During lunch, what did I do?"

The corner of his lips lifted into a grin before he pressed his lips together trying to hide it. "Oh, that."

"Yeah, that." I smiled while he looked oddly pleased with himself. It made me curious. "What was that about?"

We moved through the thicket. "It's a wolf thing."

"Spill, mister." I grinned.

He took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "So, do you know about mates for wolves?"

I nodded. "Astrid mentioned it." I looked up at him, my heart sinking a little. "She also said since you were bitten..."

"That I won't have one." He pulled me to a stop and stepped in close. "But that doesn't mean I won't bond to someone."

"What does that mean?" I asked softly, my pulse pounding in my throat.

He stepped even closer, leaning down to bring his face within inches of mine. "If you have a mate, you don't get to choose. That is your mate, your partner. But bonds..."

"They're different?" I asked, my lower stomach flipping.

He nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. "You and your wolf agree on one person to..."

I stopped breathing. Was he saying? "To?"

He ran his fingertips along the line of my jaw. "To bond with. To be our partner. Our wife."

My heart slammed hard against my ribs. "Wife?"

He smiled. "Breathe. I'm not proposing."

"Oh, thank God." I let out a relieved chuckle.

He laughed at the look on my face. "It's a choice."

I looked up at him, scared to ask. "What does that have to do with what I did at lunch?"

He grinned. "It wasn't kissing me. It's what you said. You said I was yours."

I nodded. Yeah, I remembered that.

"That's one of the things you say to start the bond," he explained.

My stomach dropped. No, no, no... "Ash, did I just take your choice from you?"

"No, honey," he promised. "You just made the urge to mark you a lot stronger."

I groaned. "Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He smiled. "That's okay. I just... I need to talk to Astrid about it." He smiled again before brushing a small kiss over the corner of my lips.

Asher's head snapped up. His eyes shifted to silver blue. His wolf eyes. "Come on." He looked around the small grove and pulled me closer. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. Hades dropped the stick and came back to stand on my other side.

My heart pounded. "Ash?"

He snagged my upper arm a heartbeat before he was dragging me further into the trees.

"Ash." I fought his steel grip, but his fingers only grew tighter. "What's going on?"

He stopped at a large tree. "Get in the tree."

When I hesitated, he turned to me. "Now!"

"What is going on?" I bit out between my teeth. Hades began to growl.

"Three shifters are heading this way and I don't recognize their smell." His hands went to my hips and he lifted me as if I weighed nothing.

I grabbed the tree limbs and climbed into the lower branches. "Shouldn't we be running?"

Asher looked up at me. His eyes were even lighter this time, the silver thicker than ever. "Not with three of them."

My heart pounded. "Ash..."

"I'll be fine, Ally," he promised as he dropped his pack at the base of the tree before backing away. "Get as high as you can and let the wind hit you. It'll bring them right to me. Hades, guard Lexie."

Hades immediately began pacing in front of the tree.

What was he going to do? My throat grew dry as I focused on climbing higher in the tree. Bark bit into my palms, leaves snagging in my hair as I got higher. When I reached halfway and I couldn't go any higher, I turned and looked down at Asher in the clearing.

He had taken his shirt off, the lines of his shoulders and back defined as he stood in the center and waited. His head was down and cocked to the side as if listening to something. Something about him changed. It wasn't his posture. The line of his neck? It was something I couldn't explain. It was like a hum of energy. You could only feel it along your skin and down your spine, like sunshine.

Two people walked out of the tree line and into the clearing. One a large man, with a scar through a now useless eye. another stocky but tall man with an arrogant chin. A woman stepped out beside them, lithe and beautiful.

The stocky man's head raised. His eyes found me in the branches. He grinned. "If you want your friend to survive, you'll need to come down and go with us."

Asher shook his head slowly. "Walk away now and you'll leave the woods with all your limbs attached."

Arrogant man's gaze went back to Asher. "You're new, so I'm not going to remind you of the protocol of meeting your alpha."

"I don't belong to a pack. And you sure as hell aren't my alpha," Asher said, his voice a deep thrum from his chest.

Arrogant man grinned. "Do you really think you can protect her from three of us?"

Asher's hands began to change. Blood dripped to the rich dirt as he held his hands out to his sides. Sharp talons emerged from his fingertips.

The smirk was gone from the other shifters' faces as they shared a look, the women stepping back, away from the clearing.

The woman glanced up at me then back to Asher. "Are you so sure of your control that you'd risk her by shifting?"

"There are worse things than being a wolf," I shot out across the grove. "Like being a lackey to another wolf."

She growled up at me. I flipped her off.

She ran toward my tree. Hades snarled and growled. Asher was suddenly there, knocking her back across the clearing with a swing of his arm. She flew back and rolled into the grass.

Growls and snarls erupted from the two men. Asher moved into a fighting stance, his body taut and ready.

The large scarred man charged him first. The clearing turned into a chaos of growls, snarls, blood and rising dust.

My pulse beat in my ears as I tried to follow the fight, but it was simply too fast. Eventually, the larger man staggered back away from Asher, clutching his stomach.

Arrogant man smiled. "You might be worth taking as well."

Asher moved lower to the ground. A hot blast of energy swept through the clearing from him. My hair flew back; the taste of pine and cinnamon coated my tongue. A long, deep growl emanated from him, changing his voice. "Ally. Run."

It took barely a heartbeat for it to sink in before I was climbing down the tree limbs. I dropped to the grass just in time to watch Asher's jaw break and reform. Holy fuck! He was shifting. Oh, shit. Shit. I ran the other way. Heart pounding, arms pumping, I burst through the underbrush and all but tripped onto the trail. Not wasting time, I pumped my legs harder than ever, running faster than I ever had in my life with Hades at my side.

A howl went up through the woods spurring me to go keep going. If Asher was a wolf, he didn't know me. He wouldn't have control. Move it, Lexie!

When my lungs burned, I had to slow to a walk. Hades stayed pressed to my hip, his touch comforting.

Gasping, I kept moving. Asher, be okay. Please be okay. Another howl went up. This time it was closer. When I could, I started jogging down the trail, hoping to make it to the truck before someone found me.

I felt it before I saw the wolf. A flash of movement through the woods up the hill. I veered downhill and through the woods. My foot slipped on the loose rocks. I hit the ground with a solid grunt and toppled down the hill until I reached the bottom. Hades followed me at a more controlled pace. Groaning at the bumps, bruises, and scrapes, I hauled myself up and kept moving.

A rustle in the brush above me told me we weren't alone. Heart in my throat, adrenaline pumped through me as I splashed through a creek, soaking my jeans and shoes only to slip on the rocks on the other side. Hades grabbed me by the back of my shirt and dragged me off the slippery, slime covered rocks. Cursing, I pushed to my feet and kept moving.

Suddenly, something darted out of the trees in front of me. Hades appeared between me and a dark streak. The streak hit Hades, knocking him back into me. Snarls, growls, a heavy weight crushing the breath from me for several terrifying heartbeats. Suddenly the weight was gone as the fighting canines rolled off me. I scrambled away from them to a tree and put my back to it. The two animals went at it, slamming into each other, biting and snarling. Was it Asher? Or was it one of the others? I needed to go, but Hades...

The black and brown wolf threw Hades back toward me. He rolled to his paws and moved in front of me again. Something wet matted his fur in several places as he growled at the wolf, warning it away.

It was enormous. I tried to keep my breathing even, but I began to take short gasping breaths as he came closer. It was going to kill us both. We were going to die.

My rage boiled up through me. No. No. No! A pressure built in my chest that I had only felt once before. This time it was sharp and burning.

Everything that I had been holding back crashed over me. Ethan, Miles, Asher, Isaac, Zeke... All of it. It all rushed over me like a wave breaking over the top of a dam. I held it all until I could barely breathe. The wolf snarled at Hades as it took another step closer, towering over both of us. Hades backed up to me, still growling, still standing, still protecting.

"Fuck off!" I shouted, letting it fly. The silent blast of gold light rushed past Hades and slammed into the wolf like a missile, throwing it back into a tree trunk. There was a sickening crunch. My head exploded and my stomach lurched. I crumpled to the dirt as the world drifted in and out of focus with my pulse pounding in my ears. Something warm dripped onto my upper lip. The world went black.

I was being moved. It barely brought me to the surface. Opening my eyes wasn't even an option.

A heavily calloused hand brushed my hair from my face. "You used too much, Stellina," a voice whispered. "You're going to get yourself killed if you keep doing that." I tried to come to the surface, but my body wasn't listening.

The ground disappeared and I was against a warm body. "Rest." I sank back into the darkness.

* * *

Isaac

Grandma and Grandpa Turner were what you'd expect. Lynn was shorter than us with stylish glasses and white hair, while Paul was taller with wide shoulders and salt and pepper hair. Both had warm smiles.

"You two have gotten so big," Lynn said as she patted my back.

"That's what happens when they grow up, honey," Paul teased as he beamed down at us. Ethan started to spin his rings as we sat in the diner.

"So, the last time we saw you was around Sophie's fourth birthday?" Lynn asked turning to Paul.

"That's right." Lynn turned back to us. "That's when we moved to Austin."

Gladys arrived with her notepad. "What can I get you?" She sent Ethan a warning glance before jotting down Lynn's order.

After Gladys left, awkward silence was all that remained.

"So, do either of you play sports?" Paul tried hopefully.

I shared a look with Ethan and started talking about MMA fighting. That at least bought us time until dinner came.

We were halfway through dinner when Lynn set her fork down. She pressed her lips together before turning to us. "Boys, what was he like before the restraining order?"

"We know he was in the wrong, we don't doubt that," Paul added quickly. "But we've only heard bits and pieces."

"Why?" It slipped out before I knew it.

Paul sighed. "It'll determine exactly how much assistance our son will receive from us."

We shared a look. Ethan raised an eyebrow. I shrugged. We turned back to our grandparents.

"In the house, it was all verbal," Ethan explained. "He'd tear into Ma, try to make her feel like she was the shit beneath his shoe."

Memories came forward that I had forgotten. "It wasn't always when he was drinking. He'd make snide little remarks about everything. He found any excuse to tear down Ma, from trying to get her teaching degree to the choice of clothes she wore that day."

Ethan nodded. "And if Ma wasn't home, he'd have a run at us."

I snorted. "He made the mistake of trying that in front of Ma once, and she threatened to kill him."

"I'd never seen her so pissed in my life." Ethan shook his head. It had been a frightening sight. Ma running out of the kitchen with the cast iron frying pan, tearing into Dad. A memory I was sure neither of us would ever forget.

"You said in the house?" Lynn pointed out.

We nodded in unison.

"Outside, he was normal." I started poking at my potatoes.

"Until he knocked her down while she was pregnant with Sophie." Ethan shifted in his seat. "That's when Ma shot him."

Lynn's eyes were wider than before. A vein was bulging in Paul's forehead. We simply sat and waited for their reaction.

"We got an extremely watered-down version of the story," she said in a calm voice, the lines on her face deepening.

"You don't need to worry about your mom," Paul said, getting our attention. "We've arranged for him to have his parole in Billings. His probation includes restrictions, such as not contacting your mother in any way. Though, you boys may hear from him."

I was already shaking my head before they even finished the sentence. "Not interested."

Paul nodded as if he expected that.

"We can stop him from calling, but he may email you boys," Lynn pointed out.

"He'd be wasting his time." Ethan took a bite of meatloaf.

"He's always been down on himself since he was your age," Paul explained. "Of course, the alcoholism didn't help."

"What?" I lifted my gaze to Paul. "He's an alcoholic?"

Lynn nodded. "Oh yes, he realized he had been one for years. He's recently been attending the meetings they hold for inmates. He already earned his first sobriety chip."

"It's a little easier to do that in jail," Paul muttered.

Ethan snorted.

Lynn sent him a look before changing the subject to what Ethan wanted to do after high school.

Our dad was an alcoholic. It had never occurred to me. It probably should have. He almost always had a stash of something somewhere in the house. Hell, even my room. At least until I had my first drink at ten.

The realization hit me like a truck. There was a genetic predisposition toward alcoholism. My mind raced as I moved my peas around my plate. And I used to drink. A lot. Maybe I shouldn't do that anymore. At least, not as often... Or not at all? Which would be better? I could guess what Ma's answer would be, but I didn't want to risk getting grounded to find out. I began to tap the tines of my fork against the plate. The sooner I saw that therapist the better. And not one drink until I got my questions answered.

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CHAPTER 9

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woke up surrounded by softness and warmth. My head throbbed as I opened my eyes. The light pierced my skull and I shut my eyes, groaning. A forearm was between my breasts, pulling me back against a familiar hard, warm body. A knee was between my legs flush against my core. Cinnamon and vanilla filled my nose, along with the scent of wet dog fur. Asher and Hades.

"Ally?" Lips brushed against the back of my neck.

"I don't know if I want to be Ally yet," I muttered as I tried to open my eyes again.

Asher shifted behind me, his arm pulling away from between my breasts.

I mumbled a protest. "I was cuddling with that."

"If you're not Ally, you don't get to cuddle with me," he whispered.

I groaned. "Fine, I'm Ally. Give it back."

Instead, he pulled his leg from between my legs. Not ready to face the world yet, I rolled to my other side and snuggled against his chest.

His arms moved around me as his nose buried in my hair. We stayed like that long enough for my head to stop throbbing.

"Where are we?" I muttered, enjoying the feel of him.

"In my room at Miles' house. After I dealt with two of the shifters, I found you unconscious and Hades covered in blood on the trail. The third found you, I'm guessing?"

I nodded, brushing my nose against the hollow of his throat. "Yeah. Hades protected me." That's when it hit me. I pulled back and looked up at him, panic rising in my chest. "Is he okay?"

"He's okay, he's not hurt at all. He's down at the foot of the bed," he assured me.

I lifted my head and found my big, wrinkly baby out cold and lying on his back. Sighing, I relaxed into the bed again. "He fought the wolf off. I was so fucking scared for him." I buried my face in his chest.

He held me closer. "As soon as we got here and started cleaning him up, we realized none of the blood was his."

I looked up at him. "Really? None of it?"

His eyes were warm as his hand moved to hold my face. "He was really lucky not to be killed. He's huge, but he can't match a werewolf. How did you two get away?"

"I knocked the wolf out." I shoved my hair out of my face.

He frowned down at me. "How?"

"Remember when I shoved the ghosts out of my class last year?"

His frown disappeared. "Yeah. That gold blast that we couldn't figure out."

"That's how. I threw the wolf into a tree." The sound of the crunch ran through my head. "There was this sound... and it didn't get up."

His eyes unfocused. "She might have broken a bone when she hit. That would be the only thing to slow her down."

I didn't even feel guilty. The bitch went after my dog, she deserved a broken leg. "Are you okay?"

He grinned down at me. "Yeah, from the way I felt when I shifted back, I won."

I blinked up at him. "So, you don't know? You really don't remember what you do as a wolf?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Astrid said I'll get there eventually, but I only get glimpses for now."

"So, how do you know you won?" I asked carefully.

"I had the shit kicked out of me and I was near you," he said, his eyes growing shadowed as he held my gaze. "I thought for a minute I had attacked you."

"It was some brown wolf." I ran my fingers over his chest.

His hands moved to hold my face. "I almost lost you."

"But you didn't," I whispered back.

His lips found mine. I sighed as he feathered small kisses on my lips over and over. I ran my hands further up his chest, feeling his heat and muscle. He growled deep in his throat a split second before his kiss grew harder. I parted my lips before he slipped in and took over. I met him kiss for kiss, stroke for stroke until my mind was spinning. He growled into my mouth a heartbeat before his hands wrapped around my wrists and took my hands off him.

He pulled back, breathing heavily as he met my eyes. "You can't touch me."

I blinked up at him, still trying to string two thoughts together. "Huh?"

He shook his head. "When you touch me when I'm kissing you, I want to mark you. That's the trigger."

My heart ached as I closed my eyes. I wanted to touch him — hell, I wanted more than just touching him — but if this was what he needed... "I can try to keep my hands to myself."

"We can test it out, I guess." He bent his neck and softly brushed his lips against mine again. I almost instantly sighed and reached for him again.

He pulled back, cursing.

My face burned as I realized I couldn't stop myself. "Sorry."

He met my eyes, longing filling every line on his face. The silver thread was back, weaving through the blues. "Hold on to the headboard."

His order sent scorching heat to pool between my legs. I pulled back from him and moved to my back. I slipped my hands up between the pillows and gripped the bottom of the headboard.

His eyes held mine as he reached above me and locked them to the wood. My breath caught at his grip. Shit... that was...

He leaned down and kissed me again. Softly, carefully, until my brain was scrambled all over again. When he lifted his head, he was smirking. "That works."

It did. It really fucking did. I smiled as I went for another kiss.

He pulled back.

My heart dropped.

"It's not that I don't want to, honey," he whispered, his arm tightening around me. "There's something I need to tell you about werewolves and humans."

I raised an eyebrow.

He swallowed hard as his eyes met mine. "You know how dangerous I am."

I nodded, wondering where he was going with this.

He licked his lips. "I... If we ever..."

I took a guess. "Bang?"

He chuckled softly. "Make love, yeah. There's some requirements for me."

"Requirements?" Both of my eyebrows shot into my hairline.

He cringed. "More, prerequisites."

I relaxed in the bed again. "Well, condoms are on my list."

He relaxed a little more. "Mine too. But first..." He sighed. "Since you're human and I'm a wolf, well, I can do a lot of damage if I lose control."

He suddenly had all my attention. "You mean, during sex?"

He nodded, his face tense. "I could break something of yours or even kill you."

I bit back a smile. Bad, dirty mind! Bad! I forced myself back to the seriousness of this talk. "Yeah, I guess you could." I smiled. "Be blunt and just tell me."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Our first time together, sexually, will have to be... with several wolves in the room."

I snorted. He had to be kidding. I started laughing. "Very funny."

As his face stayed serious, my laughter faded.

"You're kidding, right?" I asked, my stomach knotting.

He shook his head. "It's the only way we can."

I pulled away and sat up against the headboard. "The only way we can have sex is to put on a show for other wolves?"

He sat up and faced me. "It's not a show, Ally. It's a safety measure."

I shook my head, stunned.

"Lexie, I can lift a car," he stated. "Now imagine what I could do to you if I... got really carried away."

I tried to force myself to think.

"Ally, packs have this down to a science. Over time humans have had their throats torn out, their pelvises shattered, or even been turned," he explained. "I will not do that to you."

Okay, yeah. If what he was saying was true, then... "Okay, it makes sense, but, fuck."

He sighed. "I know."

I shook my head and was honest. "I don't know if I can be naked and have sex in front of strangers."

His face didn't change. "We don't have to be visible."

"What?"

His face turned pink. "We can be under blankets. But they do have to be in the room."

"Oh, well, that makes it better," I muttered.

"I would tell them to fuck off if I could, but... I don't want to kill you." His voice was tired as he sighed.

I thought about it. Under a blanket? In front of people? It was too much to think about right now. "Look, let's talk about it more when the time comes."

Relief softened the lines of his face. "Sounds like a good idea."

The room fell into thick silence. That was when my stomach decided to growl.

"I've got to go make dinner." He got to his feet, picked up his shirt from the floor, and headed for the door.

"Isn't it our date night?" I asked, still smiling.

"That's why I'm bringing it in here." He opened the bedroom door. "It's too busy out there with the last of the shifter families moving out. Hell, even Lucy moved out today."

I raised an eyebrow. "Lucy left?"

"Yeah, Miles hooked her up with a hotel room until she could get back on her feet." Before he could shut the door, a wolf cub darted into the room. The tan and white cub bounded across the floor only to stumble and roll completely over to her side. She panted happily in her new spot.

"Casey," Asher chided with a smile. He left the doorway and went to get her. "You know you're not allowed in this room."

She raised her butt and wiggled, obviously looking to play.

Asher bent to pick her up and she darted between his legs and under the bed.

I snorted as Asher went to the end of the bed and knelt down.

"Casey, I'm not playing right now." Asher disappeared as he looked under the bed.

A small, adorable, high-pitched bark was his answer.

"No."

Casey growled playfully.

It was so fucking cute, I burst out laughing.

Asher's head popped up from the end of the bed. "Yeah, laugh it up. This is what it's been like since I got here."

I continued laughing as Asher tried to get the pup out from under the bed. It took him promising to sneak her ice-cream before she'd come out and shift back to human. I was still laughing as he shut the door behind them.

I got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. I could still feel dirt on the back of my neck, and it was bugging the crap out of me.

After a nice long, hot shower, I went to the mirror and wiped the steam off. Damn. As a redhead I was pale. This summer, I had gotten enough sun with enough sunblock to get a slight glow going. But I couldn't see it now. My skin was snow-like. The shadows under my eyes were darker than usual. It wasn't the face I had this morning. What the hell happened? I turned away from the mirror and went to the bedroom. Snagging my phone, I headed to Asher's dresser. Luckily, the guys had started leaving a drawer of my clothes in their rooms ever since Lucy moved in.

"Lexie, how are things?" Uma's voice was cheerful.

"I somehow threw gold light at a wolf and knocked it away today," I announced as I started to pull on a clean pair of cotton shorts.

"You did?"

"Yeah, and now I look like I've been sick for a month," I muttered as I dug around in the drawer.

There was a long silence on the phone. Long enough that I had pulled on a bra.

"I'll be there by tomorrow," Uma stated. "Whatever you do, *do not* do it again." She hung up the phone.

Cursing, I put my phone down on the dresser and turned to an awake Hades. "That'd be easy if I knew what I was doing." He gave me a half whimper. I sat down and started scratching his ears.

AFTER MY EVENING WITH ASHER, I opened the door to Rory's house and walked into a war zone.

Tara was on one side of the living room while Rory and Susan were on the couch trying to talk to her.

"How could you lie to me?" Tara screamed. Her face was red and blotchy, her nose raw as tears fell down her face.

I froze in the doorway.

"Because we never wanted you to feel different or question if Rory loved you," Susan answered honestly. "Rory is your father in every way that matters."

"No, he's not!" Tara gasped, her breathing harsh. "He's not my dad."

Rory got to his feet and moved toward her. "Breathe, baby."

That only made the tears fall faster. She jerked away from him before he could even hug her. Rory's face dropped. I watched as his heart broke a bit. I fought to stay in place as Tara moved across the living room from them. That's when they realized I was there.

"Um, what happened?" I asked, already taking a good guess.

"She found out today," Rory said as Susan hugged Tara to her.

"How?" It was out before I could stop it. It didn't matter how, only that it happened.

"Blood typing in biology," Susan answered for Rory. Oh fuck...

Tara pushed her mother away and scowled up at her. "She knew?"

Rory came around the couch. "Tara, baby."

Tara pointed at me. "She knew I wasn't yours!"

Rory took a deep breath. "Yes—"

"This is un-fucking-believable!" Tara sat down hard on the floor and sobbed into her hands. Hades moved out from behind me to go to her. Rory and Susan went to Tara. My chest ached for her, but I left them to comfort her. I'd only make it worse.

I went upstairs but didn't go to my room. I sat down at the top of the stairs and listened to Rory and Susan trying to get Tara to calm down and listen. But she wasn't ready. Even I could tell from the stairway. My phone vibrated several times, but I didn't answer. Tara's heartbreaking sobs made it impossible to think about anything else. It went on for a couple of hours.

Eventually, Tara came upstairs. I tried to think of something to say only to not find a word. She shot me a furious look before slamming her door behind her. Hades came up the stairs and demanded scratches.

I wanted to be there for Tara, but our relationship wasn't great. Not knowing what else to do, I went to my room.

The sound of Tara's sobbing drove a knife into my chest. I rolled over and checked the clock. It was past midnight. She was going to make herself

sick. Sick of wondering if I should, I followed my instinct and got out of bed.

When I stopped outside her door, I was carrying nausea meds, a water bottle, tissues, an ice pack, and my secret emergency chocolate stash. Taking a deep breath, I knocked gently on the door.

The crying stopped. The door opened a crack. Her eyes were swollen, but the tears still flowed. Without a word, I held out the icepack to her. Eventually, she took it. Then I held out the tissues. She silently took those too. One item at a time, I handed her everything.

"I know I can't understand what you're going through," I said softly. "But that doesn't mean you have to go through it alone."

A fresh set of tears rolled down her face. "You knew. He told you."

"Not really." I swallowed hard. "I knew because you aren't a necromancer."

She scowled at me. "You never told me."

"I didn't want you to hurt," I admitted. "I'm sorry."

"At least that explains why he treated you differently." She shook her head and shut the door in my face.

I cursed under my breath and headed for my bedroom. When I reached my door, I stopped. She was crying again. Should I? No... she doesn't like me. I'd just make it worse... How would the guys handle this? I thought back over everything I'd learned from the guys since we met. Fuck it.

I turned and knocked on the door again.

"Go away!"

"I'm not going anywhere." I swallowed hard. "If it was me, I wouldn't want to be alone right now. And I'm sure you don't either."

"Fuck off!"

"No. You are family, Tara," I said, my voice firm and calm. "I'm here for you. I'll be here *for you*; I'll always be here for you. We might not get along, we might be too different, but you're still family to me." I sat down on the floor and braced my back on the wall beside her door. "I'll be here all night, whether you open the door or not. I'm not leaving you alone."

Hades sat between my knees and watched me wait. She never opened the door. But it didn't matter. I wasn't going to leave her reaching for someone and have no one there reaching back.

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CHAPTER 10

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Lexie

ursing under my breath, I hurried into history and froze. Everyone's head was down, their pencils scribbling across a sheet. Pop quiz. Fuck. I went to Mr. Jones' desk and took the quiz he held out to me then took my seat.

It was only the third day of school. Why the hell were we doing a quiz? I pulled out a pen and dropped my bag then began to speed read. Shit, shit, shit.

Great time to sleep in, Lexie.

I was five questions in before Mr. Jones broke the silence. "Time's up, quizzes in."

I cursed and held my test to the person in front of me only to blink up at a familiar face. "I thought you weren't coming this week?"

Zeke looked worse than the last time I saw him. His beard was thicker, the shadows under his eyes darker. He looked about how I felt. He simply took my test, added it to his, then passed it forward before turning back to me.

"Mr. Jones doesn't do make up quizzes or tests," he reminded me. The guy in the next row stared at Zeke, his eyes wide.

"I'm so screwed," I groaned before burying my face in my arms on the desk.

The chair in front of me creaked. Leather and engine grease tickled my nose. "Why were you late?"

I lifted my head in time to spot someone else trying to listen in. Both people to our left seemed intent on hearing our conversation. "You know that enormous secret Rory had?" That should be vague enough to confuse anyone listening.

Zeke nodded.

"It came to light yesterday." I shoved my hair out of my face and met his slightly wider eyes. "I spent the night on the floor in the hallway outside the other bedroom."

He eyed me. "Why?"

I lowered my voice to barely a whisper. "I didn't want her to be alone if she didn't want to be."

His face softened. "Fuck."

"Yeah. So, rough night."

He eyed me. "Did you have coffee yet?"

I shook my head. "I'm still wearing flannel bottoms, Zeke."

Zeke leaned into the aisle and chuckled as he saw I wasn't kidding. People's jaws dropped around us as they watched Zeke laugh. "I'll pick up some of your clothes for you so you can change."

Whispers erupted around the classroom.

I grinned up at him. "You'd be my hero for the day."

He leaned in. "I'll be back before the end of second period."

"Thanks." I smiled up at him.

The bell rang.

Everyone got to their feet and started for the door. Zeke placed himself between me and the crowd. It was sweet and familiar. It made me smile.

Before I could head off to my next class, a ruckus caught our attention in the hallway.

Mrs. Weaver was in the hallway with two security guards and three open lockers. My jaw dropped as the vice principal opened the next locker in line.

Every student in the hallway was frozen in place as one of the guards pulled out several items from this locker. Mrs. Weaver made a note and moved on to the next.

"Is this really happening?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the scene.

"Lexie." His tone was full of foreboding.

That's when I realized it. She was opening my locker! "Oh, fuck."

"Anything bad in there?" he whispered as he moved to my side.

I shook my head. "Just research books and supplies."

"What kind of supplies?"

Mrs. Weaver pulled out a small Ziploc of herbs. It was actually dried starwest raspberry leaf for a tea I read about, but from the triumphant look on her face I could tell she thought it was something else.

"Oh, fuck this." I turned to Zeke. "I'm outta here."

We both started down the hallway and around the corner.

"Might want to call Rory," Zeke warned.

I cursed again as I pulled out my phone.

* * *

Ethan

Lexie didn't come to class. I took notes for her, and when we were let go to work on our math, I pulled my phone out and texted the group.

Ethan: Lexie's not in class. Anyone know what's up?

Miles: I'll check her phone location.

I began to spin my rings. I hated that he lo-jacked our phones without asking, but right now I had to admit it came in handy. My phone buzzed.

Miles: She's with Zeke at her house.

Zeke...

Woofy: Did she make it to school?

I grinned.

Woofy: Who fucking changed my name?

I snickered.

Miles: According to the tracking, yes.

Huh.

Less attractive clone: Are we meeting after school since we aren't covering the trails anymore?

Miles: I can't. Lucy is coming over today to work on something.

I scowled at my phone. He'd rather work with Lucy than hang out with Lexie?

Woofy: What are you working on?

Miles: An idea.

I waited for him to elaborate but he didn't.

Woofy: What kind of idea?

Miles: I'd rather not talk about it.

What was with the secrecy? I set my phone down as I thought back over the last month. Miles had been pulling away more, spending more time on his own or with Lucy. Lucy...

A sick feeling filled my gut. Could he be cheating on Lexie? He had been spending a lot of time with the alchemist. And she had been staying in his house...

I texted my brother in our private chat.

Ethan: Do you think Miles is messing around with Lucy? It was a couple of seconds before my phone vibrated again.

Isaac: I am now!

Ethan: He's been weird since we got home.

Isaac: I'll fucking kill him!

Ethan: We don't know. It's just he's been weird and quieter than usual.

Isaac: We have to find out.

Ethan: It's between the two of them.

Isaac: Not just them. It's between all of us now.

He had a point.

Ethan: Why don't we talk to him? With the other guys?

Isaac: Without Lexie? I guess, but if he is...

Ethan: He probably isn't.

Isaac: I don't know, remember his set up with Autumn? They get interested in someone else, they'd break up. He can't pull that shit with Lexie.

Ethan: He knows that.

At least I thought he did...

Ethan: We'll talk to him.

"Mr. Turner." Mrs. Hubert's voice pulled me back.

I looked up, cringing.

Mrs. Hubert held up a note. "The new counselor wants a word."

I muttered curses under my breath as I packed up. Jadis, great. I got to my feet and headed for the office.

By the time I knocked on her door, my stomach was knotted.

"Come in," Jadis called.

Don't play her game. Just get in and get out. I opened the door and found her at her desk. Smiling.

"Come on in, Ethan," she said in a sweet voice. "It's so good to see you again."

"Go fuck yourself." It was out before I even stepped inside.

"Close the door," she ordered.

I didn't move from the doorway. "And be alone with you? Not a chance."

She eyed me as she began to trace her fingers over her desk. "I'm not here to attack you, Ethan. I'm here to help."

Something touched my face. I scratched it. "Bullshit. Nothing you say is going to bring me to your side in this."

She eyed me and continued absently tracing on the desk. "What if Lexie agreed to join us?"

I scoffed as my nose suddenly started itching. "Good fucking luck." I scratched my nose and left the office. I was fed up. Fucking Jadis needed to take a long walk off a short pier.

* * *

Lexie

Zeke managed to convince me to come back to school and deal with Mrs. Weaver and her bullshit. "Better now than later," he had said.

I hated when he was right. I managed to be back halfway through lunch. Once I entered the quad in front of the cafeteria I slowed to a stop. The table was empty. I pulled out my phone to call the guys when my phone dinged.

Superman: Janitor's closet. Big talk.

I cursed and turned around. What the hell happened now?

Before I could reach it, it was opened by Isaac. I raised an eyebrow. How did he know I was here? Asher's hearing? I gave him a smile and got a strained one in return. My heart dropped. Oh shit. More problems. Great.

I slipped in past him and walked into a fight.

"Answer the question, Miles," Ethan bit out between his teeth from one side of the space.

Miles' face was blank as he said, "What kind of question is that?"

Isaac closed the door behind us. "Does Lexie know what's going on?"

I turned to Isaac. "About what?"

Asher cursed then turned on Miles. "Tell her."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, barely. "What now?"

Miles' arms were crossed over his chest. His face grew blank. Warning us off.

Well, that might work for the others. "What's going on?"

He shook his head. "They believe I'm cheating on you with Lucy."

My heart stopped. I whispered, "Are you?"

His gaze shot to mine. His eyes widened a little, his mouth opening a small fraction. "What? No. Of course not."

"Then why didn't you just say that ten minutes ago?" Asher asked, leaning against the work bench.

Miles' eyes turned glacial as he turned to Asher. "Because it's none of your concern. It doesn't involve you. This is about my relationship with Lexie, not yours."

His voice sent a shiver down the back of my neck.

"It doesn't just affect you two," Ethan reminded him.

Miles sent the same look to Isaac. "Would you like it if I meddled in your relationship with her?"

Ethan shot him a look. "There's nothing to meddle with, we're not keeping secrets from each other."

I rubbed my temple, my head beginning to throb. "Guys..."

"We all agreed to stay out of each other's relationships." Miles' voice was a hard hammer that slammed the closet into silence. "That was the agreement. Stick to it."

Everyone stared at Miles. His lips were a hard line. His face was like stone, his eyes sharp as he looked at each of the guys.

I dropped my hand from my temple, drawing his attention. His face instantly relaxed, his lips softening, his eyes warming. "I think everyone needs to calm down and take some time to think about how you would feel if you were in Miles' situation." I looked at each of my boyfriends. "Not one of you would appreciate this either."

"We just wanted to make sure without hurting you, Red," Isaac said for all of them.

"I know." I turned to Miles. "You have been distant the last month. Disappearing without a word and not telling us where you were. I can't honestly blame them for thinking the same thing I did."

"They shouldn't have asked." Miles pushed his glasses up his face.

"We came to you as your friends to let you know what your behavior looked like," Asher stated. "You're the one that made a big deal out of it."

The icy look was back in Miles' eyes as he looked up at Asher. "Are you cheating on Lexie?"

Asher growled between his bared teeth.

"See. You don't respond well to that question either." Miles walked through the group and out the door.

The bell for class rang.

I sighed deeply, already tired today. We filed out of the closet and went our separate ways. Was there always going to be this much trouble between everyone?

Asher wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a comforting squeeze as we walked to class.

WE WERE both quiet as we started our drawings for the day's assignment. This time it was supposed to be a feeling that we represented. Just a sketch to start for a painting later. Still fuming, I picked up the charcoal pencil and got to work.

"Ally?" Asher's voice pulled me back to the present.

Blinking, I looked up at him. It was suddenly too loud, too bright, too much movement. I closed my eyes tight until it passed. "Yeah?"

"They want you in the office," Mrs. Archer said as the sketch pad slipped from my fingers. "Alexis?"

Everything finally came back into focus. I blinked a few more times before looking up at her.

She was holding my sketchpad, a slight half grin on her face. "This is what I'm wanting. What's does this represent?" She turned the pad around. I blinked again. The sketch was of the world on fire. And there I was, in the middle. Back to back with five men with unfinished faces fighting to put out the blaze that burned the trees. But each of the men were also fighting each other. Bruises and blood covered each of them.

"Sabotage," I muttered, feeling stupid. Miles wasn't cheating on me. I was sure of it. But he was hiding something. And the others didn't like it either.

"Good. It's a great representation of the emotion," Mrs. Archer said. "This has substance. This says something."

I nodded, finally understanding what she had been trying to tell me, though I had to resist the urge to fidget. Her seeing it made me feel naked. Vulnerable.

She met my eyes. "Great art comes from emotion. If you only focus on technique, then you lose your message."

That made sense.

"I'd like you to make a painting of this. It would make a great addition to your portfolio for art school," she said, setting the pad down again.

I nodded again.

"Now, go to the office."

I closed the pad and tucked it under my arm as I picked up my bag. I was halfway to the office before I fully came out of the daze I'd been in. So, that's what she meant. Why the hell didn't she mention it before?

I put it out of my mind when I opened the door to the office.

"Lexie," the receptionist greeted me with a smile. "Mrs. Weaver wants a word."

I sighed before I made my way through the office to the door and knocked.

"Come in."

I opened the door of the now familiar office and froze. A police officer that wasn't Rory was at the desk across from the vice principal. I came in and sat down without even being told.

"You have some explaining to do," she announced as she set the bag in front of me on her desk.

"It's starwest raspberry leaf, for tea," I stated simply. "I drink tea."

She smiled, humoring me. "Sure, it is."

"Actually, I'd believe her. Marijuana doesn't smell like this." The officer pulled the leaves in his hand away from his nose. "Or look like this."

Mrs. Weaver's head snapped around so she could glare at him. "What? Are you sure?"

The officer held out the loose dried leaves. "Have a sniff."

She took the leaves, smelled them, then crushed them in her fist. "Thank you, officer."

"Next time, you might want to check out what you find before calling the department." He headed for the door and closed it behind him.

Mrs. Weaver turned back to me.

I managed not to smile. "Anything else?"

"Where were you the last two classes?" she demanded.

I sighed wearily. "At home, changing."

Mrs. Weaver sighed. "You can't just leave school anytime you like."

Actually, I could. I'd just pay for it. But I was good and kept my mouth shut. Ten points for me!

She shook her head. "Your cousin has also decided not to show up to school. I think it's your influence on her—"

"Wait, Tara's not here?" I asked, needing to be sure.

"No," she said, looking at the computer. "She didn't show up to class and we can't reach your uncle or her."

My heart grew heavy as dread pulled me down. "You mean, there is a psycho out there killing women and my cousin is missing?"

Her face grew pale. "We... haven't been able to locate her."

I surged to my feet, threw my bag over my shoulder and started for the door.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"I'm looking for my cousin!"

Stomach knotting, I burst out of the admin office and went to speech to text. "Tara is missing! Need your help to find her!" I sent it on the run. By the time I reached my Blazer, my phone rang.

"What's going on?" Zeke demanded.

"Tara's missing." I pulled open the door and threw my bag and pad inside. "The fucking vice principal didn't even think about the fact people are being murdered!"

Isaac cursed.

I climbed in, frowning. "Is this a party line?"

"Yes, I added it to my plan last month. It's faster in an emergency," Miles said.

"Good idea." I jammed the key into the ignition. "We need to search for her."

"Lexie, Ethan, start with the places she knows that aren't on campus," Miles ordered. "Zeke, the roads. Isaac, her friends at school. Asher, search the school. She might be hiding out in the library or some out of the way corner. See if you can sniff her out."

"Call if you find her!" I dropped the phone into the passenger seat and tore out of my parking spot. My heart slamming, I left, praying that I wasn't going to lose Tara. Lose Tara... Oh fuck. I stopped at the stop sign at the exit of the parking lot. She had just learned she wasn't Rory's bio child. Oh God... no... I peeled out of the parking lot, heading up the mountain. Please, please don't do something stupid.

"I FOUND HER. SHE'S OKAY."

My breath left my body in a rush. Relief washed over me, tears prickling at my eyes. I covered my eyes with a shaking hand. "Where is she?"

"She's with Jessica at Asher's." Ethan's voice was the most beautiful thing in the world right now.

I took a deep breath and headed back toward my car with Hades. I had been searching every bridge in the county since I left school an hour ago, half expecting to find Tara's body. "Thank you, Ethan. Thank you so much."

"Um, don't thank me yet," he said, his voice growing serious. "I think... I think they need you."

His words stopped me as I was climbing into the Blazer. "What do you mean?"

"Just get here." Ethan sighed wearily.

"On my way." I tucked my phone into my pocket and climbed in. Why would they need me?

By the time I pulled up to Asher's house, I was calmer. Tara's red Ford was there behind another car. She was safe.

Jessica was sitting on the couch in the living room. Ethan was sitting on the coffee table in front her. Tara was beside Jess on the couch.

"You just scared the shit out of everyone!" I shouted at Tara.

Tara's face was weary as she turned to me.

"There's some psycho out there killing women and you take off without letting us know where you are going?" I snapped. "Do you have any idea

how dangerous this town is right now? No! Because you don't listen to Rory!"

Ethan carefully took Jessica's forearm and raised it. The light glinted off her pale skin, highlighting the blue and purple smudges in the shape of fingerprints around her wrist.

It stunned me for several heartbeats. "What happened?"

Tara sighed. "Jason is an abusive dick."

I moved into the living room. Ethan gave up his spot on the coffee table and moved to sit beside Jessica. I sat down across from her on the coffee table. Jessica's face was hidden by her hair as she looked at the floor. "Jessica?"

She sniffed one more time before lifting her head. I expected a black eye, bruises, something. But there was nothing, thankfully. Her eyes were bright red and bloodshot. Her nose was raw from crying.

"What's going on?" I asked softly. Hoping she'd talk. "What you tell me will stay between us, unless you want someone else to know."

Her lower lip trembled. She hesitated only a heartbeat before she pulled up the sleeve of her cotton pajama top. More bruises in the shape of large hands were wrapped around her upper arm. Some old, some new. I bit back my own surprise. She didn't need it. I remembered how I felt when I showed the guys my back. Naked. She didn't need it from me.

"That motherfucker," I muttered simply because I had to get something out. I met her gaze. "Talk to me. Please?"

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "It started a couple of years ago. He messed up a play in a game. They lost because of it. He was ranting and I was sick of hearing it. So, I started walking off. He grabbed me really hard to stop me." She wiped her nose with the crumpled tissue in her hand. "He didn't mean to, it was only an accident. And he apologized the next morning when the bruises showed up."

"The next morning?" I asked to be clear. "Not immediately? Only when there was proof he hurt you?"

She barely nodded. "He said it was an accident. A onetime thing."

I bit back a curse and focused on keeping my voice calm. "Was it?"

She shook her head. "He did it again. And again, and again. Yesterday was the first time I was sure he did it on purpose."

I took her icy hands in mine and squeezed gently. "Jess. I remember wanting to believe it was an accident. My mom would smack me once in a

while. She would always apologize after and say it was an accident." I still couldn't believe that I bought it for so long. "But now, after time and therapy... I know if someone squeezes you hard enough to leave bruises, they're doing it on purpose. Well, unless the person is in a huge amount of pain or terrified on a roller coaster. Then I don't think it's on purpose."

She huffed, but the tears stopped falling. Good. She shook her head. "I just get him so mad."

I met her eyes again. "How? What makes him that mad?"

She shrugged as her eyes unfocused. "Um. When I embarrass him. When I say no, when I don't want to do what he wants to..."

"So, basically anytime you don't act like he wants you to?" I hated to say it, but she needed to see it.

She thought about it while looking down at our hands. Eventually she nodded slowly.

"That's abuse, Jess," I said gently. "That's him using the threat of violence to get what he wants."

She met my eyes. The lost look on her face told me there was more. It made my stomach churn.

"Ethan, can you make some tea, please?" I asked without taking my gaze from hers.

Ethan got to his feet and left the room without a word.

I waited until there was the swish of the kitchen door swinging closed. "Did he ever make you do things you didn't want to in other parts of your relationship? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I can't not ask."

She pressed her lips together as her eyes filled. Oh fuck. She nodded.

"Okay." My heart broke as rage coursed through me. My eyes stung as I rubbed her hands while I fought for control. Be here for her, be here for her. "Do we need to go to the hospital?"

She shook her head.

"Okay." I couldn't keep it in. "Does anyone else know?"

Jess shook her head.

"Do you want to press charges? For the bruises? For...?" I had to ask.

She looked down at her legs and clutched my hand harder.

"She's too scared of him," Tara answered for Jess. "He's been threatening her since I decked him."

My eyebrows shot up to my hair. "You're the one who hit him?" No way...

Tara's cheeks tinted pink. "Well, yeah, he came after me when I caught him trying to get her to leave school yesterday."

My temper sparked. Jason went after Tara? I fought back the urge to hunt the fucker down and finish what Tara started. This wasn't the time. This was about what was best for Jessica and Tara now. Later. I'll hit a bag later. I nodded. "Okay, if she doesn't want to press charges, you could. If Jess is willing to give a statement as a witness."

Tara nodded. Jess hung her head.

"Then again, you are the daughter of a cop," I added, quickly trying to stop the tension suddenly radiating from Jessica. "You might not need Jess' statement."

Tara pinched her lips closed as her posture grew rigid.

I pointedly looked at Jessica then back to her.

Tara closed her mouth. She got it. This was about Jess right now. About making her feel safe.

I turned back to Jess. "Jess, we can help you get away from him."

Jessica's eyes were wide and filling again. "I love him."

"I know. But that doesn't mean he's good for you," I managed instead of cursing at her. "No one who loves you could do this to you. That's not love. It's possession."

Tears rolled down her face again. "He's all I have."

The front door opened.

"No, he's not." Asher's voice reached us before the door even closed. He stepped into the living room with a calm expression as I moved out of the way. Jessica buried her face in her hands and began sobbing.

Asher took my spot and pulled his sister into his arms. She buried her face in his shoulder as she broke apart.

I took Ethan's spot and reached out to Jess, setting my hand on her back. Tara reached out and carefully pulled her hair out from under Asher's arm. A silver-ring-clad hand reached down and settled on Jessica's shoulder. Another manicured hand joined Ethan's. I looked up to find Miles standing on the other side of Asher. Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. The other guys came into the room one by one as they arrived. Each took a heartbeat to see what was happening, then moved to Asher and

Jess. Each of them reached down and held her with Asher. Adding their hands and arms around her. Jessica sobbed even harder.

This... this was family. I watched in awe while the guys all gave their support to this girl who had pulled away from them years ago. Who had driven them crazy, who pissed them off time after time.

I watched as they gave their love, their strength, to her without question. Without an explanation. She needed, so they gave. It was... breathtaking. This was what family was supposed to be.

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CHAPTER 11

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WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

ara eventually took Jessica upstairs to wash her face. The rest of us gathered in the kitchen. Asher was quiet. Too quiet.

"Ash?" I kept my voice soft.

He lifted his head. The silver band through the blue was thick. Thicker than in the woods. It was obvious he put his anger aside for Jessica and what she needed. Now that she was in the bathroom out of sight... "He dies."

"Deep breaths," I said, keeping my voice calm. "You can't kill him, Asher. But we can get Rory's help."

"Screw that!" he snarled, his eyes almost all blue and silver now. "He hurt my sister."

I eyed him. How much had he really heard?

Zeke moved between us. "Don't be such a selfish prick."

Shocked silence slammed through the room. Did he just...

"This isn't about you and your rage, Asher," Zeke stated firmly. "This is about *her*. What she needs, what she wants. Right now, it's about keeping her safe from him until she makes a decision. Take it from me, you need to focus on being here for her. It'll get you through."

I couldn't see how Asher reacted, not around Zeke's massive shoulders. Rage boiled through me. Jason hurt Jessica, and Asher wanted blood. And he couldn't do it.

Ethan moved and blocked the door. "You can't. You'll kill him without meaning to."

Asher turned and swept his fancy blender off the counter growling in frustration. He gripped the tile on the island. Claws sprung from his

fingertips to puncture the tile.

My heart slammed in my chest. He was losing his shit. An idea sparked. It was ridiculous and stupid, but it was the only one I had.

I backed out of the kitchen and started for the foyer.

"Lexie." Miles' hard voice froze me on the spot with my hand on the door handle. "Where are you going?"

"To beat the shit out of Jason," I shot over my shoulder, my fingers tightening on the knob.

"What will that solve?" he asked, walking toward me. His face was a mask of blankness. The shouting from the kitchen grew louder.

"If Jason gets hurt it'll calm Asher down." I let go of the handle and turned to look up at him as he reached me. "If I do it, Jason will live."

Miles' mask dropped. Disappointment filled his face. "If you sink to his level, you'll be the one who loses."

"Right now, I don't care," I bit out between clenched teeth. Guilt ate at me. I didn't want to disappoint him, but...

Something crashed and shattered in the kitchen.

"You can't use violence to solve everything," he stated in a strained voice. "You're better than this."

I swallowed hard as his words hit me. Was I? I always went to violence. Maybe this was just who I was. Maybe I was just tired of fighting it? "Maybe I'm not. Did that ever occur to you?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Did it ever occur to you that you are?"

I held his gaze until there was a resounding crash came from the kitchen. Silence filled the house as we turned back toward the kitchen door.

We both hurried to just inside the kitchen door where we came up short. The back door was busted and hanging off one stubborn hinge. Ethan was on the floor of the back porch, his shirt shredded. Asher moved back from the door, his silver-blue eyes fading back to ocean as Ethan stayed still.

My heart in a vise, I shoved my way through the guys and past Asher just in time to reach him as Ethan cursed. He pushed himself to his feet.

I skidded to a stop on the porch as he turned on Asher with the glow back in his eyes and bared teeth. Oh shit.

A guttural growl slipped out between Ethan's teeth a heartbeat before he launched himself at Asher. The two smashed back into the tiled island,

shattering it. Everyone scrambled out of the way as the two began to beat the shit out of each other.

It lasted only seconds, but it seemed like an eternity before Ethan managed to get Asher into a hold, pinning him to the floor.

The only sound in the room was their heavy breathing.

"He needs the basement," Ethan declared as blood fell from his nose.

Isaac and Miles moved to help control Asher.

"No!" Ethan snapped. "Zeke!"

Zeke moved across the debris littering the floor.

"Get the doors." Ethan shifted off Asher's back and hauled him to his feet.

Asher struggled against his hold as they disappeared into the foyer.

Still doubting what I had seen, I turned to a pale Isaac. "Did that just happen?"

Isaac nodded, his jaw still on the floor.

"Ethan is stronger than Asher," Miles thought out loud as he pulled out his phone.

"Who are you calling? And where did they just take him?" I asked.

"I'm calling Astrid." He glanced at me before going back to his phone. "And they took him to the basement."

A bellow sounded from beneath us, rattling the windows. The house shook.

"Of course there's a basement." I sighed as I moved across the room and pushed the door open to follow only to come to a stop.

Jessica and Tara were near the foot of the stairs. Their faces were white as a sheet, their eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"Oh shit." The boys were out of the supernatural closet.

IT TOOK ALMOST an hour to explain everything to Jessica and Tara. They ran the gauntlet from disbelief to mostly understanding. It wasn't easy to get through their questions with Asher roaring downstairs, but eventually they understood what was going on.

"My brother is a werewolf," Jessica said again, still a bit stunned.

"Yes." I sighed, grateful it had sunk in.

"And you're a necromancer," Jessica stated.

"Yep."

"Huh." Jessica grew quiet after that as it all sank in.

I turned to Isaac. "Where's the basement?"

"Door under the stairs," Miles answered absently as he messed with his phone.

I went into the foyer and opened what I always thought was a coat closet. I moved down the rickety wood stairs to find Zeke at the bottom with his back to the stairs.

Asher was across the basement, chained to the wall, shirtless, clawing at the cement floor and leaving deep gouges behind. He hadn't even changed except for his eyes and hands.

I stopped on the last step.

Ethan was closer to Asher, his shirt clawed to scraps that hung from his shoulders. His whispers to Asher were too quiet for me to hear.

Zeke glanced over his shoulder to me.

I couldn't pull my gaze from Asher.

He was on all fours, snarling as a human. He pounded his fists into the floor and clawed at the cement. Trying to get the need to do damage out any way he could.

I stepped down to the cement floor. "The girls saw."

"Great." Zeke sighed. "How'd that talk go?"

"Okay actually." I forced my eyes from Asher to Ethan. "Did he get clawed?"

"No." Zeke's shoulders grew straighter. "And I don't know how he managed to avoid it."

"I don't think he did," I muttered, eyeing Ethan's shirt scraps again.

Ethan sighed, got to his feet and came back to us by the stairs. "I can't get through to him."

I examined his hard chest and stomach. "How did you not get clawed?" His face grew slightly paler. "I did."

I blinked up at him. "What?"

Ethan started tearing off the scraps of his shirt. "He got me, three times."

My attention snapped back to his flawless chest and abs. "Um..."

"I know." He tossed the scraps toward the stairs. "He couldn't cut me."

I examined his face. Dried blood crusted on his upper lip, a bruise coming in on his jaw. "Well, you're not impervious."

He wiped under his nose and got most of the blood. "Yeah, too bad, right?"

"How are you feeling?" Zeke demanded.

Ethan shrugged. "Fine. Just banged up."

"So, these scales you saw protect you from fire and werewolf claws." Okay...

"But not punctures," Ethan said. "I stepped on a fucking tack yesterday and it punched right through."

I nodded as if this was all normal.

Zeke turned his attention back to the still struggling Asher. "We need him to calm down, or those chains won't hold."

"Beautiful, want to give it a shot?" Ethan asked. "I mean, you calm Zeke down and all..."

Zeke smacked Ethan's shoulder behind me.

Ethan chuckled.

"Why the hell not?" I took a deep steadying breath and moved toward Asher. Slowly. "Ash?"

Those silver-blue eyes snapped to me, his body going still, like a predator in the wild that just caught a scent of something tasty.

I took another step closer.

"That's close enough," Zeke said. "If those chains give, he'll get you."

I nodded that I heard him and sat down on the cold cement floor. "Asher. Do you know who I am?"

His head tilted to the side. That's when I realized, this wasn't Asher. It was his wolf. Shit.

"I'm Lexie." Not knowing what else to do, I held my hand out palm up. "Asher calls me Ally."

Asher's head tilted to the side as he took a deep breath. Some of the tension left his body, but he began to pace. I racked my brain, going through everything I knew about werewolves.

Wolves were protective of mates, yeah. But they were also protective of the pack as a whole. Jessica...

A lightbulb went off in my head. "Get Jessica."

"What?" Ethan asked.

"He's pissed because of what happened." I didn't even take my gaze off him. "He lost his shit when she went upstairs. Get her."

Footsteps hurried upstairs while I stayed put on the floor.

"You sure about this?" Zeke asked quietly.

"Not one bit," I admitted. "But we need to do something. Maybe if he sees her okay then he'll calm down."

"Maybe." Zeke didn't sound convinced.

A door opened. Feet padded down the stairs.

Jessica took a sharp breath. "Asher?"

Asher's gaze shot to her and stayed there.

"Jess, come sit by me," I decided. "I think he needs to know you're okay."

To her credit, Jessica didn't hesitate. She was sitting beside me within seconds.

"Okay, here's what I understand about the wolf thing and how it works." I didn't take my eyes from Asher, who was watching his sister with all his attention. "His wolf is an instinctual part of him, but still separate right now. So, I think... if we convince his wolf that you're alright and need Asher right now, not him, then Asher might be able take control again."

"You're sure?" she asked, her voice shaky.

I shook my head. "You now know as much as I do about this."

She cursed under her breath before turning her attention to her twin. "I'm okay. But I miss Asher. Can you let Asher come back?"

Asher huffed like a dog.

"I'm guessing that's a no," I muttered as I racked my brain again.

"I want my brother." Her voice cracked. "Please."

My heart ached as the wolf began pulling against the chains trying to reach her.

It wasn't working.

While I was trying to think of a different tack, Jessica moved. Before I could blink, Jessica moved forward into Asher's arm length. My heart leapt into my throat as Asher reached for her.

Zeke started to move toward them. I reached up and snagged his wrist, stopping him. It was too dangerous right now. We were lucky not to have Jess hurt.

Everyone held their breath as Asher sniffed her hair and face. No one moved a muscle.

Several heartbeats later, the claws slipped back into his fingers leaving them bloody. Asher's fingers shook as he held his twin sister's face. "Jess?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "I'm okay."

He clutched her to him as he closed his eyes. The tension in the room disappeared as he exhaled.

Asher lifted his head, his gaze meeting mine. "What did I do?"

"You trashed your kitchen," Ethan chimed in.

Asher sighed. "Fuck it."

I smiled as he pulled back from Jess. His shoulders sagged as he barely held himself off the ground. "I'm going to pass out."

"You safe?" Zeke asked.

Asher nodded, his eyes closing.

Jess tried to catch him before his unconscious body hit the floor, but she only softened his fall.

Zeke rushed over to help. "Lexie, the key is on the banister."

Zeke hefted Asher into his arms while I found the key. Jess moved to the side as I unlocked each of the shackles on his wrists and ankles, revealing torn up skin and bloody gashes. I looked at the shackle. There was a band of sharp metal that would bite into a wrist. What the fuck?

Jess took a breath at the sight.

I dropped the shackle before turning to Asher. He was covered in blood spatter from his hands pounding his fists into the floor.

Ethan led Zeke up the stairs and held the door for him.

Jessica was pale as we followed Zeke through the foyer and upstairs.

"He's okay," I rushed to explain. "I think he just wore himself out." At least I hoped that was what happened.

She nodded. I went to grab a few wet washcloths and went to the bedroom. Zeke was examining his fingertips, which looked raw and pink, when I came in. I didn't say a word. I simply started to clean his hands and face

A hand took one of the wet cloths from my pile. Jess began cleaning his ankles quietly.

We worked together in silence. When we were done, I covered him in his comforter.

There was a knock on the front door.

I sat down on the side of Asher's bed and took a deep breath. I didn't want to leave him. I just wanted to curl up in bed with him and breath him

in. But Zeke and Jess were in here, so I sat. Jess sat in his desk chair, watching him breathe.

Footsteps came up the stairs.

Rory stepped into the room, his face a hard mask. "I just came from a talk with the vice principal." He eyed Asher. "I take it there's a reason that all of you ditched school?"

I nodded. "Let's go downstairs."

Rory led Zeke and I downstairs and into the living room, leaving Tara alone.

"Am I suspended?" I asked as I turned to him.

"Not yet," Rory bit out as the other's sat down. "They're waiting until Monday to make a decision about your punishment." His eyes met mine. "Now, what the fuck happened?"

"First, Mrs. Weaver started searching lockers and she found that loose leaf tea I have," I began. "She thought it was pot, I left because I was too tired to even deal with it. Then when I came back, she called me in to the office and mentioned that Tara was missing from school."

"Everyone started looking for her," Isaac added.

"We found her and Jessica here, upset," I finished.

Rory nodded. "And how did Asher end up unconscious?"

"Jessica's boyfriend hurt her. Asher was losing his control and all hell broke loose." I got it all out at once.

Rory took several deep breaths. "And at what point did you beat the shit out of Jessica's boyfriend?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I... didn't."

He scowled at me. "Come clean."

I shook my head with my hands up. "I swear, I've been here the whole time."

"She hasn't left." Miles leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs. "Someone attacked Jason?"

"Yeah, and he's not saying who." Rory kept watching me.

"If I did it, I'd admit it," I reminded him.

Rory shook his head. "I might believe you, but Mrs. Weaver doesn't."

"What?" I dropped my hands.

"She thinks it was you." Rory dragged his hand through his hair.

I growled in frustration. This was getting ridiculous. "That woman!"

"Alright, you didn't attack Jason." Rory sighed. "Fine, we'll deal with that on Monday. But did it even occur to you to call me?"

I looked back at him. "Jess didn't want to press charges, she's too scared."

"My daughter was missing," Rory snapped. "And you didn't call me."

Oh fuck. "Honestly, I was kinda focused on finding her."

"I'm a cop, Lexie." Rory's voice shook with his rage. "I could have had everyone on the force looking for her."

The silence was thundering.

Fuck. I hung my head. "That would have been better."

"Yeah, it would have. But now you've violated your probation at school," he pointed out. "And you're the one facing expulsion for something you say you didn't do. And no one believes you."

I cursed. Expulsion? "Fuck."

"You need to stop and think of other responses besides breaking rules," he stated. "It turns you into the bad guy."

I nodded. He was right. "From now on, I will." I needed to do better than this. Be better than this. I couldn't use violence. I couldn't break the rules all the time.

Satisfied that I understood the consequences of what I had done today, Rory said, "I'm going to see how Jessica is doing and if she'll talk to me." He stopped just outside the pass-through. "Where's their father?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think he's in town, but I'm not a hundred percent about it."

"He left today," Zeke announced. "Jess said when he realized that Asher really wasn't going to come home, he left."

Rory cursed before heading upstairs.

Miles' chair creaked as he got to his feet. "I've got a lesson with Lucy," he said, looking directly at me.

I looked up at him, stunned. I didn't know what to say. "You're leaving?"

He licked his lips and nodded. "There's something important I need to talk to her about."

And this wasn't? I shook my head. "Fine. Go."

He headed straight for the door. He didn't even hesitate. I growled wordlessly and fell back against the couch cushions. Secrets, secrets, and

more secrets. Maybe this was just karma for all the things I kept from the guys before? If so, this sucked hard.

I turned to Zeke, more than a little lost.

He got out of his chair. "Come on, Baby. Let's get out of here." He reached down to pull me to my feet.

We left the guys with Jessica, a quiet Tara, and a worried Rory.

My Luigi missed the ledge and dropped to his death. Again. Game over flashed on the screen. I grumbled wordlessly as I dropped the old Nintendo controller.

Zeke set his on his knee and looked down at me. "That's the second time you've killed off all your lives before we even got through world two."

I sighed deeply, watching Mario start a new level only to stay in one place. That familiar music played through the quiet room.

"Talk to me."

I smiled. I never noticed how much all of us actually use that phrase. I looked up at him and met those sky-blue eyes. "Why do I always go to violence? Why is it my first reaction?"

The corner of his lips lifted. "You're asking the right person at least."

I snorted. He had that right. "Today, I wanted to go beat the shit out of Jason so Asher would calm down. Why did I go there first?"

He eyed me then met my gaze again. "You tell me."

I raised an eyebrow. "You can't just tell me? I mean, you're the one who's had all the anger management."

He lifted his arm and settled it over the end of his bed. I scooted over on instinct and pressed against him. His arm settled around me. That feeling of safety wrapped around me as I took a deep breath of engine grease and leather.

"If I tell you, then you'll never really understand it for yourself." He brushed his chin over my hair. "My therapist said it's better to work through it to figure out your own answers. It's good practice."

I muttered curses under my breath as I racked my brain. First thing that came to mind was my mother. She used to smack me once in a while before the whole belt event happened. Then I remembered grade school. Getting picked on for my red hair. Nothing would shut them up but a punch or a kick to the shin. It always surprised them. Maybe that was it. "When I was

little, it was the only way to get the other kids to stop picking on me. Teachers wouldn't do anything, or they'd just say to ignore it and it'll stop. But it never did. Hitting them at least made it stop for a while."

He squeezed me carefully and shifted to press his cheek against my hair. "Was there any time it was worse than normal?"

I followed that thought. "Sixth grade. Three boys were picking on me all year. The teachers kept saying ignore them, and I'd tell them it wasn't working. They'd just say to keep ignoring them. And mom was forcing me to wear what she wanted. She was on my ass about being ladylike worse than ever."

"So, your mom wasn't listening to you. The teachers weren't listening to you and the bullies weren't listening to you," he summed up.

I mulled his words over. "Yeah." That's when the light went on. "Then one time, this guy hit me. I gave him a bloody nose and I was sent to the principal's office."

His hand moved up and down my arm. "What happened?"

"I got in trouble. They called Dad this time to come in to talk." I grinned up at him. "Bad move. He asked why, if the other kid hit me first, I was the only one in the office."

The corner of his lips rose. "What'd they say?"

My smile turned to a grin as I remembered Dad tearing the principal a new one. "The principal said it was because I gave the kid a bloody nose. Dad tore into him, just yelling that I had the right to defend myself and he'd never tell me not to. Demanding to know why the boy six inches taller than me wasn't in the office."

Zeke smiled a real smile. "I think I would have liked your dad."

My throat tightened. "I think he would have liked you, too."

"What happened next?" he asked softly.

"After that, they started actually sending the other kids to the office too. It started to stop." The reason dawned on me. I looked up at him. "Punching someone finally got it to stop."

He nodded. "Now, what do you think would have happened if your mom had made it stop by calmly saying the same thing?"

I thought it out. If mom had actually cared that I was the one getting picked on? If she had refused to let the school blame me? "Fuck. I'd probably go to being calm and rational."

Zeke nodded. "My therapist would probably agree with you. Being calm and rational didn't make it stop. Giving a guy a bloody nose did."

"And having my dad come to school instead," I added thoughtfully.

He kissed the top of my hair. "Yeah."

"Huh." It was weird when something made sense about why you are the way you are.

* * *

Rory

I had still been at Asher and Jessica's house when I got a text from one of the guys on the force. There was a weird scene that he wanted me to secure.

Weird was an understatement. It was ritualistic. The man was at the center of a pentagram. Eviscerated. I wrinkled my nose. The shithouse stench? The bowels had been perforated. Not everyone could handle this sort of thing. The other officer I passed puking up his guts in the parking lot was evidence enough that it was bad. Sadly, I had seen worse. I examined the scene from a distance.

Forensics were in the middle of a small grove of trees set back from the rest stop. The foliage was thick enough that no one would have seen any lights from the rest stop area. But sound? Someone might have heard something.

At the corners of the pentagram were burned out candles. They must have been going all night. They had to have been large and thick. Much more than they'd need for a simple killing. But why? Why burn them all the way? That took patience and time, pouring out the wax so the flame would keep burning. Hmm. I turned my attention back to the circle. It was actually two; an inner circle and an outer. In between were symbols written in white paint on the grass. I pulled out my phone and began taking pictures carefully as I walked around the circle. According to Lexie, symbols had to have a power, will and intent behind them to work. What was the intent for these? I tucked my phone away as I reached the lead detective in these cases.

Morris sighed and straightened to his full height before carefully stepping back out of the circle. "Hey, Rory. I thought you'd like to see this.

Is the scene secure?"

"Yeah, I did what I could until the feds get here." I eyed the body. Male, early teens. "Don't tell me they changed their ritual."

He shook his head. "As far as I can see, same weapon, same setup, which means the same person. No hesitation marks. Not since the first victim. They're getting a taste for it."

I nodded in agreement. "It changes the motive, too."

"Maybe. This person is either bi or these aren't sexually motivated murders staged to look like rituals as we thought." Morris sighed. "The candles..."

"He spent time at this one," I surmised. "Burning the candles down was important for some reason."

Morris shook his head. "We may need to get a consultant on these symbols." He turned to me. "Do you know how many different meanings a single symbol could have? Dozens."

I nodded. "Yeah, my niece does a lot of research into this stuff." I eyed the circle again. "It frustrates the hell out of her."

"Think Susan would know a good professor at the university?" he asked.

I thought about it. No names came up. Well... one name did. "No. But I know of someone in Bridgeport who is rather in the know." Lexie had said Serena was a bitch but didn't elaborate. "She's the only resource I can think of."

"Well, there's our first suspect." Morris turned to me. "This is our last chance to find anything before turning it over to the FBI. What do you see?"

I shook my head. "Nothing you haven't."

Morris nodded. "Thanks, Rory."

"No problem." I sighed. "So, you're going to occult killing motive?"

Morris nodded. "Yeah, if it was just women it wouldn't be my main focus, but statistics alone... Yeah. We're going to keep it quiet though."

"Otherwise you'd have a witch hunt," I muttered.

He turned back to me. "What do you call a male witch?"

I thought about it. "Man witch?"

Morris snorted. I bit back a laugh before turning back to the body. Sometimes dark humor was the only thing that kept me sane when this stuff happened.

I turned my attention back to the body. Things were going to get worse in town. Much worse.

* * *

Miles

LOOKING out the car window at Jason's house, it was just like any other house on the block. But inside, Jason was recovering. The ice inside of me wasn't holding anymore. Rage coursed through me with heat instead of ice for the first time. And I didn't care. That bastard hurt Jess.

I took off my seatbelt and got out. Knocking on the door, I put on a friendly face. It wasn't easy.

Jason's mother opened the door. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm a friend of Jason's. I heard about what happened at school and I'd like to see how he's doing. If that's alright?" I asked carefully.

She smiled. "Oh, good, I'm glad someone stopped by." She opened the door further and gestured for me to come in. "His room is down the hall." She left me to find my way.

Good, she didn't need to hear this. It wasn't hard to find Jason's room. It was full of football memorabilia and equipment. He was propped up in bed. Black wings were under his bandaged nose. Whoever it was must have broken it. With all the other bruises on his face, he looked like shit. He finally looked away from the tv on the dresser.

His eyes grew wide. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

I gave him a cruel grin as I closed the door behind me. "I'm here to warn you."

"That fucker already did that," he spat.

I raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

His mouth snapped shut.

"Who attacked you?" I asked again.

He eyed me, disgust filling his face. "Maybe it was your bitch."

My hand was around his neck before he could finish the sentence. "Never call her that again. Not if you want to live," I hissed in a raging

whisper. "Understand?"

He nodded as the skin that wasn't covered in bruises grew pale.

I didn't let him go. "Now, let me make something extraordinarily clear." I squeezed my fingers a little more. "I don't care who did this to you, but if you go near Jessica again, I'll make it seem like a love tap."

He clenched his jaw.

"No calls, no talking. Nothing. You see her in the hall, you go the other direction. We're talking fully out of her life. Understand?" My voice was calm and icy.

"I'm not afraid of a beating," he croaked.

I leaned closer. "If not, I have enough proof from hacking your computer that you've been paying your trainer for steroids the last three years. It'd be a shame if that came to light. Get it?"

His eyes practically popped out of his head. He nodded.

I let him go and stepped back. For the first time in my life, I knew I could keep the people that mattered to me safe. It wasn't through violence or brawn. It was through connections, information, and blackmail. I could handle blackmail. I headed back toward my house. It was getting close to my time to meet Lucy.

* * *

Lexie

I was almost asleep when I noticed it. Zeke was clenching and unclenching his fist. Well, one of them. His other was wrapped around my foot, rubbing the arch absently. His eyes were unfocused as we watched the news. Apparently, the DA for our county was found dead at the bottom of his stairs with a broken neck.

I eyed Zeke. His breathing was controlled, his face blank. That wasn't good. He needed a distraction.

Grinning, I moved my foot and snagged his fingers with my toes.

He looked down at me surprised.

"This is boring," I stated. "I know Sylvie has a Mel Brooks movie stash somewhere."

His lips twitched. "I'll go get it."

I pulled my phone out and brought up the delivery app. "I'm ordering junk food."

"So, this is a junk food and movie night?"

I smiled a big smile. "Oh yeah. We're talking stuffed crust."

He chuckled a little before moving my feet off him and getting up.

He had no clue what he was in for.

He'd regret that.

Three and a half hours later, we were sprawled over the couch, both groaning and holding our stomachs.

"Why'd you order so much?" he muttered as his head fell back to the top of the couch.

"'Cause for once you were on board for junk food." I groaned before shifting and instantly wanting to puke. Ugh.

"I never want to eat again." He sighed in relief as he unbuttoned his jeans. "Fuck..."

"You would have just sat there and thought about it." I turned my head to him. "I figured this would distract you."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Most girls would have tried to distract me with sex. You went for junk food."

I eyed him, noticing the light in the corner of his eye. There he was. My Zeke. That little spark of humor. "I know you pretty well."

He chuckled, which made me laugh, which of course made us both groan from full bellies.

"Tell me we have tums," he muttered.

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CHAPTER 12

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woke up slowly, wrapped around a hard body. Something was buzzing. I took a deep breath of guy and engine grease. It made me smile. Zeke... I drew my knee up higher and snuggled even more, drawn to the heat that radiated from him. My fingers played with the hairs over his tattoo on his pec. Eventually the buzzing stopped.

He shifted even closer, his hips moving against me, bringing me to the very top of his leg.

Something hard pressed against the front of me. And huge. I stayed relaxed as I thought about the position we were in, that couldn't be what I thought... right? His lips kissed my neck before he settled again. Holy shit... I let out a slow breath as I tucked that piece of info into the back of my mind for later.

It wasn't long before my bladder's demands made themselves known. Sighing, I carefully untangled myself from him and scooted to the bottom of the bed. As I got to my feet, I realized Hades was sleeping on the other side of Zeke, pressed against his back. Good dog.

I quickly went across the hall and used the bathroom. When I came back out, Zeke was sitting on the side of his bed, his elbows braced on his legs, face buried in his hands.

I moved to him and ran my fingers through his hair.

He dropped his hands and looked up at me, his face hard, his eyes still full of shadows. Heart aching, I ran my thumb over his jaw.

"Go take a shower." I kept my voice soft and quiet. "I'll feed the dogs and start breakfast."

His hand covered mine, pressing against his skin. "I'm not hungry."

"Please?"

He met my eyes then eventually nodded.

Leaving him to shower, I headed to the kitchen and set the dogs' dishes up. Wolf hybrids were high energy dogs, which meant lots of food. Each dog dish got two heaping scoops of dry food and one can of wet food.

I didn't bother with my shoes as I opened the back door and slipped outside. The yard was enormous and surrounded by an eight-foot-high fence. Zeke once told me that there was three feet of concrete under the fence line to prevent the wolves from digging out. The grass was left to grow throughout the spring and summer, which created a rather interesting view from the back door.

"Tank! Kita! Food!" I shouted. Staying put, I waited. A black wolf bounded through the grass like a happy puppy. It made me smile as he came toward me.

Kita popped up out of nowhere to sit at her designated food spot. Damn... she was a quiet little thing. Tank went to his spot and sat. I set down Tank's food first. He waited until I was standing straight again to start chowing down.

"Good, Tank."

With Kita, I hesitated. Last time I fed her, she bit me, but she wasn't growling this time. I slowly set the food down and just as slowly straightened to my full height. Just like Tank, Kita began chowing down. She really had come so far.

"Good, Kita." I grinned before going back toward the house. That's when I spotted it.

A dead squirrel under Zeke's window. My heart dropped. It was just bones this time at least. Dreading my new plans for the day, I headed inside.

I turned on the tv for some noise while I started breakfast as I thought about Zeke and what he told me the other day. That aching pit in my chest was back as I pulled a knife out of the cabinet and set it down. A lot of little things made sense now. The conversation I overheard with Rory, the way he woke up swinging, how he knew I wasn't really okay after the cabin, how patient he was with me when he triggered me.

I vaguely remembered my phone ringing this morning. I dried my hands and went to my phone. Yep, Rory called. I hit my voicemail button.

"Hey, kid." Rory's voice was strained. "I was hoping to tell you last night, but... your mother's trial was yesterday."

My heart dropped.

"The judge decided that since you were eighteen and living away from her, to grant her time served."

I closed my eyes and hung my head. Of course they did.

"I'm sorry, kid. I already called the school and said you wouldn't be in till your meeting on Monday. I claimed family emergency. Call me if you want to talk." The message ended.

I tossed my phone back onto the counter. Time served. For getting caught with belt in hand, beating the shit out of me. I shook my head as I went back to making breakfast.

I picked up the potatoes and moved to the cutting board. First Clay, now my mother... what the hell were the court systems doing? Sitting around with their thumbs up their asses? I cut the potato a lot harder than I needed to. I put it out of my head and concentrated on making breakfast.

I was just getting the eggs out when Hades came in the kitchen and whined. I didn't even hesitate. I set down the egg carton and followed Hades to the closed bathroom door.

I knocked. "Zeke? You okay?"

"...No." His voice was lower than I'd heard in a while.

"Can I come in?"

There was a long minute where I thought he'd say no.

"Might as well."

I opened the door to find a freshly showered Zeke in nothing but a white towel. He was leaning on the counter with both hands. The lower half of his face covered in shaving cream. The mirror was still fogged over as he glared at it.

"Tough Guy?" I kept my voice soft.

"I... I fucking can't..." He shook his head. Tension came off him in waves. "Every year I think this is the year."

I glanced at the mirror and realized what he was saying. He couldn't look in the mirror. Heart aching, I crossed the room then lifted myself to sit on the high counter beside the sink. I carefully took the razor from his clenched fist. The room was quiet as I turned on the water in the sink and met his eyes. "I can't reach you if you're standing over there."

His eyes were warm as he moved to stand between my legs, my knees spreading for his hips so he could get as close as I needed. Before I did anything, I met his eyes. "You know I have no clue how to shave a face. Or how to use a safety razor."

"I don't care." His gravelly voice rolled over me as he leaned his hands on the counter on either side of my hips to bring him further into my reach.

"Well, I do." I reached up and carefully ran the razor down his jaw. We fell silent. The trickle of water filled the room as I cleaned the razor and continued working. With the steamy bathroom, it was almost as if we were in our own bubble. The clean scent of soap lingered in the air.

I was only a couple of passes through when I nicked him. Blood seeped to the surface. I hissed. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He swiped his thumb over it, wiping off the blood. "It doesn't even hurt."

"Are you sure you want me to keep doing this?" I looked up at him hopefully. "I mean, I've only just figured out the angle to hold the damn thing at."

His lips twitched. "You're the one who has to look at me."

"Partially shaved wouldn't look awful. You could start a new trend." I tried again carefully. When I nicked him again, this time near his nose, I cursed.

He wiped the blood away.

I pulled my hands away and up in surrender. "I need some instruction here."

The shadows in his eyes grew less. "You shave all the time, how is this any different?"

"Well, if you need to shave your pits or your legs, I'm your gal." I smirked up at him. "But since I kinda like your face the way it is, give me some pointers."

He raised an eyebrow. "You like my face?"

"Well, yeah. You're kinda cute." My face grew warm. "So, give me tips."

Zeke truly grinned for the first time since our movie marathon last night. The next ten minutes turned into a shaving lesson. Apparently, the trick was to pull his skin taut in certain directions while shaving.

When I was done, my wicked side came out to play. "Hold on, I missed a spot." I picked up the shaving cream and put some on my finger. Before he could guess what I was doing, I booped him on the nose with the foam. "There. All better."

He narrowed his eyes at me before wiping the foam off his nose. I started giggling at the look on his face. He swiped the foam down my cheek. I continued to giggle as I reached for the towel on the counter. Gently, I wiped the shaving foam off his face.

When I was done, he pressed his forehead against mine and squeezed the back of my neck. "Thank you, Baby. It was starting to drive me crazy."

"Anything for you, Tough Guy."

Zeke straightened to his full height; his eyes were lighter than when I came in. "I'll get dressed and be out in a minute."

I couldn't help but eye the line of his shoulders as he walked across the hall and closed the door. Scars or no, that man's back... I grinned as I hopped down off the counter and headed for the kitchen.

It wasn't long before I had the pan and oil warm enough to add the potatoes to start to fry. Zeke's big footsteps sounded behind me.

"You didn't have to make breakfast," he rasped on his way to the coffee maker.

"When was the last time you ate something hot?" I shook the pan to make the potato lay flat. When I turned, he was frowning at the coffee maker.

"A couple of days ago?"

I went to the one clean empty counter left and hopped up. "Something that wasn't microwaved?"

He went back to filling two mugs with coffee. "I don't remember."

"That's why I'm cooking breakfast." I remembered the sunrise lighting up the driveway this morning. "Where is Sylvie anyway?"

He opened a cabinet and pulled out the cream and sugar. "I told her to stay in Bridgeport for a while."

"What, why?" Zeke was living alone?

He put my usual amount of sugar and cream into one of the mugs before mixing it and handing it to me. "Because Jadis is in town and I want her out of firing range."

"Thanks." My heart dropped. "She knows?"

He nodded.

"How much?"

"Everything." He took a sip of coffee.

I sat there stunned. "And does she believe it?"

He looked at me over the top of his mug. "She's got a room in Bridgeport, what do you think?"

Relief left me weak in the knees. "That's good at least."

He picked up his mug and leaned against the counter. "So, are you finally going to tell me what happened to make you so pale?"

I finished my sip of coffee first. "I was searching a trail for setups with Asher and Hades. We were on our way back when we ran into three shifters."

Zeke pushed away from the counter and moved in front of me. His hand moved to cup the back of my neck, the weight comforting. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Asher ended up needing to shift. He told me to run, so I ran with Hades." I hesitated. He really wasn't going to like this part.

"Lexie, please?" he asked, his voice the low, soft one that did things to my insides.

"One of them got around Asher. It caught up to us. Hades took the wolf on. He protected me. Until he couldn't anymore."

He put down his coffee mug next to me and lifted the hem of his too-big mesh shorts he lent me to sleep in so he could look at the scrapes on my knee. "Did the wolf do this?"

"No, I did that by tripping over my own feet." Heat dancing up my thigh had me pushing the hem back down. "It was coming at us and I felt that pressure in my chest again. Just like last time. And I let it loose somehow." I shook my head, seeing it all again. Goosebumps ran down my neck as I remembered how scared I was. The werewolf was huge. "If it weren't for Hades, I would have been screwed."

He hugged me to him. I rested my head on his chest, his heartbeat under my ear. I took a deep breath of his engine grease scent that always managed to stay with him.

I slipped my arms around his waist and hugged him back. "This time, it knocked me out. I woke up at Miles'."

"We need to call Uma." He pulled back and lifted my chin so he could meet my eyes. "You look like you did when you had a two."

I wrapped my fingers around his wrist. "I already did. She'll be here sometime today."

One of his hands went to the back of my neck and squeezed. "Next time you go on a trail, you're taking Hades, Tank and Kita."

I smiled. "Okay."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "No argument?"

I shook my head. "I thought we were going to die."

He bent down to kiss my forehead before pulling me against him. By the time I stopped shaking, the potatoes were almost burnt.

We ate breakfast in the living room, watching the news coverage of another body being found, this one male. It was already ruled as a homicide.

We spent most of the morning close to each other, sometimes talking, sometimes not. Once in while I'd get a grin out of him, but we were always within arms-reach of each other. Occasionally, I'd curl up to him. Sometimes he'd reach for me. We ended up with Zeke stretched out on the couch napping with his head in my lap as I watched a movie. It was sometime in the afternoon when I was running my fingers through his hair that the door opened.

Every one of my boyfriends came into the house, and Asher's gaze immediately found me and Zeke. Everyone hesitated in the pass-through to the living room.

Miles pushed up his glasses and mouthed. "Is he asleep?"

I nodded, expecting them to get upset that we were touching and starting to bicker like they had been all week.

Isaac stuck his head around Miles and grinned.

Even Asher relaxed enough to have a half grin. He turned to the others and gestured for them to go in the kitchen.

Asher followed them closely as Zeke snored lightly in my lap.

I smiled to myself. Maybe this was going to work after all.

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CHAPTER 13

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THURSDAY AFTERNOON

e were all over at Miles' house when Uma arrived. Well, most of us. Zeke was at his appointment with his shrink and was planning to meet us here after.

Uma walked into the house with a regal confidence. Her nutmeg skin was flawless as she stepped into the foyer with a satchel in her hand. Uma was, well, stunning as ever.

Those dark eyes found me. "Lexie."

"Uma." I grinned. "How's the family?"

She sighed. "Adjusting well." Her eyes left me to settle on Ethan. "And our mystery boy."

Ethan bowed gallantly. "At your service, my lady."

I snorted as he straightened.

Uma shook her head with a patient look on her face that screamed she had a teenage boy at home.

Before she could say anything, my phone rang. It was a blocked number.

"Hello."

"Miss Delaney." Jadis' voice sent ice through my veins. "I was disappointed you weren't in your classes."

"So sorry to cause you any worry," I said in a deadpan voice, catching the attention of everyone. "What do you want?"

"Just keeping an eye on our dear project." Jadis' voice was sweet and cloying. "Has he changed yet."

I set the phone to speaker so the others could hear. "Do you actually care?"

"He's quite dangerous you know." She ignored my question. "With that mixture we pumped through him."

"What mixture?" I asked calmly.

"Oh, you'll find out one day. When he loses control and kills everyone around him," she said. "It's just a matter of time."

I ran her words through my head again. She liked to taunt. To torture. She liked having all the power. She wanted me to doubt Ethan. I snorted. "Oh, sweetie. You really suck at trying to create doubt."

A tense silence was her answer.

Uma eyed me with an odd look in her eye.

It was my turn to talk, and I took it. "That weak shit doesn't work when I've already been taunted by a demon. The shit you're trying to pull, is like a fly buzzing in my face compared to that. And secondly, I know Ethan. In New Orleans, we were on your turf. Now you're on ours."

"Monday morning, eight a.m. Come to my office with your uncle," she ordered. "We need to have a meeting about your attendance."

"I'll bring the doughnuts." I ended the call. Our turf. Our home field. The inkling of an idea started to form. Not quite there, but it existed. It just needed time.

"She's not one for charm, is she?" Uma sighed before turning to Miles. "I need an empty room to test Ethan and train Lexie. Preferably fireproof and out of sight."

Miles' eyes unfocused. "Well, there's the atrium, though that is full of glass. There's one of the empty rooms downstairs. They haven't really been finished."

"Cement floor and walls?" Uma asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Miles lowered his head in a single nod.

"Perfect." She turned to Ethan. "Let's not waste any more time."

* * *

Ethan

I LED Uma downstairs and to the far side of the house. The room was large and bare, with only hanging lightbulbs between the beams.

"This will do nicely." Uma closed the door behind her before pulling something from her bag. She set her things down before she walked around the outside of the room, putting up symbols in black chalk, even on the beams in the ceiling and on the floor. When she was done, she tossed the chalk and turned to me. Her eyes were all business as she surveyed me. "What have you noticed so far?"

I shrugged. "Healing, scales that showed under my skin when my hand went into fire, nothing can cut me, but a tack made its way into my foot just fine. I'm as strong, if not stronger than Asher. And, my eyes changed."

Her eyes met mine. "Describe your eyes."

"They glow. Like amber glass in front of a light, I guess?" I hadn't really been looking at them, just reacting.

She narrowed her eyes. "Were your pupils different? Were they slit and vertical?"

I shook my head, picturing it again. "No, they were normal."

She tapped her thigh. "Alright. So, your hand went into the fire and you didn't burn?"

I nodded.

"Let's see if you can do it again." She crossed the distance to her bag and came back with a candle and lighter.

"Couldn't you just wave your hand and create fire?" I asked, only half teasing her.

She scowled at me. "Sure, I could, but that's a lot like using a nuke when a pellet gun would suffice." She lit the white candle and held it out to me. "Touch the flame and let's see what happens."

Slowly, I reached out and brought my palm low over the flame. Nothing. "I feel heat but no pain."

She pulled my hand up and examined it. "Hmm." She blew out the candle. "Let's try the nuke."

* * *

Lexie

I was sitting at the bottom of the steps to the basement when my phone rang. It was Jake.

"Hey hon, what's up?" I answered.

"After hours of tireless negotiation, I've finally managed to drag Riley back to the café," Jake announced dramatically. I could almost see him clutching his chest to add to it.

"How'd you manage that?" I grinned. "Bribery?"

"There may have been cheesecake involved, yes."

I snorted.

"But, you now have a date to meet her tomorrow night in town at the café again." His voice was so joyful I could tell he was beaming.

"Goodie," I muttered.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I looked down and started fiddling with my shoelace. "What is there to talk about? She thinks I'm easy and I think she's narrow minded."

"You two are friends. That bond is still there even if time has passed," he reminded me.

I sighed. Okay, yeah, he was right. And I did miss her. "Okay, I'll go." Ethan came out the door, shirtless.

"I gotta go, text me the time and I'll be there." I hung up on him. The scent of smoke reached me before he did. "What was on fire?"

"Me." He sighed as he reached me. "She wanted to test how fireproof I am." He held up a smoking ruin of cloth that had been his shirt. "Turns out the answer was very."

I snorted. "Did she have any ideas?"

He ran his hand through his hair and met my eyes. "A few. But she's not sure. She's going to do some more research."

"As long as you're okay."

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. "I've got to shower. Head on in, she's expecting you."

I let out a deep breath and headed down the hallway toward the room he left, trying not to dread this. I opened the door to find Uma in the middle of a white chalk circle.

"Watch the lines as you cross in and sit in the center," she warned.

I did as she said and went to her side. "So, what's with the circle?"

"This particular circle is to collect and hold energy from a ley line," she explained as she gestured to the floor.

I sat down on the cold concrete floor. "I've heard about them, but I didn't think they were real."

She sat down across from me, managing to make even that movement graceful. "They're real. They are natural collections of energy."

"Huh? What?" I quipped.

She smiled. "Think rivers. Like water, energy is everywhere, falling like rain. The natural inclination of water is to take the path of least resistance, so it goes down the hill as runoff and joins a larger stream. It's the same thing for energy."

"Oh, okay." That made sense.

"Now, those ley lines are made of magnetic energy from the earth itself," she explained. "This is what we tap into when we're using magic in a circle."

"If that's what you use, then how the hell can you throw magic around like in New Orleans?" It didn't make sense. "Don't you need a circle?"

She sat down across from me and reached into the pocket of her vest. She pulled out a white orb. Clear, with white cracks moving through it and giving it color, the small crystal ball was about the size of a golf ball in her hand. "Crystals. In a circle, you channel that energy into a crystal for storage to use when you need to use magic on the run. Different crystals have different energy frequencies. It takes a while to find one that works well with you and with what you do."

"A portable ley line battery," I summed up.

She nodded.

I bit back a grin. "So... you actually use crystal balls."

Uma held out for several heartbeats before she smiled and chuckled. "Yes. We use crystal balls."

Sobering, I looked down at the circle. "So, we're tapping into a ley line?"

She sent me a look. "That has yet to be decided. Tell me again what happened."

I repeated everything while trying not to get irritated that I was having to repeat myself, again. By the look on her face, I didn't succeed.

"Hmm." Uma surveyed me. "Do you remember the telepathic spell I used in New Orleans?"

I nodded slowly, not sure I liked where this was going.

"Would you mind if I used an altered version of it to look at your channels?" she asked.

"Why?" My stomach knotted.

"I have a theory that you used your own energy to save you. As a necromancer, using your own energy is normal, but that energy shouldn't affect anything living, let alone throw a werewolf far enough to break a bone. You also shouldn't be able to throw it."

"So, no matter what, I'm doing something weird?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's possible working with the Veil gave you more abilities than you were born with. I won't know unless I take a closer look."

I chewed on the corner of my lip, wanting to say no. I didn't need anyone in my head and seeing my memories. But I needed answers. "Sure. Let's give it a shot."

Uma rubbed her hands together and unfocused her eyes. The air grew thicker, charged. The hair on my arms and neck stood up. She raised a finger and began drawing out symbols in the air. Those symbols hung like a shimmering sign in front of me as she continued to write out the spell. When she was done, she passed her hand through the center diamond and touched my forehead.

Nothing. I felt nothing. I expected pain or warmth or the room to disappear, but I simply felt silly and sat there. Well, that was anti-climactic. I watched Uma's face as lines appeared around her eyes. A dull throb in my head had me flinching. It was followed by another. Uma's face grew paler. She pulled away and opened her eyes.

Shock. That was the only word I could use to explain the look on her face. Her eyes were wide, her skin was pale, and her breathing was rapid.

"I don't like that face," I muttered.

She dropped her hand to her lap and blinked several times before meeting my gaze. "I was wrong."

"How so?" And why was she looking at me like I was something to be studied.

"You're not pulling energy from yourself or the ley lines." She swallowed hard. "You're pulling from the Veil."

The world stopped for several minutes. The only sound was my heart pounding in my ears.

I could not have heard that right. "What?"

Uma's color was coming back. "The energy you used to throw the werewolf, to knock the ghosts out of the classroom, came from the Veil itself." I shook my head slowly. "You're kidding."

"No," she said. "You said you formed a link to the Veil, correct?"

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "It was the only way to access it."

"Alexis." Her tone pulled my scattered attention back to her. "No one has ever worked with the Veil this long before. No one has ever had this much contact with Veil energy. We don't know what it really is."

"Wait, you just said that the energy is magnetic," I countered. Please... please...

"Ley line energy, yes. Energy every witch in the world uses? Yes." She took my shaking hand. "But this energy isn't magnetic. It's older than that. Stronger, more primal."

Yeah, that wasn't scary at all. I gaped up at her, not knowing what to say.

"This energy is something that humans were never supposed to be able to access. Do you understand?" Her eyes demanded an answer.

"Not really," I said robotically.

"How did you feel after these incidents?" she asked, coaxing my brain back into working.

I closed my eyes and thought about it. "Tired. I got a bloody nose and a raging headache the first time. The second time I passed out." When I opened my eyes, I met her gaze.

"Your body wasn't built for channeling that type of universal energy. It will most likely kill you if you keep doing it." She let the other shoe drop carefully.

I caught that word. "You said wasn't built for this."

She swallowed hard. "You have a new, fairly young channel just now opening. A type I've never seen before. I think it's from working with the Veil. That energy may be trying to change you so you can use it. You can never do this again. Do you understand?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know how I did it those two times, how the hell am I supposed to stop it?"

Her eyes unfocused. "Each time, you were desperate. You had no way out, right?"

I nodded.

"That might be the trigger," she said. "If you feel trapped, threatened, your body is reacting instinctively."

"So, don't get threatened in the middle of what is about to be a warzone for the fate of the Earth. Great." The darkness inside me boiled out of its corner. I shoved it back. It was getting harder and harder to do. I got to my feet and headed for the door.

"Lexie, we need to talk about—"

"No." I turned on her. "You just told me that I can't use it, but I don't know how not to. So, I'm probably screwed."

"That's what I'm going to teach you."

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ome again?"

"I'm going to teach you how to collect the energy from around you," she said carefully. "Just like any witch."

I blinked at her. "Okay... that doesn't seem like a good idea."

"Sit," Uma ordered.

I took my spot across from her again.

She held up the white foggy ball of white stone. "First, we need to find a crystal that works for you. Hold out your hand."

I did as she said.

She set the stone in my palm. "Now, how does it feel to you?"

I tried to notice something but came up with nothing. "Like a rock."

She eyed me carefully. "Open your barriers just enough to feel it."

I closed my eyes and cracked my barriers open. Tingles ran up my arm from my hand. "Blank. Like... nothing." I opened my eyes and met hers. "There's a strange tingle along my nerves but that's it."

"Hmm." She carefully plucked the stone from me without touching me. "Interesting. Quartz is a good stone of all trades. You can use it for just about anything. That's why most witches carry it."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a green gem I recognized. "Try this malachite."

It went on like that for an hour, being handed gem after gem and telling her how they felt.

Just as I was getting irritated, she cursed. She eyed me before reaching into the bag and pulling out a small velvet bag. She opened it and carefully

pulled out a deep orange sphere of stone I had never seen before. She set it in my hand.

Energy crackled up my arm in a breath. I slammed my barriers closed as my hand wrapped around it. The sphere fit perfectly, as if it had always been there. "Whoa."

Uma sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"What?" I dropped my hand from between us.

"Carnelian is heavy duty and complicated, Lexie. I haven't heard of a lot of witches using this stone as a battery." She shook her head. "But you vibed with it, it'll work for you."

I held up the stone between my fingers. "Now, how do I use it?"

She was quiet so long I stopped examining the stone.

Her face was a mask, emotionless as she watched me.

"Uma, what has you so worried?" I asked, fed up with the look.

"You have an explosive temper, Lexie. It worries me that you are on the same resonance as this stone." She started packing the other stones away. "That's all."

"What happened to the others?" I asked, needing to know. "The ones that used this stone?"

Her eyes were haunted as she turned back to me. "They... died."

My heart dropped. "All of them?"

She nodded slowly.

I tapped the stone. "Directly from using this?"

"One way or another, yes. It was usually user error."

"Why does everything try to kill me?" I asked, wanting an answer.

Uma gave me an understanding look. "Perhaps because you're a necro. Maybe you can't tap all your abilities until you die."

"Really?" I didn't like that one bit.

She gave me an elegant half shrug. "It's a hypothesis Louis and I came up with years ago. I honestly have no idea."

I let out a small breath of relief. "Thanks for scaring the shit out of me."

She grinned. "I wasn't trying to. Let's start your first lesson."

I cringed as I pulled my phone out. "I can't. It's Isaac's date night."

She smiled. "Go. Normal relationships are hard enough, you don't want to add missing dates to this situation."

I thanked her, got to my feet, and bolted for the door. I let the door close behind me and headed out of the house. I didn't see anyone, I didn't tell anyone. I simply left and started for home.

It wasn't that I was avoiding the guys, I just needed time. A little time to myself. It was becoming scarce lately.

I just got my life back this summer. I'd lived with the cloud of death above my head for most of my life. I had finally gotten out from under it only to be shoved right back under it. No. I was done today. I was going to go home, get in my pjs, and watch a bad movie. I didn't care whose night it was for a date. I didn't care if one of the guys was mad at me. Sometimes, you just had to say no and step back.

When I REACHED THE HOUSE, I parked and went inside as usual. Rory wasn't home. Weird. I closed the door behind me and locked it, only to be greeted by Hades. I gave him a quick scratch before I pulled out my phone and headed up to my room. No messages from Rory. Hopefully there wasn't another body. I was about to put my phone away when it rang. It was Isaac.

"Hey."

"Hey, Red." His voice alone made my shoulders relax. "What do you want to do tonight?"

I hesitated only a few seconds. "Honestly? I want to get in my pajamas and watch something that'll make me laugh."

"Sounds good. Get in your jammies and find something to watch while I bring dinner," he said.

I smiled to myself. "I love you."

He chuckled. "I love you too. I'll be there soon." He hung up. I smiled down at my phone. I was still smiling when I changed into my cotton bottoms and cami. Hurrying downstairs, I grabbed my secret stash of Asher's chocolate chunk cookies and a glass of milk before heading back to my room.

Thankfully, the guys had chipped in to get me a small smart tv so I could watch what I wanted. Tara had a habit of going on romantic comedy binges and my bad horror movies tended to bother her.

I snuggled under my blanket next to Hades on the flat futon while I scrolled through what was on. Eventually, the door downstairs opened and closed. Isaac came into my room with two bags of groceries and a smile.

"I brought your favorite," he announced as he set the bags on my desk. "Food."

I smiled a big smile. "Thanks, cutie."

He dug into the bottom of the bag. "You're in luck. The salad bar was still open at the store." He handed me a cardboard container.

Grinning, I opened it. It was my usual grilled chicken salad. "Thanks, Cookie Monster."

He pulled out his own ice-cream pint and sat down beside me on the futon in sofa mode. I draped the blanket across his lap before he held out a plastic fork to me.

"Miles noticed you didn't eat before you left," he said. "And I know Rory's not home."

"How?" I took a bite before starting the show.

He hesitated. "It's all over the news. They found another body."

I went still. "Another one?"

He nodded.

I sighed. "I kinda thought so."

"The only thing that they're telling people is that, yes, it's a woman and they believe it's the same person responsible." He pulled out his own salad.

"So, they're finally making it official?" I looked up at him. "A serial killer."

Isaac nodded as he opened the lid and picked up a spoon from the desk. "Looks like it." He turned back to me and gave me a warm smile. "Let's not worry about that. Let's watch the show."

I smiled back and snuggled up to him. He kissed the top of my head and started to eat his dinner.

I finished half my salad before I set it down. Isaac lifted his arm, giving me better cuddling. I took a deep breath of limes and smiled.

He held me close and did nothing but spend time with me over the next hour. It was exactly what I needed. "Thanks, Cookie Monster."

He looked down at me. "What for?"

"For being you." I reached up and brushed back a stray blue hair. "Just being you."

He smiled down at me. "Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

I chuckled. He bent his neck so he could brush his lips against mine. Heat slowly filled me as his hand cupped my jaw. He slipped between my lips, sending my head spinning. My heart pounded as one kiss led to another and another.

Eventually, I pulled back only long enough to push away the blanket and straddle his lap. My lips took his again as need ached through me. His hands ran down my waist to my butt and squeezed. Fire curled through my core and I moved my hips against his. He groaned against my lips.

Needing to feel him, I pulled his shirt up his rock-hard abs, my fingers dipping into the hills and valleys, rising up his body toward his chest. He pulled back only enough to pull his shirt off and drop it to the floor. Then his arms were around me again, holding me tight against him. The feel of his skin, his smell, his gentle touch... it all made me want more.

He took over my mouth and kissed me desperately. My fingers ran down his chest and brushed over the small raised scars. I stiffened.

His hold loosened as he pulled back to look up at me. "What?"

My eyes were on his muscled chest. Perfect, sexy, and he still had his tan from this summer. I traced a fingertip over the scars, my throat tightening. The darkness I'd been holding back washed over me, dragging me down into its inky depths.

His hands went to my jaw and forced me to meet his eyes. "Red?"

I swallowed hard. "If it wasn't for me, you would have never had to go through that."

"Lexie." His voice grew softer. He took my hand and ran my fingers over one of the thin lines on his chest again. "Without you, I would have been beyond lost."

"Without me, you would never have been possessed in the first place." I shook my head. "Do I just bring everyone I love pain?"

Isaac scowled at me. His fingers gently pushed the strap of my cami off my shoulder. My lower stomach fluttered as he traced the puncture scar from the demon just below my collarbone. "You were willing to give up everything to save me."

"I was dying already." I looked down, away from him. I couldn't hold his gaze. It was as if he was stripping me naked and seeing everything without even touching me.

"You were dying. But you were willing to trade your soul," he gently reminded me. "You found me, Lexie. I was drowning and no one else could reach me."

I shook my head. "I was the only one who had the abilities—"

"I was lost long before that. Before you even came," he whispered, his hand forcing me to turn back to him. "You saved me in so many ways that I've stopped counting."

"But things are going to get worse here." I ran my fingers over the thin scars on his chest, remembering how close I came to losing him. My Cookie Monster. His hands moved to my waist, his hot fingers slipping under my hem, drawing it up to my breasts.

His eyes moved to my stomach and my scars. Warm fingers traced the thick scars down my side then over my hip. "You don't hurt us, Lexie." His warm amber eyes followed his fingers, tracing the lines again. "You found me when no one else could. And that was before there was even a demon." His eyes met mine as his fingers flexed on my hips. "Every time you see these scars, I want you to remember what you were willing to do to save one of us. Remember that you don't take from us. You add to us."

The absolute adoration in his eyes tightened my throat. He bent forward and brushed his lips over the scars on my ribs sending a jolt of heat through me. My breath caught in my chest as his lips moved over my skin. The room grew hotter with each brush of lips.

When he finished kissing my scars his gaze met mine. The heat in his eyes had my body clenching. I slipped my cami off and dropped it to the floor. His eyes grew wider a heartbeat before his mouth took mine. Gently, his hands moved over my sensitive skin.

My fingers ran over his hard muscles. While I tried to breathe, his tongue did things to my breast that made me grind my hips against him.

"God, you're beautiful," he rasped as he moved to the side to lay me down on the futon. He moved over me, his chest pressing against mine, his hand carefully massaging my breast. Sparks and lightning fired down my nerves. His lips left mine to begin a slow, scorching path down my breastbone. My breathing grew heavy, everything else disappeared as his lips brushed small, sweet kisses across my breast.

I shifted against him, my panties soaked. I needed more, wanted more. I tugged on his shoulder. He came back up to kiss me again, his body spreading my legs. His hips met mine while still holding most of his weight off me, his rigid length hitting me where I wanted through my thin shorts. I moved against him again.

He rubbed his cock against me. I whimpered as my skin grew tighter. My body grew heavy, achy and hollow. Hungry for him. His hands were everywhere, exploring every inch of me he could reach while all I could do was hold onto his shoulders and breathe. He shifted a little to the side, putting his weight on one arm as he ran his other hand over my breast and down my stomach. He hesitated at the waistline of my shorts. I whimpered arched against him, wanting more; more of him, more of his touch, more of his body, more of his heart... all of him. I took his hand and guided it under my waistline before burying my hand in his hair again. His breathing grew heavier as our kiss grew deeper. His trembling hand slid slowly down into my shorts, making me shiver. Everything in me was coiled tight, ready to explode. All he needed to do was touch me.

His trembling fingers just barely ran over the front of my panties. Need shot through me, making me shake. I made a small noise as his fingers stroked my damp panties. He hit my clit and my back arched, pressing me against his fingers.

He lifted his head, his eyes glowing. "Lexie... I..." His hesitation had me kissing the line of his throat and shifting against his hand again.

He let out a hard groan. "I-I've never done this before," he whispered softly, his voice uncertain.

I pulled back and met his gaze. "Huh?"

"I-I need you to tell me what you want me to..." His face burned as his fingers stroked.

My head fell back as I groaned. I was getting there, and fast. "Isaac, you're doing great already."

He hesitated again.

I looked up at him and kissed him again. "Up a little, that small bump..."

His fingers moved over my panties and stroked my clit.

I cried out as my body grew taut, coiling tight. "Oh, fuck..." My entire body shook as I climbed to that edge. I trailed my hand down his chest to his jeans and slipped my fingers under the waistband. He groaned deeply as he took my mouth again, his fingers stroking with more confidence. I somehow managed to get his pants undone and my fumbling fingers slipped inside. My fingertips barely brushed soft flesh when his fingers left me.

I opened my eyes to ask him why when his hand slipped inside my panties. His fingers stroked through my folds, missing my clit. My hips moved against his hand, needing, wanting.

Once his fingers finally slipped inside me, I cried out in need. I was on the edge and so desperate to fall. His fingers slid out slowly, driving me mad.

Everything I was focused on his fingers sliding back in. My legs shook, my breathing uneven. My core throbbed. "Curl your fingers up and go faster." I whimpered.

His lips took mine again as he did exactly as I said.

The wave rose above, threatening to tear me apart. "I'm coming, don't stop, don't stop, don't stop." The tsunami slammed down on me, shattering me. I clenched around his moving fingers as I grabbed at his shoulder, wave after wave of pure pleasure sparking down every nerve I had. My hips met his rhythm, keeping it going. Words poured from me without thought. When I stopped convulsing, he slipped his fingers from me, sending another curl of longing through me. That had been great, but not satisfying enough.

I took his lips and slid my other hand down to his hips. His breathing grew heavier as I met his eyes and pushed his jeans far enough down that he sprang free. The rigid length against my thigh made me smile. He pulled back only long enough to help me get out of my cotton bottoms and panties. He tossed them over his shoulder as he took me in. Desire, need, love. All of it filled his eyes until the way he looked at me made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. I opened my knees to welcome him. He moved between my thighs, his hips resting against mine. Hot, dry skin met my folds as he moved over me.

He cursed and pulled his hips back. "I don't have anything."

Half out of my mind with wanting more, I almost said fuck it. But instead, I reached over to the middle drawer and pulled out a square foil.

He smiled a big smile down at me. "Damn, woman, that's sexy."

I chuckled as he sat back on his knees and opened the foil. I devoured him with my eyes as he slipped it on. He curved up a little, not too big, not too small. That's all I could think before he was over me again. His face flushed as his lips took mine. Soon, we were back to where we were, his sheathed cock stroking through my folds, throwing me toward that edge again.

He pulled back a little. "That's... that's yes, right?"

I nodded, barely understanding what he was asking through the storm building in me again.

He reached down and pressed the head of himself against me, only to go a little high and nudge bone. He cursed. I reached between us and took him between my fingertips.

He groaned. "I might not last long..."

"I don't care, I already came." I positioned him at my entrance. "I just want to feel you."

He moved his hips forward. Slowly, carefully, he slipped inside me in small, shallow strokes, each going a little deeper than the last. I moaned as my entire body began to tremble again. His slow, careful strokes were just enough to leave me wanting more.

"Please... deeper," I whispered against his neck.

Tension shook his shoulders as he pressed his cheek against my hair. "You sure?"

I nodded then dropped my head back. "You won't hurt me. Please?"

Those amber eyes met mine as he slowly, carefully, filled me. By the time he was all the way in, I was breathing heavier and he was whispering about baseball under his breath. My hands went to hold his face and turn him to me. Sweat dropped from his forehead to the bed near my head.

"Don't worry about how long it lasts," I begged. "Just stop thinking and be with me. Here. Now. Be with me."

His body sank into mine, though he still held himself off my chest so not to squish me. He began to move. My toes curled as my body gripped his. I gasped as that edge flew by. Lost, my hips met his, stroke for eager stroke. Yes, yes, yes.

His entire body grew rigid, he groaned as he thrust hard one last time. His eyes squeezed shut as he joined me. When he relaxed, he all but dropped onto my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and cradled him with my body. Happiness bubbled through me like champagne. My Isaac. My Cookie Monster.

I simply relaxed into his heat and floated in happiness. Eventually, we came back down to earth when Hades grumbled from the doorway.

"Oh, shit. The cameras." He jerked the blankets up to cover me.

I snorted. "None of them point into the bedrooms."

He didn't relax. "What about audio?"

I widened my eyes and put a panicked look on my face. "Oh shit."

"Rory's going to kill me!" He moved to get up.

I started laughing. "No audio. Rory thought that would be too much like spying."

He sank back into the mattress. "Shit, Red. Don't do that to me."

I snickered. He wrapped his arm around me again and pulled me close. His lips stopped my giggling and soon I forgot what I was giggling about. He buried his face in my hair and held me close. I took a deep breath of lime and floated.

Eventually, though, a thought crept into my head. "Do... do you think that was too soon?"

He lifted his head to scowl down at me. "After a year of wanting you? Hell no."

I giggled.

He smiled. "I love you, Lexie."

"I love you too." I kissed him again because I just couldn't not.

IT HAD BEEN a couple of hours since Isaac kissed me goodbye at the front door. He kept turning around and coming back for another kiss. It was too cute not to oblige, but Rory's car pulling up quickly put a stop to our play.

If that hadn't worked, the first words out of his mouth killed the mood. "Someone's killing boys now. We just found another one."

He told Isaac to spread the word and to drive home safe.

Rory headed into the kitchen while I shut and locked the front door. "Isn't Tara with you?"

His shoulders sagged as he pulled out a beer. "No. She's still staying at her mom's. She says she's not ready to come home yet."

I sat down on the arm of an armchair. "She will, it's just going to take time."

Rory left the kitchen to sit on the couch. He took a deep drink before he turned his attention back to me. "I went to see Serena today."

I blinked at him. Serena... no, I couldn't have heard that right. "What?"

"I needed her help identifying some symbols," he said.

"Are you fucking insane?" I snapped. "She's in with the Witch's Council!"

"I know," he said. "But we're running out of leads and people are dying."

I deflated. "You just... you have to be careful. Did she touch you? Give you anything?"

Rory shook his head. "No. I made a point not to give her anything either."

I let out a relieved breath. "Well, what did she say?"

He took another drink. "That they were symbols for holding whatever was in the circle and wiping their memory."

I raised an eyebrow. "Wiping their memory?"

He nodded. "She said the soul of the victim wouldn't remember their death, or who did it."

I cursed as I slid down into the armchair. "Well, that's great."

"What?" Rory leaned forward.

I turned to him. "That would leave a great big hole of no closure for the ghost. They might not move on because of it."

"So, they'll hang around?" he asked.

I nodded as it hit me. "Just as if the Veil was still closed."

"What are you saying?"

I turned to him again. "It's the person who closed the Veil."

"What makes you say that?" He leaned forward again.

"The Veil is open, he has to stop them crossing some other way." I met his gaze. "Son of a bitch."

Rory closed his eyes and shook his head. "Well, that's not going to help the feds much."

"But it's someone else looking for them," I reminded him. "It'll add pressure. He could fuck up."

Rory nodded. "That's true." He sighed and shook his head before getting to his feet and heading to his room. "I'm hitting the sack."

"Night," I said absently, running through everything I knew again.

I was still sitting there an hour later when my phone rang. Quickly, I checked the number. Unknown. But I knew those digits. I debated letting Dylan go to voicemail.

"Hello."

"Hey." His voice was rough and hoarse.

"You okay?" I asked without thinking. Cursing myself, I waited.

"No. No, I'm really not." He swallowed hard. "I know I shouldn't have called..."

He was more than right about that. Too bad I was a big softie. "Is it about your dad?"

"Yeah"

"Jake told me some of it," I admitted. "How is he?"

"He's in hospice homecare now," he croaked.

My heart dropped. "I'm so sorry, Dylan."

"They say he doesn't have long, a couple of months maybe." He sniffed. "Look, I know I have no right to ask you, but..."

I gritted my teeth, dreading the next words from him.

"Could you make some of Mom's cookies for him?"

I relaxed. "You can't follow the recipe?"

"I can, but I fumble the execution every time," he said. "I'm sorry to ask, he's just mentioned the cookies a few times, and I'd do anything to get him to eat something."

My eyes burned. I liked Dylan's dad. He was sweet. "Yeah, I'll get Asher to make sure that they're edible too."

"Thank you." He sighed.

"Anything else I can do?" It slipped out before I realized it. Fuck!

He hesitated for several heartbeats. "No, just the cookies. Thank you, Lexie."

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CHAPTER 15

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ood," Uma said. "Now hold it."

I bit back a curse as I fought to keep my focus on the small ball of flame in my palm. It was no bigger than a quarter, but it took everything in me to keep my barriers open and the energy flowing from outside in.

"Very good." Uma walked around me, watching. "Now, we're going to increase the size slowly. Try for a silver dollar size."

Keeping my breathing even, I focused on dropping my barrier more. Energy flowed through me in a rush. Too much. The flame exploded in my hand and blew out in a flash. I cursed as I slammed my barriers shut.

"Too much energy too fast," Uma stated the obvious.

I wiped the sweat from my face and looked up at her. "Remind me again why I'm doing this?"

She grinned. "Because unless you're near a cemetery at this point, you're screwed if you're attacked."

I nodded. "And I haven't even raised a zombie yet. Yeah, I get it."

Uma sat down cross legged across from me. "You should be proud of what you managed today. Louis struggled for years only to get to where you are now."

"Oh yeah?" My cheeks grew warm.

"Yes. He had a difficult time with the concept." She picked up a stone ball and rolled it in her hands. "Even when he finally grasped it, he only managed a flame the size of a pea."

I smiled. She had really loved Louis. The warmth in her voice when she spoke about him... "I'm sorry he's gone."

"He's with Rose. That's what matters." Her grin turned sad. "I always knew he wouldn't be a reaper."

I started cleaning my thumbnail with another fingernail.

She noticed. "What?"

"I don't know what kind of choice that is." I shrugged. "Live as a reaper, cross the dead, or move on. Why would someone choose to be a reaper?"

"Ahh." Her grin faded as she leaned her elbows on her inner thighs. "That's a good question."

I lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. "I can't see not moving on and not seeing the people you love after you die. I can't imagine it."

She tilted her head to the side. "Well, you could see them, from what Louis told me. You just wouldn't be able to stay with them."

"What do you mean?"

"Reapers can move through the ether, a lot like your friend Zahur," she said. "That includes the afterlife of those you love. You just can't stay with them. You can't make it home."

"I still don't understand reapers, not really." My face burned for no reason. Being a necro, I should understand these things.

"Well, Louis said there are two types of reapers." She continued to play with the crystal ball in her hands. "Those who are born reapers, and those who turn after death."

"But, aren't they dead?"

She shook her head. "No, they're not. Their life cycle has been... paused, like a movie. They get to a certain age and they just... stay there."

I thought that over. "That doesn't sound so bad."

She raised an eyebrow. "It sounds like hell to me."

"Hell?" Was she serious? "You wouldn't die, at least not again. You could still see your family. It doesn't sound so bad to me."

"But you don't change," she countered. "Everything will stay the same. Stagnant. You'd have duty, and memories. That's it."

That didn't sound so fun after all. "But friends, family..."

"You wouldn't be able to see them, not while they're living." She set the stone down with a click. "Being a reaper means you're surrounded by the dead all the time. You've already had a small taste of that. Does that sound interesting to you?"

I thought about. Only the dead to keep you company? No, it sounded awful. I shook my head.

Her face filled with approval. "Good girl. Remember that when they offer you the world to become a reaper."

"I'm not planning on giving them the chance for a long time," I countered.

The corners of her mouth drooped. "No one ever plans to die early, Lexie. But you know it happens."

I nodded in agreement.

"Besides, I think you might be right." The light was back in her face. "A necro that can use natural energy is a frightening opponent indeed."

I grinned.

"Now, let's get to work on protective barriers."

* * *

Ethan

"You're going out with Lexie today," I stated.

Miles didn't even look up from his alchemy table. Bottles and metalwork covered the surface. "It's not my night."

"I know, it's mine," I bit out. "I'm giving it to you and trying to help your ass."

Miles shook his head absently. "And I'm trying to save everyone."

"Miles, you need to keep your relationship with her tight," I tried again.

Miles simply didn't seem to hear me. He had tuned me out. I sighed in defeat. There was no point talking to him when he was like this. "Fine, be a shitty boyfriend."

He didn't even twitch.

I turned and stormed out of the conservatory. When Miles concentrated like this, he ignored everyone and everything. And something had gotten up his ass today.

Fine. I'll take my girlfriend out.

I found her in my bathroom. She was drying that waterfall of curls with my hair dryer, giving me an amazing glimpse of her backside in those jeans. I simply stood and watched with my body growing harder.

Her gaze found me in the mirror. She smiled a bright smile as she shut off the hair dryer. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough." I smiled back.

Her cheeks tinted a slight pink as she started cleaning up her makeup. "So, where are we going tonight?"

"It's a surprise." Fuck Miles, I was going to make her smile all night long like she deserved.

Lexie

"Strike!" I turned and did an arm pump. "You lose, sucker!"

Ethan chuckled as the pins reset.

Beaming, I dropped into the seat next to him and looked at the score. "Oh."

He shook his head. "You still got more strikes."

"Yeah, but it was the gutter balls that killed me," I muttered. It had killed my average. "You didn't used to be this good."

His smiled faded a little as he set us up for another game. "My back used to hurt too much."

"And now it doesn't." I bumped his shoulder with mine.

His grin came back as he turned to me. "And now it doesn't."

"I'm sorry New Orleans happened," I admitted, the guilt still eating at me sometimes. "But I'm not sorry for the outcome."

He shifted to face me, his arm moving across the back of my chair. "Me either." He tucked a stray curl behind my ear. "I'd go through it a thousand more times if it meant that I felt this good."

I reached up and played with a wrinkle in his shirt on his chest. "I just wish Evelyn had been allowed to fix your back."

He shrugged. "It's fixed. I feel great. And I'm with you. That's all that matters."

Light shining through me, I leaned forward and gave him a kiss. When I pulled back, his eyes were warm.

"You better go first this time." He smiled.

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in. Once it did, I rolled my eyes and got to my feet. A chill ran down the back of my neck, and not the 'there's a ghost around' kind. I made a point to send my ball down the lane before glancing around the bowling alley. There. Several people our age. Probably from school. The girls were watching us and whispering to each other.

"Okay, Beautiful," Ethan said as he came to my side at the ball return. "I see what you're doing."

"Oh yeah?" I grinned as I picked up my ball.

Ethan moved his hand to my lower back and walked me to the line. "You keep throwing to the right." He moved me further left. "Roll from here."

I looked up at him. His face was full of mischief while his back was to the group watching us closely. "You're taunting them."

He flashed me a smile full of teeth. "No, this is." He leaned down and captured my lips before I knew it.

I fought not to melt into him and pulled back. "You're awful."

"I know."

I stepped away from him and threw a horrible gutter ball. "This secret really isn't going to stay quiet."

He snorted before he took his shot. "I think that boat has sailed."

"Yeah," I muttered, watching as one of the guys watched me and Ethan. "How long do you think the gossip will last?"

Ethan came back to sit beside me. "As long as we're not hiding it."

"Do you think we should have tried harder?" I asked, cleaning my thumbnail.

He scoffed. "Fuck no."

I looked up at him.

He wrapped his hand around the inside of my knee. "I'm not ashamed of sharing you. And there's no way I'm going to pretend to be."

My chest grew warm. "Really?"

He nodded. "You're ours, Lexie. You always have been."

I reached up and brushed my thumb over his chin. "And you guys are mine."

I WAS ALMOST ASLEEP around midnight when the first chill ran up the back of my neck. I had just turned off my phone and cuddled with Hades. I didn't have anything left today.

Hades' head shot up. He was at my bedroom door before I could blink, making a low growl. I got up, opened the door, and followed at a slower pace. The house was dark, only the kitchen light over the sink on. It threw enough light that I could make out the shapes of the furniture and Hades at the back door.

At the back door, I grabbed his collar before opening it. Nothing but darkness filled my vision. Too much darkness. Yeah it was night, but most nights you could see the stars. There was only darkness. Without taking my eyes off the back yard, I flicked the switch for the outdoor lights.

The lights turned on, flooding the grass and patio with light. But that's where the light ended. Pitch black human figures stood around the edge of the lawn. Familiar black figures. Shadow men. I had run into them before, in an old abandoned hospital a few miles from town, though there hadn't been that many. The figures kept pressing against the air and pawing like a cat at a door. I let go of Hades and stepped out into the crisp night air. There had to be twenty of them here. What the hell did they want?

A figure dropped in front of me. I jumped and started to scream. A strong hand covered my mouth. My heart all but leaping out of my chest, I looked up into Samuel's sparkling eyes.

"It's just me." He grinned.

I smacked his hands away from me. "You are such an asshole."

He chuckled a rich laugh as he stepped back away from me and turned to the line of shadow men. "Sorry, I was doing my usual checks when I saw this. I thought I'd take a look."

"What the hell are those things doing here?" I muttered, looking them over again.

Samuel tilted his head to the side. "Well, no one quite knows what they are. There's several theories."

"Do any of them explain why they would be here?" I asked dryly.

"Well, yes." He kept watching the shadows move. "A complicated bit of magic and then they can be sent after a target."

My gaze snapped to him. "What?"

He looked down at me. "Someone is trying to kill you."

I sat down hard on the chaise, stunned.

He knelt in front of me, bringing him to my eye level. "What has changed in town?"

I racked my brain. "Everything?" I rattled off everything that had happened in the last few days.

His eyes narrowed on mine, his voice turning sharp. "No. There has to have been something else. Think."

I turned back to the ring of shadows. "I don't know, but they'd be inside if it wasn't for the wards." My heart dropped. The wards. My house was the only one warded. "Give me your phone!"

I took it and called Miles.

"Yes?" His voice was tired.

"Miles, are there any shadow men in your house?" My heart beat in my throat.

"Lexie, what—"

"Answer the question."

"No. Everything is normal." He sighed. "What's going on?"

"Call Zeke and Asher. I'll call the twins and ask them. If there are, get to my house." I hung up and called the twins.

"Huh?" Was Isaac's only answer.

"Are there shadow people in your house?" I demanded.

Sheets rustled. "No, we were fine until you called. What's going on?"

I watched the shadows move. "Nothing, go back to sleep."

I hung up and called Miles again.

"Zeke's fine," Miles answered. "He's getting ready to go to your house."

I growled. "Fuck."

I hung up the phone and called Zeke.

He answered on the first ring. "What's wrong?"

"Stay put," I snapped. "My house is surrounded by shadow men, but the wards are holding them off."

"Lexie—"

"Stay put," I snapped. "If you show up, they might swarm you. I'm safe and okay."

He cursed a good long streak. "Fine. But if the wards look like they're going to go—"

"I'll get safe and call," I promised. "Fill Miles in."

"Alright. Please, be careful."

My heart warmed at the soft note in his voice as I hung up and handed Sam his phone back. "That was fun."

"Good to know it's just you," he quipped.

I shook my head. "It looks like I'll be warding the other houses tomorrow."

"Before nightfall, that's when they come out," Sam said, watching the shadows. "That's when they get to play."

"How strong does someone need to be to send them?"

He straightened to his full height and approached the line of shadows. "Someone with a great understanding of magic, conjuration, and with the ability to collect enough magic to power it. It's a complex spell." He looked at me over his shoulder. "And since a lot of people have suddenly come into town, that doesn't narrow it down."

I put my emotions to the side and focused. "So, we could safely assume a witch."

"I would say so, or whoever closed the Veil." He sat down beside me.

I eyed the line. "But like you said, why now?"

"Exactly." He raised an eyebrow waiting for my answer.

"Why now?" I racked my brain as the shadows continued to move. "Honestly, I think Jadis has been in town for a couple of weeks. They had plenty of opportunity."

"Something's different," he agreed. "What?"

My stomach dropped as I thought it through. "If they've gone from trying to control me to trying to kill me"—I turned back to him—"it's because they don't need me."

He watched me, as still as a statue, waiting.

I looked out at the writhing mass of murderous shadows. "It's because they don't need me anymore..." My stomach dropped. "They found him."

"You're now expendable to them," he said, approval filling his voice. "They'd need something of yours to target you. Hair, clothing, even an eyelash would do it. What witch has had access?"

I thought it over. There was only one witch that would do this and had ever gotten that close to me. Serena. Rage boiled through me. "That fucking bitch."

"I take it you know who did this?" he asked.

I scowled at him. "There's one witch, besides Uma, that I've been close enough to, and that's Serena."

"Well, it looks like you have a place to start," he said.

I nodded and watched the shadow men slam against the barrier.

"You need to keep an eye on your wards," he warned.

I huffed. "Goodbye to the five hours of sleep I was hoping for."

He glanced down at me then turned back to the shadows again. "Go to bed, I'll watch them tonight for you."

I shook my head. "I don't think I'd be able to sleep anyway."

Sam sat on the other chaise and watched the shadows try to break in. He took the left and middle: I took the right, searching for any sign of the wards breaking down.

It was a long time until sunrise.

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CHAPTER 16

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Miles

pulled up to the diner across the lot from the new Cadillac. He was already here. I sighed as I got out. What did I expect? Of course, he got here early. He always needed to have his bodyguards check out whatever area he was going into. Today wouldn't be any different.

I opened the door to the diner and did a quick scan. My father was at a table in the middle of the restaurant. Two men in suits were at a table near the door, one of them close to my age. Odd. Two more were spread out at a table not far from his back. The entire diner was empty. I glanced at Gladys behind the counter, tapping her pen against the order pad in her hand and watching my father. It didn't take much to guess that Father had bought out the entire restaurant for an hour. That wasn't his usual habit, though. Something was off.

I started toward him only to be brought up short by a large gorilla-like man in a suit. "Arms out."

I kept my face blank as I looked up at him. "I'm his son."

"Arms. Out," he repeated, his voice sharper this time.

I held my arms out and waited as the big gorilla patted me down. While he was checking my legs, I met Father's gaze over the man's shoulder with fresh eyes.

Lines had etched deeply into his face, aging him. His hair was perfect, as usual, only now I could see the silver roots. He was dyeing his hair. I filed it away for later and continued to inspect him. His eyes

were a dull green, clearly tired. Even his posture was different. His shoulders were slightly slouched, as if he couldn't hold the weight of his body anymore. His skin was paler too. Huntingtons weren't known for our ability to tan, but if we were in the sun, we did darken thanks to our Italian roots. He was completely white, as if he was spending a lot of time indoors. Was he in hiding?

The gorilla stopped patting me down, straightened, and stepped aside.

I went to the table and sat down across from him. He finally moved, a statue coming to life, taking a sip from his coffee mug and setting it to the side.

Gladys came forward with the carafe and refilled his mug before turning to me. "Anything for you, hon?"

I turned my mug over. "Just coffee, please."

Gladys filled my mug in the thick silence of the diner.

"Thanks, Gladys," I said when she was done.

She gave me a small nod before going back behind the counter. I made my coffee the way I liked it and finally looked at him again.

Father was watching me with an odd twist of the lips. "You know her."

I grew still. "My friends come in here often."

He nodded. "I'll be sure to pay her well for the use of the diner."

Father continued to stir his coffee with the same blank face. "You wanted to talk."

Right... I called this meeting. "You know I never liked how the shipping business started."

He took a sip of his coffee before nodding.

"But I'm in a situation where... those tactics would be useful," I hedged.

My father leveled me with his gaze. After a moment I had to fight the urge to begin tapping. Finally, his intense scrutiny let up as he went back to his coffee. "Which tactics?"

"Connections and blackmail."

He raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Why would you need to use those tactics?"

I swallowed hard. "I'm fed up with not being able to protect the people I care about."

"Just when I think you're more like me then I thought, you say something like that." He shook his head. "What do you need?"

"There's a new counselor at the high school. Her name is Jadis. She and the vice principal have it out for Lexie," I said.

"And you want them removed from their positions?" he asked with a small grin.

I nodded. "There was an incident and Lexie... well, she—"

"Is being accused of bashing someone's face in," he said. "I'm aware."

It shouldn't surprise me that he knew, but it did. "She's facing expulsion."

He said nothing, simply sat there, waiting.

"I don't want that to happen," I said.

He nodded slowly. "Sometimes the end does justify the means, son."

"Are you going to help Lexie?" I asked carefully.

His eyes narrowed on mine. "I should be able to have the witch removed in a couple days. The vice principal will take some time."

I blinked. Witch? I didn't say witch... "Thank you."

"But in return, I expect a favor."

"Of course you do," I muttered. "What do you want?"

His lips quirked up. "I would also like to talk to you without you throwing me out the door," he stated.

I resisted the urge to begin tapping. "Alright."

His eyes met mine. "Where are you thinking of applying for next year?"

I simply stared at him in stunned silence.

"I know MIT has a great program for physics, so does Columbia."

"This is what you want to talk about?" I asked carefully.

He sighed then gave me a smile with the corners of his lips turned down. "It's one of the things, yes."

"I'm not telling you." I took a sip of my coffee, mostly to cover my confusion.

He raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Because I want to gain admission on my own merit." I set my mug down. "If I told you, you'd go and buy me a spot. I'd rather earn one myself."

The corner of his lips lifted. "I see."

I leaned back in my chair and surveyed him again. "Are you sure you're not ill?"

He chuckled quietly as he turned his mug in his hands. "Yes, I'm sure." His eyes met mine. "I've sold the shipping business."

His words hung in the air like smoke. It took me several moments before I could even respond. "To whom?"

His dull eyes met mine again. "Don't play games with me, Miles. You're smarter than that."

To the family he'd been working with. I narrowed my eyes at him. "They aren't going to just let you go."

His lips quirked to the side. "I'm aware."

The guards. I glanced over his shoulder to the other two suits in the diner. At least that explained the change. The mafia was after him.

"Why?" The man I knew would throw his own mother to the wolves to save himself. He certainly wouldn't give up his life for anyone.

"What you and your mother will inherit will be clean. Legal. I've always fought to keep that aspect separate from the two of you and I will continue to do so." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a familiar micro USB drive. "I wanted to thank you."

"For?"

His eyes grew brighter for a moment. "For filming that incident with your mother. It was eye opening to see it from your perspective."

I grew still as a statue as fear ate at my intestines. "How did you get ahold of it?"

His eyes focused on me again. "Your mother gave me a copy."

I found that hard to believe. My heart grew heavy as a thought occurred. "I haven't seen her for over a year. All I've gotten are emails."

He tilted his head to the side like a snake. "Ask what you want to ask."

"Where is she? Is she even alive?" My voice grew glacial.

His expression didn't change a hair. "Last I spoke to her, she was on her way to a rainforest to do research on a highly funded expedition." He leaned forward, his eyes alive for the first time since I walked through the door. "Your mother is doing what she loves."

I got the message. She was out of harm's way and safe from retaliation. "That's why she didn't come back."

"Yes." He slid the drive across the table to me along with a card and a series of numbers. "This is the number to her satellite phone, though it only works once or twice a day."

"I always thought she blackmailed you." I tucked the card into my wallet.

His lips quirked up into that grin again. "She did. Rather well. I was impressed."

I shook my head. I would never understand my father or his attitude toward women. Perhaps I should just stop trying. "Is that it?"

His slight grin disappeared. "No, it's not." He reached down into his well-used leather case and pulled out a file. He set it in front of him on the table before meeting my eyes again. "We need to talk about Alexis Delaney."

Everything focused solely on him. "What about her?"

He opened the file and skimmed it. "You took her and your friends to Denver, Colorado, this summer. Along with your doctor." He looked up at him. "Why?"

"Impulse trip," I said in a bland voice.

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Why wasn't there a hotel charge?"

I took a slow, deep breath and let it out. "Those trips are my business and don't concern you."

He nodded his head a little once. "True." He lifted a page in the file and looked at the next. "But the trip to New Orleans does. The Center for Disease Control was about to quarantine the city when you and your friends left." He let the paper drop back down and met my eyes. "What were you up to?"

"Vacation. What does this have to do with Lexie?" Why did he want to know? What would he do with the information?

His eyes narrowed on mine. "You need to keep your distance from her."

"Why do you say that?"

His internal debate was clear on his face as his eyes unfocused. When he came to a decision, he answered. "There are things in this world that you may not know about. Factors that you don't understand. And that will mostly keep you safe."

The way he said that... "What type of factors are you referring to?"

He straightened his shoulders, his face going blank again. "The type that us mere mortals shouldn't deal with or try to control."

He knew something. But what? About Lexie? About the guys? Asher? "Are your associates aware of such factors?"

His eyes lit up with approval. "Yes. They tend to use them for their own means. There's a good market for it. A high demand and little supply for rare things." His eyes met mine. "Extremely rare things or talents."

I eyed my father. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? If we were alone, I'd ask, but now I could only calculate the odds.

"My associates keep an eye out for those things, and the people around them," he added, confirming what I was thinking. "Then, eventually, they collect them."

"Makes sense." I began tapping my finger on my coffee mug as I tried to figure out a way to ask what I needed to know. "Hunting for rare items must require a lot of research. A great deal of planning. Observation."

"But you can't research or observe things that haven't gotten your attention." He grinned with approval.

Lexie hadn't gotten their attention yet. Good. But I might be being watched. Lexie, Ethan and Asher needed to lay low and keep the weird to a minimum in public. He was warning me.

"Why tell me this?" I asked, needing the answer more than my next breath.

His eyes surveyed my face before meeting my eyes again. "You're my son."

"So, the trust is legitimate?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm just trying to make sure you two are alright while I can."

I met his eyes and held his gaze. "Alright. I'll sign the papers today."

* * *

Lexie

"Lexie, wake up, I need to go." A voice brought me to the surface.

I woke up to the stench of decay. Wrinkling my nose, I looked down at my lap and found the rotting body of a squirrel. I screamed and flailed out of the lawn chair to the patio. "Ew, ew, ew!" Sam's laughter taunted me as I frantically brushed myself off and ran into the house, getting louder as I ran. "Ew, ew, ew!"

Necro or not, I did NOT like dead things!

After a long, boiling shower during which I considered grabbing the bleach under the sink to use, I got dressed and headed for the Blazer. Hades barked and followed.

During the drive to Bridgeport, I was calm. Well, as calm as I could be considering the bitch sent shadow men after me. It was just the last straw.

I pulled up to Serena's little cabin-like shop and left Hades in the car. Calm, Lexie. Don't use violence. Stay calm.

I opened the door to find her alone behind the counter packing a box.

"You may want to rethink this, child," she warned as she started to tape it closed.

I strode to the counter and made a point not to hit it. Ten points for restraint! "You sent shadow men after me last night."

"Did I?" she asked as she set the box on a counter.

"You did. Or you helped them." I took a deep breath to keep from growling.

"Helped who?" Serena finally gave me her full attention.

"Jadis and her crew."

"Finally, you know what she is." She sighed as she began to pack another box.

"You either helped them or sent those shadow men after me last night," I stated.

She turned back to me with her head tilted to the side. "Really?

The ticking of a clock filled the room.

"What did you take of mine?"

Her brow drew together. "Yours? I haven't seen you in over a month, and the only thing I ever got from you then was cash, which would be useless to target you."

My stomach dropped. "You're right..." They couldn't have been after me. I was careful. Extremely careful. Rory. "You sent them for Rory."

She went back to packing the large box. "You really are a clever girl. Keep being clever and you might survive."

"He's done nothing to you," I snarled. "Why would you do that?"

Her face contorted into a mask of rage. "Look! I'm a witch. You are a necro. I put you on your path as a favor. What happens after that is not my problem."

"He's innocent."

"He's poking around where he shouldn't be," she countered as she came to the counter and leaned over it. Her gaze held mine. "This is a war and the people around you are fair game. It's not my fault you made him a target." She pushed back from the counter and started packing again, slamming things into the box.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. That's when I saw it. Boxes. They were everywhere. The shelves were empty, as was the case beneath my hands. I turned back to her. "You're running."

She didn't stop packing while she answered. "I'm a rogue witch about to be caught in the middle of a war. I'm getting out of here before my daughter or I get hurt."

"They threatened your kid?"

She kept packing. "When you're rogue, you don't have back up. It's just you and your skills. And I can't take Jadis."

"Then help us beat her."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to make my daughter a target. That's that." Her pace picked up.

I stepped back from the counter and headed for the door.

"I didn't do the spell." Her voice brought me to a stop. "I only supplied a picture."

That was nice to know. I walked out the door without another word. Hades met me at the porch steps. "Sorry, baby. Let's get out of here."

During the drive back, her warning went around and round. The people around me were fair game, Rory poking where he didn't belong. Rory was there to investigate the murders, not the Veil. Jadis was helping with the murders. I ran back over the last month. The murders had started almost the day we got back. Had they really been here for a month?

AFTER DROPPING Hades off at home, I was pulling up to the diner for what had become our usual Saturday breakfast with the guys when I spotted Miles' car. He was leaning against the trunk, his arms crossed over his chest, his face a mask of blankness. Oh yeah, I was lo-jacked.

I cursed as I parked. This had to fucking stop. Straightening my shoulders, I climbed out and walked toward him, ready for a fight. But once those unfocused glacial eyes came into view, my heart stuttered. Something was wrong.

"Miles?"

His eyes focused on me. "Hmm?"

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Food is inside."

The mask was back. "You went to Bridgeport."

"I love you, sweetie, but you keeping track of my every move is getting old." I shook my head and let it go for now. "Let's go inside, what I got from her and Rory is a doozy."

I started for the diner and opened the door.

Miles was still staring at the parking lot asphalt. Okay...

"Nemo?"

He pushed away from the car and started toward the diner. For the first time ever, I held the outer door for him. My worry tripled. Miles had never not held the door for me.

I found the others in a back booth. Their conversation stopped when we got within earshot.

Isaac got out of the booth. "Scoot in, Red."

I raised an eyebrow as I took in their serious faces. "Let me guess, none of you are happy."

"You're right." Zeke took a drink from his mug. "You shouldn't leave town alone right now, it's dangerous."

"I had Hades." I sighed before scooting inside. "Look, the information I have was worth it."

"Worth losing you?" Asher raised an eyebrow. "Nothing is worth that." Isaac sat beside me while his brother pressed his thigh against mine.

"I think Jadis and her cronies are behind the murders," I announced in a hushed voice.

"Shit." Isaac leaned back in the booth.

"You can say that again." Miles took the open chair at the end of the table next to Asher.

"Shit." Ethan, Isaac and I said immediately.

I snorted. Even now, I thought it was funny. A strange tingle ran down the back of my neck. I was being watched.

I started to look over my shoulder for who it was when Asher cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to the table.

"How did you come to that idea?" Asher asked, shooting an odd look at a distracted Miles.

I explained what happened at the store, what happened last night. What I thought it meant and how it seemed to be connected to Serena suddenly closing up shop.

"Fuck." Zeke ran his hand through his hair, his elbow bumping Asher.

Asher's nose wrinkled. "Man, you have to take a shower in the mornings."

Almost everyone bit back a smile. I took a small whiff and got nothing. Must be a wolf thing...

"I took one before bed," Zeke countered.

"If we're sitting this close, you need it," Asher replied.

"Why are we in a too-small booth and not in the empty corner booth?" I finally asked.

The guys shared a look but said nothing.

I sighed. "Just tell me."

"Ordin's mother is here with several women," Miles announced almost absently.

I shook my head. Clay Ordin's mother. Fuck. That bitch had sworn to the cops I was lying about the cabin in January. Clenching my teeth, I felt that tingle again. Ethan squeezed my thigh.

"She's been staring at me, hasn't she?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah." Zeke shifted in the cramped space.

Asher scooted over more, his frustration written across his face. "Next time, someone else sits next to Zeke."

I looked up at Isaac. "Move, please."

He grinned at me before getting to his feet. I followed him out of the booth and started toward the corner booth. I wasn't about to sit there squished between everyone just because some woman's son was a sick fuck who hurt me. I caught Gladys' eye as we passed each other. "We're taking the corner booth."

Gladys shook her head. "Are we playing musical booths?"

I gave her an apologetic look as I slid into the middle of the booth. The guys slid in around me as I glanced around the diner. There. A table of four women, all of them dressed as if they were politician's wives. One of them glared at me, her jaw clenching. I just held eye contact with her until Gladys took our order and blocked my view.

"So, what'll it be?"

Everyone ordered their usual. Asher hesitated, then ordered oatmeal, hard boiled eggs and fruit. Nothing that would touch the grill.

When Gladys left, Isaac turned to me. "Damn, Red."

I smiled. "I'm not the one who did something wrong. Why should I hide?"

The guys shared a small smile that I didn't quite understand.

"So, how are you enjoying not having to cross the dead?" Ethan turned back to me.

I thought about it and beamed. "Not having to go to the cemetery is amazing. You have no freaking idea."

"Give us an idea," Isaac teased.

I thought about it. "Imagine having a rock in your shoe for so long you've forgotten what it's like to not have one."

Asher grinned. "That's a good feeling."

Our convo went on to nothing special. Just the usual and I loved it. No one was bickering, no one was eyeing each other if a touch happened. Hell, it was rather obvious that Ethan had his hand on my knee again and no one said a thing. It was warm, comfy. It felt like... us.

We were halfway through our meal when Mrs. Ordin and her friends got to their feet, saying their goodbyes. Mrs. Ordin stopped and seemed to change her mind.

She turned back and cast her shadow over our suddenly silent table.

I met her gaze and waited.

She eyed me as if I were a bug under her Prada heel. "You lied about my son. How can you look me in the eye?"

I scoffed. "I wish I had to lie. I'd have fewer nightmares." When she didn't say anything or leave, I asked sweetly, "Can I help you?"

"You led my son on," she stated.

I rolled my eyes. "No, I really didn't."

"This isn't the place, come on." One of her friends had come back to take her arm.

Mrs. Ordin blinked, then seemed to realize what she was doing. She raised her head and straightened her shoulders. Without another word she left with her friend.

I set my fork down, my appetite gone. I knew I didn't do anything but be a smartass, and that wasn't a beating offense.

"Lexie." Ethan's voice was his smoky, toe-curling one. I met his chocolate eyes. "Let's get going, Uma said she wanted all day to work with us."

I nodded, reached into my pocket and dropped a ten on the table for my breakfast. We didn't get more than three steps from the table before Ethan reached back and took my hand. I squeezed his in thanks as we headed outside.

We were almost to the Blazer when I spotted a certain small redheaded ghost in a Care Bear shirt and jeans.

I beamed. "Where the hell have you been, young lady? I've been worried sick about you!"

Claire chuckled. "Searching the woods, hot shot."

I snorted.

She turned to Ethan then did a double take. "What happened to you? You're... different."

"No clue," he quipped.

She shrugged and simply accepted it. She turned to me, a smile stretching across her face. "I found it."

WE PICKED up Hades and drove out of town toward Dulcet. I drove while Ethan talked to Uma on the phone. We needed everyone out at the site Claire had found. Trying to stay calm, I followed her instructions to a scenic overlook between Dulcet and Spring Mountain.

It wasn't long before the two of us were following Claire through the underbrush and up a steep hill.

Hades' ears perked up, bringing me to a stop. A heartbeat later, Hades was running off into the underbrush.

"Hades!" I called. He kept going.

"Shit," Ethan cursed before he started after them. I crashed through the underbrush right behind him.

Heart pounding, we followed the red hair hustling through the trees. I was replaying every cheesy scary movie I'd ever seen as we spotted Claire at the top of an even steeper incline.

"Ya know, this is how horror movies start," Ethan teased as he reached back to help me.

I chuckled. "I was just thinking that."

He pulled me up the boulder in our way and helped me to my feet. Right next to a wall. It was a wall of camo.

I wouldn't have noticed it from below if it hadn't been for Claire. I looked up and spotted the wires holding the camouflage between two trees That chill ran down my neck. A big one. Our breath came out as a fog. There were souls around, a lot of them.

"Claire?" I whispered. "Is anyone on the other side?"

She poked her head out through the camo. "Just ghosts." She popped back through the fabric, her passing fluttering the cloth and showing us the seam.

"I'll go in first." He barely said it before he slipped through the hole and disappeared from sight.

Stomach in knots, I moved the fabric and stepped to the other side. Hades shoved in past me as I looked up at the walls of several cliffs. That temperature continued to drop. My teeth chattered as I reached Ethan and a small cliff entrance.

I pulled out my phone and I dinged my location so they knew exactly where we were. My phone began to vibrate in my pocket almost immediately. Ignoring it, I followed Ethan into the small entrance and around a bend of rock. A red glow had me blinking until my eyes adjusted. Hades pressed against my hip, letting me know he was here. My heart stopped. It was a ravine. Like before. Only this time the pulsing, massive red circles with triangles inside them were packed in everywhere over the rock. Every conceivable space was taken up by Triangles of Solomon.

And in those traps were souls. A lot of trapped souls. Some hunching, some lying down in the space. Some barely an image at all. All of them groaning or crying in pain. Stunned, I couldn't move for several heartbeats.

When ghosts needed energy, they pulled from the environment. At the very least they pull the warmth from the air. They had been here long enough that large icicles had formed on several rock edges over our heads.

They were trapped. Hurting. I spotted the setup under a battered, fraying tarp. Rage pouring through me, I strode past a cold Hades and toward the more complicated setup and eyed it. This one was different. A generator was puttering and hooked up to something else I couldn't even begin to identify. There was a still working just like the last one, only this time, there was a lab vial full of bright blue glowing gel.

Ethan moved to my side, his brow furrowed as he took it in.

The cries of the souls pulled my attention back to them. That's when I saw the hoses. Every soul trap had one, funneling back through some gadget and down another hose toward the setup. The gadget was humming. I reached over to the generator and flipped the switch to off. The noises stopped.

The dead turned to us with relieved faces. Several began to cheer, some sobbed. I recognized a lot of them. They were my missing ghosts.

"Hades, guard." I walked around the setup. "Are you guys okay?"

Several dropped to the stone. Ethan silently picked up a long stick and went to the closest triangle. He began to scrape up enough paint to break the trap lines and the light went out. There were a lot of them.

I pulled my phone out again.

Alexis: We're fine. We found them. Bring a shit ton of paint remover.

I found my own stick and started scraping the paint just enough to let them out. "Where are the others?"

"They're gone," one woman said before tilting her head to the setup. "What's left of them... is there."

I stopped scraping. "You mean the blue stuff?"

She nodded. "The trap keeps us here. The still... it wears us down."

I shared a disturbed look with Ethan then went back to scraping as I listened. I listened to how they had to watch as other souls slowly became barely an image and then watch as they were pulled into a hose.

Eventually, Hades barked.

"Ethan! Lexie!" Zeke's bellow was unmistakable.

"Here! Hades, heel," I shouted. "Make your way back toward us."

It wasn't long before Zeke led Miles and Lucy into the odd ravine, though he had to suck it in to get through.

Lucy's eyes grew wide at the area. Both her and Miles' jaws dropped as they made their way through all the souls that were free. Some faded away as soon as they were released, moving on to the Veil.

"You found them," Zeke said, as he looked around the crowd still here.

I nodded as the glow from the last triangle blinked out before I pointed Miles and Lucy toward the cover. "Go look at the setup and tell me what you see. Don't touch the blue stuff though."

"Sure..." Lucy left our sides and went to do as I ordered.

"How did you find them?" Zeke asked, his hand going to my lower back.

"Claire." I turned to look up at him. "She led us straight here."

"Hey, I'm right here," Claire chirped. Almost everyone turned to her to say hi. Zeke's eyes narrowed at me as he thumbed a tear from my cheek.

"They broke down souls," I whispered, my heart aching. "I think... he killed them."

"He?" Miles' head snapped up.

I nodded and wiped my ice-cold face. "That's the one thing they could all agree on. That the person who came here was a man."

Miles' brows drew together, making that small wrinkle. It was his thinking face.

Zeke lifted my chin and noticed my shivering. He pulled his hoodie off and wrapped it around me. "This one you can't keep."

I didn't realize how cold I was until his body heat wrapped around me with the hoodie. I slipped it on and pulled it tighter. His hand stayed on the middle of my back. "We'll find him, Baby."

I looked up at him, stunned. His eyes were glowing as he looked around the groups of souls, some barely even existing. He was mad. He wasn't the only one.

When I was a little warmer, I stepped away from him and turned to the dead. "It's time to cross."

"No." One of the women turned to me. Modern clothes, no sign of death. "We're not leaving until he's stopped."

I sighed. "I don't know how long that will be, but I promise we will find him." I shook my head. "This fucker already stole enough from you guys. Don't let him steal this too."

After some thought, they all finally nodded.

By the time I finished making sure the dead crossed over, Uma had arrived. She was examining the vial of blue liquid while Lucy began pulling the machine apart.

When Lucy managed to get the top off the tank, she turned white. "Oh my God."

She suddenly had everyone's attention. From Zeke and Isaac, who were trying to get all the paint off the rock, to Ethan and Asher who were watching the entrance.

Everyone hurried to Lucy.

She picked up a stick and began to dig around inside the tank. From the look on everyone else's faces, I was grateful for the first time in my life that I was short and couldn't see.

"I definitely see... salt, willow, thyme, wormwood, some frankincense..." Lucy's face grew paler and paler after each herb she listed. "What is that smell?"

A whiff of pine hit me; it was so strong I plugged my nose.

"Tar water," Uma announced.

Lucy looked up at Uma. "Everything in there is used for purification, isn't it?"

Uma shook her head. "Not just purification, but transformation."

"Shit," Miles cursed.

I turned and looked up at him in surprise.

He walked off toward the gadget between the triangles and the setup. He crouched down and pried the cover off. "It's a vacuum."

Lucy's jaw dropped. "He's using alchemy to break souls down into pure energy."

"He can do that?" Asher asked, moving up to my side. I moved a little closer to him and his body heat while I pulled Zeke's hoodie closed.

Uma and Lucy nodded in unison.

"He's managed to infect those triangles with enough rage to twist them into breaking down souls." Uma's face grew paler.

Lucy shook her head. "Normally, if you did this, you'd probably get next to nothing. A drop, maybe two, but that's it."

My heart stopped. "But with the Veil closed, the energy had been building and the dead were picking it up like sponges."

"They're batteries." Uma met Lucy's gaze. They both filled with dread.

"Okay, he's broken down souls to make batteries." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest. "What is he using it for?"

Lucy shrugged. "It could be to power an enormous alchemical machine or gadget. I don't know what else. I'd have to experiment with it, but I'm not touching this."

Uma held up the vial in her hand. "It's incredibly versatile. You could use it to power one hell of a spell, something world altering. It could keep a person alive through just about anything. Hell, you could even use it as a power source for a house if you had the right equipment."

I was stuck back on keep someone alive. "How would this keep a person alive?"

Uma let out a deep breath. "As a person starts dying, their body isn't producing the energy to keep it going anymore. This could replace it."

"It's Dylan."

Everyone turned to me.

Suddenly so many things made sense. The book he hid in his room, this 'project' he had that took up so much time... Pieces fell into place so well that bile rose in the back of my throat. "Fuck..." I turned away from them, took a couple steps, and was sick on top of a pot of flowers. Hands were there, holding my hair back, holding my suddenly shaking body. It had to be Dylan...

When I could, I wiped my mouth and turned back to them.

"Why do you say that?" Miles asked, tapping his fingers against his thigh.

I met his eyes. "His dad's dying. Has been for a while. He's in hospice now."

Ethan frowned. "How do you know?"

"'Cause, he called me last night."

The tension rose with an almost audible snap.

I rolled my eyes. "He asked me to make his mom's cookies. His dad's not eating right now, and he was hoping it would help."

"We don't have proof," Miles whispered in that soothing voice I loved. "Let's not jump to conclusions. We only have circumstantial evidence at best." He turned back to Uma as I straightened.

"How world altering are we talking about?" Miles asked as he pulled a roll of mints from his pocket and handed it to me.

I popped several into my mouth to chase way the acidic aftertaste.

Uma's eyes unfocused. "If it was just one vial, it could power an easy spell for a person's lifetime. Like a glamour. But..." she shook her head. "He must have hundreds at this point."

Lucy swallowed hard. "It's going to depend on how much information he has, what his resources are." She gestured at the setup. "This is a pieced together system. There's only so much he can do."

"Even with the energy?" Miles asked.

Lucy turned to him. "If this person was at my experience level and had my resources?" She pointed at the vial. "With hundreds of those, I can build a machine capable of altering the world within six months. And I'm talking on a cellular level. Like, everyone in the world can suddenly breathe through gills type of change."

Oh shit... "So, something is limiting him somehow?"

Lucy nodded. "Yes. This has been going on, what? Over a year?"

"Yes, I'd say since the summer before last. That's our best guess," Miles said.

Lucy's eyes unfocused. "There's the possibility that he's using it as fuel for something but not using it in an efficient way. Maybe that's why he has to keep collecting? He's running through it too quickly."

"Perhaps. It'd be the same if he was using it to keep someone alive though." Uma sighed. "But we aren't going to figure it out tonight. Let's finish up with the symbols and break this system down. It'll slow him down at the very least."

Everyone got back to work while Miles and Lucy broke the setup apart.

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Hours later

had just finished brushing my teeth in Miles' bathroom when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

"How are you feeling?" Miles asked.

I shrugged as I rinsed off my toothbrush and put it in the holder beside his. Apparently, besides clothes I had a toothbrush in every bathroom now.

"Do you really believe it's Dylan?" he asked.

I hesitated. Did I believe it, no, but it was too much of a coincidence not to acknowledge. "It was the first name to came to mind." I turned and leaned against the counter. "He lost his mom already. He is desperate to keep his dad…" I shrugged. "It fits."

He nodded solemnly. "Then we'll need proof before we move forward." I nodded.

"Which means, we need someone close to him to watch him," Miles said.

"Well, yeah. I guess." What was he getting at?

"We need to get Jake to spy on him," he stated.

Weight seemed to crash down on my shoulders. "You want me to tell him? Then get him to spy on one of his best friends?"

He nodded. "It's the only way to know for sure."

I shook my head, stunned. "What is going on with you?"

Miles' eyes met mine, but all I could focus on were the bags hanging under them and the difference in him over the last month. "You aren't sleeping."

"There's too much to worry about." He stepped back and headed into his room.

"Oh, no, you're not getting off that easy. What is going on?" I followed him into his room. "You're tracking us without telling us. You're disappearing and you won't tell us what you're doing, and then there's the whole thing with your dad's papers."

"Lexie..." He turned around and faced me.

"Don't Lexie me, I want an answer." I held up a finger. "Tell me something. One thing."

He sighed. His shoulders sagged as he went to the desk and picked up a notebook. He crossed the room and handed it to me. "This is what I've been working on with Lucy."

I opened the book and found drawings and writing. It was a schematic. "You're trying to design a staff that uses alchemical components?" I looked up at him, confused.

He nodded. "Things in town are getting worse. And with the magic users probably behind most of it..." He met my gaze. "It occurred to me that the guys and I only have our shields. That we were, well, as Isaac put it, cannon fodder."

I looked down at the schematic again. "You designed a staff?"

"Lucy has potions that can duplicate spells. So,"—he shrugged—"why not weapons that use alchemical components and have a similar effect?"

I gaped up at him. Out of anything he could have said, this was out of left field. "Do they work?"

"We don't know yet," he admitted. "I only showed them to Lucy last night. She says they should work."

I smiled up at him. "That's amazing, Miles. Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged as he went back to his desk and put down the notebook. "I guess I didn't want to get your hopes up."

I was still smiling when he turned back to me. "That's why you've been so quiet?"

He slid his hands into his pockets.

I shook my head as relief swamped me. It all seemed so ridiculous now. "I'm sorry, Miles. I shouldn't have thought..." I met his gaze. "I should

trust in us more than I have been."

"It's not like I haven't been giving you reason to doubt me." He began to tap his fingers in his pocket. "When something is on my mind, I tend to stop talking."

I simply waited for him to tell me.

"My father is in town," he admitted. "I met him at the diner this morning."

I focused on him. "Why?"

"It's not important." He met my eyes. "What is, is that he gave me the number to my mother's satellite phone."

My eyebrows shot up. "He knows where she is?"

He nodded. "And he also had the USB with the video of him assaulting her."

My pulse picked up. "He had the video your mom blackmailed him with?"

"Yes." His lips pressed together as he looked down at his hands. "I don't know if I should call the number or not."

My brow drew together. "If you called you could talk to her."

His eyes met mine. "Or it could keep ringing and never be answered."

"Oh." The lightbulb finally went on. "You think he..."

"Him, or the people after him." He pulled a crumpled card from his pocket. "I don't know if I want to know."

I reached out and took his other hand.

His fingers squeezed mine gently. "If you don't know if you want to know, then don't call."

His gaze snapped to mine. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe you aren't ready to know." I half shrugged. "And when you are, you'll call."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You don't think I should know if she's dead or alive?"

I looked up at him and stroked his jaw with my fingertips. "I think that knowing she is dead would hurt. And knowing she's alive but not here would hurt. And unless you're ready to deal with it, you'll gain nothing from learning the truth."

He blinked and looked down at my hand in his. His shoulders were tense as he let out a deep breath. "You're right. There are things we can change here, but this isn't one of them."

I wrapped my free arm around his neck and hugged him close. "I'm sorry."

His arm slipped around me, bringing me in close.

Wintergreen filled my lungs as part of me let go. Miles wasn't rethinking us. He was just distracted. Relief left me holding him a little tighter.

Eventually, I pulled back and met his gaze. "Get some sleep, okay?" I said.

He nodded, his lips still pressed together.

I left him in his room and headed downstairs.

* * *

Lucy

THE POUNDING on the door had me hustling out of the bathroom in a hotel robe, still dripping from the shower.

"Hold on, hold on." I muttered. What could be so important that Miles would be pounding on my door?

I jerked the door open. My heart leapt into my throat.

Jadis was there. Flanked by two of her goons. She smiled smugly. "Let's have a chat."

* * *

Lexie

I LEFT Hades with the guys and headed out to the café. Riley was already there. I took a deep breath and crossed the parking lot to her table on the patio. Her face lifted from her phone to spot me. I took the seat across from her.

The scent of coffee beans wafted over the breeze. The clink of mugs was louder than it should have been.

"Jake said I was being judgy," she said first.

"And do you agree, or do you think I'm still trying to get to Zeke through the others?" I asked directly. I wasn't going to waste my time to save a relationship if Riley couldn't understand that I'd never do that.

She chewed on her lower lip. "I'm not sure."

Well, that was something at least.

"There're already rumors you're dating Asher, Isaac and Ethan." She shook her head. "It's only a matter of time before people realize..."

"That they're all true?" I smirked.

She snorted. "Yeah."

I raised an eyebrow. "Imagine all that indignation."

She didn't laugh, instead she shook her head. "You make jokes, but it's going to be bad. People are going to harass you and the guys."

"I'm aware, and so are they." I sighed. "We have all discussed this and we know what we're in for."

She looked at me stunned. "And you're signing up for it?"

"For a chance to be with the men I love, yeah." I half shrugged. "I don't get how that is so hard to grasp."

She leaned forward. "Tell me honestly. Are you really in love with all of them?"

I met her gaze. "Yeah." How often did I have to repeat this to her before it would sink in?

She shook her head slowly. "I... don't understand how that is possible."

"Do you have to understand it?" I tilted my head to the side.

Riley looked down at the table. Her eyes unfocused. "I guess not." Her eyes refocused on me. "I guess I could just be supportive." She paused for a heartbeat. "Tramp."

I grinned. "Prude."

"Whore."

"Jealous?"

We dissolved into laughter.

It was dark by the time we were walking back to our cars, still laughing about a surprise that Ryan had fumbled for her birthday. Two streaks shot out from the tree line. Riley only had time to scream before the world went dark.

HEAD THROBBING, a sound brought me to the surface. Drip, drip, drip.

"Wake up!"

I blinked hard. Hmm?

"You need to wake up!" The man's voice moved through my ear.

I blinked, trying to see who was talking. Dirt. I was on wet, moldy dirt. And no one was near me. I wrinkled my nose at the stench and tried to move, only to realize I couldn't. My chest seized as I struggled against the ropes that were biting into my wrists behind my back.

Laughter had me freezing.

"She's awake." Jadis' voice made my blood run cold. Fear crawled up my throat, choking off any hope I had of screaming.

"Calm down, or you won't live through this." The voice slipped through my head again with a calm that helped me take a deep breath.

Hands grabbed me and forced me up to my knees, giving me my first real look at my surroundings. The room was filthy. Plants grew here and there, mushrooms popping up through the sludge. Two circles spray painted on the dirt, symbols in between. Five candles at the corners of the pentagram. The scent of sandalwood permeated the room. My adrenal system kicked into overdrive. Just like Rory described. Fuck! "They're going to kill me!"

"No shit. We're already moving through the building, but it's rigged to give an alarm. It's slow going. Where are you?"

I didn't know how to send a telepathic message, but I gave it a shot. "Basement. Dirt floor. Hurry."

"Stall them."

Five people watched me take in the room. Jadis and a couple of witches I recognized from New Orleans were grinning like maniacal hyenas. Movement drew my eye. A figure with a bona fide black silk cloak was working at an altar. Something about the figure was familiar. The set of the shoulders... I'd seen them in the Veil. It was that fucker! "Where are we?"

"Who knew you had such a poor memory." Jadis grinned as she moved forward to the edge of the painted lines around me. "I was told you had quite an interesting experience here before."

I examined the room again, only this time I noticed the small metal doors on the left wall. A morgue with a dirt floor? There was only one place it could be. "The abandoned hospital."

The cloaked figure stopped crushing something.

"Good guess. Our new member started here." Jadis moved to stand beside the cloaked figure at the altar. "And here is where you'll die."

My throat tightened. You're not dead yet, Lexie, think! "Go fuck yourself."

Jadis' chuckle was like a chime. Light and full of joy. "Oh, I'm going to miss that wit."

I glanced around trying to find a way to stall or escape only to realize what wasn't there. Or who. "Where's Riley?"

Jadis came to stand at the edge of the lines again and beamed. "She was going to be left in the parking lot but, well, when a master vampire asks for her instead of a cash payment, you don't argue."

My stomach knotted as my chest grew hot. "They took her?"

"Quite a deal if you ask me," she said proudly, as if she got a great deal on a fridge.

"You sold her?" I bit out, pulling against the rope and the grip of the fucker behind me.

"Yes."

I eyed her. "What happened to you, Jadis? Did mommy and daddy not give you enough attention or were you born this way? You just sold a person. What the hell is wrong with you?"

A chuckle rumbled through my head. "That's one way to buy time, get the bitch to talk about herself."

"She really enjoys it. That and bragging about how smart she is," I tried to send back.

"Don't force it, just think. I'm in your head holding the link. Just stay alive."

I stopped worrying about it and focused on Jadis since she'd been ranting for a minute or so now.

"—little shit. I'm still amazed a nobody like you would be given the honor of working in the Veil." She shook her head. "It's unbelievable."

I started laughing. "You think it's an honor?" I could hardly contain myself. "Oh, you're an idiot."

"That kind of energy is beyond your understanding. All mankind's understanding to be honest." She licked her lips, her spine straight as the lines of her face filled with... determination. "You touched the universal energy that created the world—"

I grinned. "And I made a foghorn alarm out of it."

She scowled at me. I tried not to laugh in her face again. Help was coming. I could stall. "Who are you?"

"My client would prefer to remain anonymous for now," he sent back, the warmth from the voice gone.

Meanwhile, Jadis seemed to be coming to the end of her rant. "— ungrateful little thing."

"That's me," I chirped.

There was a laugh in my head and over my head. Jadis' glare shot to the man holding me in place. Face furious, she gestured to the center of the circle.

The man holding me forced me to my feet. I stomped on his foot, tried to head butt him, but he held fast long enough to knock his boot into the back of my knees, dropping me to the dirt in the center of the circle.

"Dylan, don't do this," I pleaded, my heart slamming in my throat. "I can't stall anymore!"

The cloaked figure went still with his back still to me.

"At the stairs, stay alive."

"The Veil is already open," I stated, my panicked mind throwing anything that might work at me.

"Oh, well. Our new member closed it before, he can do it again." Jadis smiled as she went to him and took the blade off the altar, then put it in his hand.

"But can he?" I asked, my mouth dry.

The man behind me grabbed my jaw and force me to look at the ceiling. Tears filled my eyes as the figure turned into the light. I expected to see the face of my ex. Only I didn't. It was a mask. A black full-face mask. My breathing grew shaky. He stepped closer.

"Hurry!" I struggled harder against the grip and got nothing but bruises. Not that they would matter in a minute. "You chicken shit! You can't even face me as you slit my throat."

"If you have any tricks up your sleeve, now's the time."

"It's a onetime only kind of deal."

"Get it ready."

The cloaked person towered over me and placed the cold, sharp blade to my throat as I let my panic and fear bubble up in me. Something washed over my mind, adding to it. Making me begin to shake. "The cookies for your dad are done, Dylan," I whispered as that panic turned solid and built with the fear that the voice sent to me.

The blade pulled away. But he didn't answer.

"Now would be a good time!" I sent. "They're at Miles' house right now," I rasped. No one was here. There was no sound. I must be insane and desperate. It was my imagination.

I was going to die. That solid heat pushed at my control. I needed time...

"I loved you," I confessed, my heart aching. "Why didn't you just tell me? We could have found another way to save him."

For a moment, I thought I had gotten through to him. A gloved knuckle brushed the tears from my face then buried in the front of my hair, his palm resting on my forehead as he held me in place by my hair. Tears began to fall faster.

"We're at the door, do your one shot and we'll take them out."

The blade moved back to my throat. About fucking time! That pressure was ready to go. "Go fuck yourself!" I let it fly.

A loud boom thundered through the room as it filled with a flash of light. Everything was thrown back from me, leaving me crumpled in the dirt. Something crashed. My stomach rolled as people began shouting Latin, and gunfire turned the basement into an ear-splitting hell. I closed my eyes and was sick over and over. A hard body covered mine. My hands were finally free. Something hit us. A familiar voice grunted a curse.

By the time I was done being sick it was over. My ears rang as the weight disappeared. I pried open my lids to look up into a pair of pretty mis-matched eyes. One hazel and the other a steel blue. An instant later, my pounding head had me curling up in agony. Arms moved around me and lifted me out of the dirt into a warm lap. He began carefully using the sleeve of his black shirt to clean the blood from my face.

"Here," another familiar voice said.

Something far softer was pressed to my nose. I struggled to bring up my hand to hold it to my face. He didn't let it go.

"You're safe now," he whispered.

"You owe me a favor, Delaney," Miles' father stated. A favor? Huh?

"Riley," I groaned, fighting off the darkness trying to take me under.

"Liam, actually," the voice from my head said out loud.

"No." I opened my eyes enough to peek up at him. "The vampires took her."

"We'll find her." Miles' father came into view over Liam's shoulder. "I give you my word."

Even knowing he was there, my eyelids dropped and I sank into the warm scent of musk.

* * *

Miles

Barely holding onto My Control, I didn't even knock on the door before I burst into Rory's house. Lexie was on the couch, unconscious and covered in dirt. Someone I barely recognized was laying a blanket over her. One of the men from the diner...

I went straight to her, almost knocking him out of my way. "What the fuck did he do to her?" I knelt beside her and immediately began searching her for injuries.

"Saved her life," he sighed. "Jadis and her crew had her trussed up with a blade to her throat. We barely got there in time."

I glared at him over my shoulder. "Why should I believe that?"

He bared straight white teeth. "Why would he send her back if he was behind it?"

It stopped me. It didn't make sense... My rage pulled back to a level where I could take a breath. "What happened?"

"From what we can tell, Jadis and her buddies hired a group of vampires to ambush Lexie and someone named Riley."

My gaze snapped back to him. "Riley? They tried to kill Riley too?"

The look on his angular face was dour as he shook his head. "The vamps took her as payment. Your father is looking for them now."

I eyed him. "How do you know that?"

He gave me a curious smirk. "That's for me to know."

"Tell me everything or I'll beat it out of you," I growled.

She made a small, unhappy sound, drawing our attention. "Nemo..." she muttered, clenching her eyes shut. She was awake and clearly hurting.

Forgetting about everything else, I took her small hand in mine. "I'm here, Angel."

"Ow..." she whimpered. "Kit..."

My eyes shot to the man who worked for my father.

"She's safe," he promised.

Something about him made me trust him long enough to run into the kitchen and jerk open the drawer. Grabbing a bottle of water, I slammed the door to the fridge. The case cracked on the kit as I tore the lid off on my way back. I knelt beside her again and pulled out the nausea dissolve and the pain meds. She tried to sit up but couldn't manage it.

Hands dipped behind her shoulders and brought her up carefully. "Easy, take it slow. You set off a big blast."

If my hands had been free, I never would have let him touch her, but she was weaker than ever right now and needed help. I popped the dissolve into her mouth. With her eyes still closed, she chewed then swallowed. I gave her the pain killers, holding the bottle to her lips. When she finished with those, I set the water bottle down and carefully lifted her off the couch and away from him.

She groaned and winced.

"You need rest," I whispered as I headed upstairs. "I'm just putting you in bed."

"Liam..." she muttered, making me stop with one foot on the first step. Liam?

"Yeah?" My father's henchman joined us at the bottom of the stairs.

"Thanks."

"You are very welcome," he said, his voice warmer than I liked.

Without a word, I took her upstairs and set her in her bed. After a quick debate, I began to strip off her filthy clothes so she'd be more comfortable. The door closed while I tucked her blankets around her.

Heart heavy, I sat beside her and brushed her hair from her face. I needed to call the others, tell them to watch their backs—something caught my eye. In the trash, a used condom.

Stunned, I stared at it and wondered who. Who did she sleep with? It had to be one of us... I closed my eyes and pictured the schedule and who went where for their dates... Isaac. He said they just watched movies for their date night, that she was too tired to do anything else. Lying bastard.

I sighed as I watched her sleep. Questions rapid fired in my head. How was it? Did she come? Did she love him more than me? Did he hurt her? Did this change things? But above all of it was the thought that it could have been me. She slept peacefully while that thought echoed through my heart. It should have been me... "Am I losing you?"

She scowled with her eyes closed. "Idiot." Her voice was warm and slurred. "Not possible..."

I grinned. She was definitely more than half asleep. "Did you sleep with Isaac?"

"Not your business."

She was right. I shouldn't have asked; it was against the rules we had set up. I eyed the trash. The others would want to see her when they heard what happened. And they'd all see. A part of me was tempted to leave it there. Let everyone know. But that would be petty. I got to my feet and took the garbage out to the curb so no one else would notice, only to find the house empty as I got to the bottom of the stairs. Good.

When I came back, she was out cold again. I texted the others to get here asap, then headed downstairs to wait.

I didn't have to wait long.

I was at the dinner table trying to salvage her sneakers when Hades shoved through the door and ran straight for the stairs.

Zeke was a heartbeat behind him. "What happened?"

"Jadis' crew hired vampires to bring Lexie to them. They took Riley as payment." I didn't even know where to start filling him in. "She's upstairs sleeping in her room."

Zeke's jaw clenched. He started up the stairs. I continued cleaning her shoes. Zeke was just coming down when the door burst open. The twins charged in.

"Upstairs," Zeke answered their unspoken demand. They didn't even give him a chance to move. They all but climbed over Zeke as they ran up.

Zeke was shaking his head as he came to sit across from me at the table. "Riley's missing?"

I nodded.

"Have you called the cops?" he bit out. The tension in the room rising like a flash flood.

"I can't call the cops." I sighed. "She has to be missing for twenty-four hours. Besides, it's better if her family calls."

He scowled at me. "Better for who? Us? What about Riley?"

I sighed. "My father is, apparently, on it."

His shoulders grew rigid. "Your father had something to do with this?"

"His bodyguards rescued Lexie from the basement of the abandoned hospital." Maybe the washer would work better? I started to unlace her shoes. At this point they were a lost cause if the washer couldn't get it.

"Miles."

I looked up at the sharp tone.

"Your father saved Lexie?" he asked very clearly.

"Yes."

He scowled at me, his eyes growing brighter with anger. "What is he doing in town?"

"Is that really important right now? Riley is missing," I countered.

"Don't remind me," Zeke replied. "But your father is looking for her and I'm sure he'll find her one way or another. There's no way he'll fuck that up for you."

I sighed. He had a point. My father was a question mark, but if he said he'd do something, he would. "He was doing me a favor."

"What favor?" Zeke demanded not letting up.

"He's going to make it so Lexie can stay in school." I got to my feet and went to the small door under the stairs. Inside was a stacked washer and dryer. I set the shoes in the wash and turned to find Zeke standing with his arms crossed.

It was clear on his face he wanted answers. "How? How was he going to do it, Miles? Did you think to ask?"

I opened my mouth to tell him I did only to realize I'd be lying. I hadn't asked how he'd do it. "No, I didn't."

"You just wanted the results, right?" Zeke shook his head. "You didn't care what it did to anyone else?"

"Go to hell." My control on my temper cracking.

His eyes met mine. "Your father worked for the mob, Miles."

"He was a sub-contractor."

Zeke didn't move a muscle.

"He sold them the shipping business. That's why it wasn't on the trust," I began. "He's in hiding, he got Mom on an expedition in South America."

He still didn't move. His gaze held mine, demanding that I look at this from his perspective.

I replayed my words in my head. They echoed back to me from the past. We were little kids when I told the others, insisting that Dad wasn't that bad. A child blind to the truth. My heart sank.

"You can't trust him, Miles." He stepped closer. "You know that."

"He saved her." I swallowed hard. "He warned me that the mafia know about supernaturals and to keep Lexie's head down."

"Before or after you showed what she means to you?" he asked simply.

I thought it over again and cursed. "After."

"See."

I shook my head and chastised myself. I knew not to believe him. Hell, I hadn't even tried the number he gave me for Mother. In the back of my mind, I knew that there was a chance it wouldn't be real. I shook my head, my eyes stinging and throat tight. "I'm so sick of not being able to protect you guys."

Zeke stepped closer and pulled me into a hug. "I know, man. I know more than most."

Tears fell as I hugged him back.

"But there's a right way and a wrong way. And sometimes the fucking paths look the same," he said in raspy voice.

Lexie, Asher, Ethan, Isaac... Money was supposed to be useful and protect the people you loved. Only it couldn't. Nothing could. And it was terrifying.

I hugged Zeke tighter. I'd find a way to protect them. I had to...

* * *

Lexie

I WOKE up to an almost dark room. Male voices came from downstairs, tempting me enough to move and slowly change into pjs.

By the time I came downstairs, everyone except Rory was there to greet me. I wasn't exactly quiet in cursing and stumbling around upstairs.

"Did anyone find Riley?" I asked as soon as I was halfway down the stairs.

Miles' face grew blank, Zeke shook his head while the twins shared a look.

"No," Asher answered for everyone.

Shit. "We need to find her," I said through a tight throat.

Everyone seemed lost as to what to do.

Except Isaac. He got to his feet, came to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I leaned against him, needing his heat. "It's going to be okay, Red."

"My father has people out looking, and Sam and his people are looking too," Miles said. "There's nothing we can do but wait at the moment."

I slumped against Isaac. He was right. I hated it, but he was right.

Isaac squeezed me gently. "But we can take care of you. Come on, Asher made your favorite."

I perked up enough to lift my head. "Cookies?"

Isaac snorted. "Yellow curry with green apples in it."

My stomach growled so loudly the guys chuckled.

Asher got to his feet from the armchair and took my hand to collect me from Isaac. He led me to the dining area. "Sit, I'll bring it over."

"Thanks, Ash." My mind was already back to wondering what was happening to Riley. They just took her as if they had a right to her. I couldn't believe that. Well, I could, but I didn't want that to happen to her.

Asher set a plate in front of me and moved across the table from me. "Eat your dinner, honey."

Nodding, I dug into my meal. It was delicious. The green apples gave it a sweetness I couldn't get enough of.

A phone rang.

"Yes?" Miles answered with all of us watching and holding our breath.

Miles' face was that expressionless mask as he listened.

Was it about Riley? Was she okay? I choked back my questions and waited impatiently.

My stomach was knotted by the time Miles hung up and turned to me.

"Where is she?" I demanded. "Rory can say he got—"

"They're gone." Miles got to his feet and came to sit beside me at the table. His eyes were flashing cold then back to warmth over and over. "They got you guys and then flew out right after delivering you to Jadis."

My heart dropped as I shook my head. No. This couldn't be happening. She couldn't be gone. "That's it? That's all he got? Where are these fucking connections he's supposed to have? He's supposed to find her so we can get

her back." My breathing picked up, desperation filling me. It couldn't end like this. Not for her! "We have to find her!"

"He knows they landed at J.F.K in New York and moved to a corporate hanger before even getting out of the plane, but that's all he could get for now."

"At least he found the right ones." Sam's voice had me turning to the back door. How'd he get past the guys?

Sam scratched Hades' ears before letting the glass French door close. He met my gaze. "I, on the other hand, have access to more information."

My stomach unknotted as those silver eyes met mine.

He hesitated.

My stomach cramped again. This couldn't be good. "Just tell me."

He licked his lips and sighed. "Jadis hired a vampire house to capture and deliver you to them. The nest from New York. The Domus Mortis."

That didn't ring any bells. "Who?"

He let out a deep breath as his eyes met mine. "The House of Death. They're the vampire nest that runs New York. The entire house works as contractual threat removal."

I sat there, waiting for him to further explain "They're assassins, Lexie. If you need someone killed, human or supernatural, they're the ones you call and pay."

My stomach rolled. "What are they going to do to her?"

He pressed his lips together. "Knowing them, as soon as they get back to their nest, they'll start the process of converting her. And once that starts... You can't stop it."

I deflated, sitting down hard back into a chair. "They're going to kill her."

He shook his head. "Vampires aren't dead, Lexie."

That drew everyone's attention.

"Our bodies are actually hyper alive. We burn at a higher level of energy. And we go through our own blood extremely quickly. We can't go out in the sun because we absorb vitamin D from the light too quickly and have an exothermic reaction. That's why we need to feed off others. Without blood, our bodies stop moving oxygen, stop breathing, and we die."

"That doesn't sound bad..." Isaac thought out loud.

"That's not the bad part," he said. "The bad part is this is all we get. No afterlife, nothing. This is it."

"So, what happens if you die?" Miles asked.

I cringed.

Sam didn't seem to mind the question. He turned to Miles. "We cease to be. That's the price of being a vampire."

"Sam."

He turned to me. It was obvious he knew what I was going to ask.

"Sam, go get her. Please?" I begged in a whisper.

He swallowed hard. "I can't go get her. If she even gets a drop of blood in her mouth, she'll need a nest to teach her control. She can never come back from this."

"Then help her," I pleaded. "Please. Don't leave her in that nest."

"It's not that easy," he reminded me. "There are blood bonds that come into play, oaths to work around. For vampires, oaths are everything, and blood bonds force compliance. You don't understand what would be involved."

"Then tell me." I got to my feet and went to stand in front of him.

He ran his hand through his hair. For the first time, I was seeing him frustrated. "I'd have to go in undercover by joining the nest. I know this master. He'll be wanting to punish me for... This isn't a weekend errand, Lexie. I'd be gone for months, maybe years, depending on how skilled she turns out to be." His gaze met mine, his face earnest. "This will mean I'm out of the fight here. Do you understand that?"

I nodded.

He cursed in French.

My throat tightened. "I know, it's probably impossible. Suicidal even." My eyes overflowed. "I have no right to ask—"

"You opened the Veil," Sam countered. "You saved the world from being choked to death with energy. And you're still working to find who did it." He shook his head. "You are the only person in the world that *has* a right to ask this big of a favor from anyone."

I wiped my face. "Please, find her? Help her? Keep her as safe as you can?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Alright. I'll contact the nest tonight about coming back."

"Thank you, Sam." I croaked.

He set his hand on my hair and rustled it. "That weepy woman act is cheating."

I snorted as my throat loosened.

He started for the back door.

"Tell her..." I swallowed hard as he paused with the door open. "Tell her... I'm sorry. And that I'd trade places with her if I could."

He nodded once before walking out the door and disappearing into the darkness.

Hold on, Riley. Just, please, hold on.

* * *

Riley

HEAD ACHING, neck throbbing, I forced my eyes open only to find darkness. Shoulders and arms aching above my head, I stretched my legs and feet to get some relief but could only just brush icy metal. Goosebumps covered every inch of me.

"Lexie?" I called, remembering she had been in the parking lot.

There was no answer. Shit! She might still be unconscious or already dead... Fuck!

Something swung me forward. I swung back and forth as my heart raced. Oh God. Where was I? Who are they? Fuck! Someone, please...

Voices sounded outside. I continued shivering as the voices grew louder. My breathing came in short pants. Oh God...

Something metal clanged. Light blinded me. I squinted my eyes and turned my head away as much as I could.

"Ah, one of them is awake," a voice announced.

I blinked hard, forcing my eyes to adjust faster. A truck. With meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. Oh God. I wasn't alone.

"Impressive," a man's voice said. "They were all given the same sedative."

I turned back to eye the man with black hair and violet eyes. My breathing became unsteady.

"She also stayed conscious longer," another voice said.

The elegant man stood over me. His face somehow managed to be angelic and horrifying at the same time. "Interesting."

I bared my teeth at him and spit in his face.

He chuckled as he wiped my spit from his cheek. "She's got fire. That's promising. You might actually survive."

The truck dipped as another man climbed in and joined us. "She seems to be the only one," he said, nodding behind me.

I forced myself to turn and look at where he had motioned. Five other people hung from chains. Two were just waking up, three still out cold. The boys whimpered in fear as the others walked through the rows of empty chains.

I turned back to the man standing so close to me, eyeing me. "What did vou do to Lexie?"

His gaze jumped to mine. "Lexie? Oh, Lexie. Your friend. We delivered her as we were hired to do." He grinned. "And took you as payment." His fingers took my jaw, his steel-like grip holding me still. "You, my dear, may have what it takes."

"Go to hell, you freak!" I hissed.

He smiled. "You'll kill when I tell you to, or you'll suffer." His fingers tightened, forcing my mouth open. He brought his other wrist to his mouth and bit into it. Red stained his lips. "Let's get started."

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Lexie

he front door opened. Jake walked in frowning. "Okay, what is so important that I had to come down tonight?"

"It's about Riley," I said in a quiet voice.

He dropped into the armchair closest to the door. "Did you two finally make up?"

My throat tightened. I turned to Asher beside me on the couch. The others were out back sparring with Zeke as he tried to deal with Riley being taken. It had taken a bit, but it finally sunk in that his ex was taken by vampires. After that, well, he needed to move.

Asher reached over and squeezed my hand.

I wrapped my fingers through his before turning back to Jake. "No. She's... she's not going to come home tonight."

Jake scowled at me. "What do you mean she's not going home?" His eyes grew wide. "Is she running off to Vegas to marry Ryan?"

I shook my head as my stomach knotted.

His smile faded as he eyed my grip on Asher's hand before turning back to me. "What happened at your meet up, Lexie?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

His brow drew down as he leaned forward. "You didn't kill her and bury her in the woods... did you?"

I scowled at him. "Do you really think I could do that?"

He eyed me playfully. "If you got mad enough."

I shot him a look then took a deep breath. "No. I didn't kill her."

"Then where is she?" Jake asked.

"New York." Asher answered for me.

Jake frowned. "What's she doing there?"

"We were attacked tonight in the parking lot." I squeezed Asher a little tighter. "They took both of us and delivered me to... someone who isn't a good person."

Jake eyed me as if I was crazy. "Uh-huh."

I met his gaze. "I'm not joking, Jake."

His grin faded a little, then it was back again. "Yeah, sure you are."

"There's something you should know about me." My heart pounded a little harder as I took a breath for courage. "I can see the dead."

I explained everything to him, including the Veil. It was freeing. As if I was throwing off a heavy cloak that just kept getting heavier. He asked a question here or there, but otherwise he kept grinning.

"That's quite the story, Lexie," Jake teased. "But I'm not buying it. Where's Riley?"

My heart sank. He didn't believe me. I shook my head, not knowing what else to say.

"She's telling the truth, Jake." Asher leaned forward, drawing Jake's attention. "She can see the dead."

Jake chuckled. "And I shit rainbows."

"Jake." I shook my head, not knowing how to get through to him. "The people that came after us, they were after me, but they took Riley as a payment instead of cash."

He was still grinning. "Okay..."

"I don't know why, but from what I understand, they'll turn her into a vampire and she'll disappear from human life."

"She'll be a hot vampire," Jake quipped.

"This is serious, Jake," Asher stated firmly.

Jake was still grinning as he shook his head. "I'm trying man, but this is such an obvious joke..."

"It's not a joke," I snapped. "Riley won't be going home tonight or any other night."

"Sure, she won't," he humored me.

I turned to Asher and shrugged.

Asher squeezed my fingers and turned back to Jake. "Look, we need your help."

Jake tried to hide his grin but failed. "Anything I can do to help the joke —I mean, situation."

"We think Dylan is behind this entire thing." Asher said it as gently as he could.

He started chuckling. "Dylan? Seriously? Into magic?"

I sighed as he continued to laugh. "Yeah, and we need your help."

When he calmed down, he shook his head. "You guys are dedicated to this, I'll give you that."

"Because it's not a joke," I stated wearily. It was late, and it had been a long day. I didn't really have the patience to convince him.

Jake turned to me. "You guys think Dylan did this thing? That's freaking ridiculous."

"If we can't find proof, then we'll move on to another suspect that fits, but we have to at least investigate if he's involved first."

"You're closer to Dylan than anyone else," Asher said carefully. "We need information."

Jake's humor faded away, his brows drew together as he eyed us. "You want me to spy on Dylan?"

"We don't want you to," I said, drawing his attention. "I need you to. If he's innocent, no harm, no foul."

Jake shook his head. "Spy on Dylan?"

"Yeah," Asher stated.

Jake scowled at me. "I thought you were over him?"

Huh? "Um, I am."

He eyed me. "Then why do you care what he's doing? You've got five hotties keeping you company, why spy on your ex?"

I sighed. "Fuck, Jake. Have you even heard a word we've said?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I heard a lot of bullshit that somehow leads to you asking me to spy on one of my best friends."

I growled in frustration as I dropped my head back against the couch. "I can't believe I thought you'd believe me."

"That you see the dead? Yeah, that's a stretch even for a joke, Lexie," Jake scoffed.

I lifted my head and met his gaze. "How many times have you caught me talking to thin air? Four, five times?" His face relaxed a little. "About."

"What did you think I was doing?" I leaned forward, bracing my elbows on my legs. "What about the time I got sick dress shopping? Did that look like a seizure to you?"

The doubt on his face faded a little. "That's what everyone said."

"Yeah." My eyebrows shot up. "'Cause we were lying."

Jake rolled his eyes and got to his feet. "Whatever. Tell Riley to call me when you guys give up on your little joke." Jake walked out the door and closed it behind him.

I made a growly scream of frustration before dropping back against the sofa and looking up at the ceiling. "Why did I think that would go differently?"

Asher turned to me. "Jake's a good friend of ours."

"Yeah, that never stopped this from happening before." I rolled my head to the left to meet his gaze. "It never mattered how good of friends I was with people. They never believed me."

Asher sighed and reached out to push the hair off my forehead. "He'll believe you tomorrow when Riley hasn't come home."

"Yeah," I muttered as I shifted into him, cuddling up to his chest.

His arms wrapped around me as he moved so I could lay against his chest.

Weariness washed over me as his heart pounded under my ear. A comforting rhythm. "I just wish he believed me tonight."

He pressed his cheek against my hair. "I know, Ally girl."

His warmth wrapped around me paired with exhaustion from the day finally caught up to me. "You're comfy..." The last thing I remember was lips pressing against my head.

CHAPTER 19

fter parking around the corner and down the block, I walked up the sidewalk with Hades to meet Jake at Dylan's front door.

He had called a couple hours ago, telling me that Riley hadn't come home. Asher had been right, he suddenly believed me.

Jake's face was pale and heavily bagged as I walked up to him. "Hey." He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

I shrugged. "I'm used to it." I held up the cookie platter covered in cellophane. "I brought his dad's cookies."

Jake nodded as he started to unlock the front door. "It'll be a great 'I'm sorry I searched your house and thought you were a killer of souls' gift."

"I don't want it to be him," I reminded him as we stepped into the foyer. "It's just that his situation fits."

Jake huffed as he led me into the large great room with aspen windows. "What situation is that?"

I set the cookies down on the coffee table and turned to him. "His mom is gone. And his dad is sick. What would you be willing to do in that situation?"

Jake pressed his lips together and looked vaguely like he was going to be ill. "Where do you want to start?"

I rung my fingers together. "His room."

He nodded and started for the stairs. "We don't have much time."

I followed him upstairs and into Dylan's room. Clothes were strewn here and there. A pile of books sat on the nightstand. Otherwise, it was just as clean as the last time I saw it.

Jake put his arm over the doorway, blocking me.

"If we are going to do this, it's together," he warned me. "I see what you see and so on. Got it?"

Seemed fair to me. "Got it."

He dropped his arm.

I stepped into the bedroom. "Hades, search for weird."

Hades began to sniff along the side of the bed while I went to his bookcase.

Dylan had put away an old book here once before Riley and I came into his room. I went to my tiptoes and felt along the top of the cabinet. "Gotcha."

"What do you have?" Jake asked, coming to my side.

"He hid this when I was over once." I pulled it down and smiled. Then stopped. It wasn't an old book like I was expecting. It was a box that just looked like a book. I opened the lid. It was full of pictures. Of his mom. He must have been looking at them around that time. Feeling awful, I closed the box and put it back.

"Not what you were expecting?" Jake teased.

"No." I began searching his bookcase. "And believe it or not, I'm glad." I didn't want it to be Dylan. We weren't a thing, but I still remembered the good guy I fell for.

"What's going to happen to Riley?" Jake asked in a strained voice.

I stopped looking at the books and moved to his dresser. "My contacts say she's going to be converted into a vampire." I glanced over my shoulder to find his face stricken. "I don't know if we can stop that, but I did send someone to help her get away from them."

He swallowed hard and nodded, even though he had grown paler. "So, she'll be back soon?"

I stopped looking to turn to him. "Not unless they get to her in time. If she's converted, she can't come back."

His eyes filled. "She loves Ryan."

My heart ached. "I know, but it's for everyone's sake. If she's a vampire, she'll have a completely different life."

Jake sniffed and wiped his face with his good arm. He looked around the room. "Are you done in here?"

I shook my head.

We got to business.

I rolled my eyes before I started going through his drawers again, then his desk. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. All I found was school stuff and sports gear. Fuck. I even had Jake check the air vents and still found nothing.

We went downstairs and started searching the rest of the house. Meds, socks, junk drawers. We found all of them. But we didn't find anything that might link him to the setups.

I was about to start cursing in the kitchen when the front door opened.

"—I told you to use the wheelchair." Dylan's voice rang from the front of the house, sending my heart into overdrive. "Now you're going to sleep all day."

"I sleep all day anyway," Dylan's dad countered.

"No, you lay down all day," Dylan snapped. "There's a difference."

Jake and I shared a look. Then Jake grabbed my arm and dragged me into the pantry.

"Hades," I hissed.

He nodded a heartbeat before he closed the door, plunging me into darkness.

"Hey, Jake?" Dylan called.

"Yeah?" Jake's voice moved away from the door.

"Can you get the wheelchair off the back porch?" Dylan's voice was matter of fact, as if his father needed it all the time.

Doors opened and closed. Footsteps and low cursing grew louder on the other side of the flimsy pantry door. Hide, Hades, hide. Please. There was no logical reason for me to still be in the house. I was going to get caught! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Why are we in the kitchen?" Dylan's dad asked.

"Let me get you some juice and you can lay down," Dylan said. "Or milk... Lexie dropped off Ma's cookies. Jake said he was going to let her in."

"Oh? Is that what you're carrying?" Dylan's dad's voice warmed. "That was nice of her. But... no thanks."

The fridge door closed. "You need to eat something, Dad."

"I'm not hungry."

Metal clanked and rattled. "Here's the chair."

"Thanks, Jake." Dylan's dad groaned. Metal squeaked. "How is Lexie doing?"

"She's doing okay," Jake hedged.

"Dad." Dylan's voice was full of exaggerated patience. "Have one cookie and a glass of milk. Please?"

"There, happy?" Dylan's dad muttered with his mouth full.

"And the milk," Dylan pushed.

"Pushy kid," his dad muttered.

"You're not eating, yeah he's going to be pushy," Jake chimed in.

"Ugh, it's gone bad." His dad groaned.

"I bought it yesterday, Dad," Dylan countered, then he began to plead. "Please, for my sake, finish the glass?"

His dad muttered but eventually something was set down with a clink. "There. Slave driver."

Dylan gave a sad laugh.

"Don't be surprised if it comes back up," he muttered.

"Come on, we'll get you back to bed," Dylan said.

I waited, hoping, as footsteps left the pantry.

Jake opened the door, grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the pantry. My search was over, I had to go now! He led me out of the kitchen, through the back door and into the yard.

"That was close," he whispered as he carefully closed the door behind us.

"Yeah, I'm going to get the hell out of here. Did you see Hades?" I had started around the house when something drew my attention. A greenhouse. I slowed to a stop.

Jake shook my arm. "Come on, you got to go. And I still have to go find Hades, if he hasn't been found already."

"What's with the greenhouse?" I asked in a low voice.

"It's Dylan's project for that full ride scholarship. Get moving." He gave me a small shove, but I dug my feet in. Project... I remembered his project. Something about plants. I started toward the greenhouse without thinking.

"Lexie, you have to go," he hissed.

"One minute." I opened the door and slipped inside. Moist heat swamped me. The greenhouse wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either. But there was only one type of plant. In different shades of orange and yellow, but still the same plant several times over. A giant flower, some three feet tall. Horizontal rows hung against the right wall. Dylan's photography gear was set up across from it. On the same table I found his research notes. But that wasn't what interested me, it was the flowers. I moved down the line to

the end where there were several that had withered away. I picked up a long petal. "I've seen this before."

"Where?" Jake whispered looking out the door, keeping watch for Dylan.

"At every single site of the ghost traps." I picked up several more dried flower petals. "What flower is this?"

"Um, I don't know. Some marigold, if I remember right," he said absently. "Come on, I have to get Hades out of the house."

That jolted me back to the present. I quickly took a picture of one of the flowers and joined him at the door.

"Head to the car and I'll bring Hades out," he whispered. "I hope."

"What are you going to tell them about Hades?" I asked.

"You left him for a cuddle with Dylan's dad. What else?" he said, as if it were obvious. "Now go."

I ducked out the door and hustled through the woods around the house to the street. My pulse had finally stopped racing when I reached the Blazer. Woof.

Hades ran to me from the driver's side. I bent down and scratched his ears. "How did you get out of the house?" He simply licked my chin in response. Jake must have let him out while I was going through the woods. More thankful than I could say, I loaded up into the truck and got us both the hell out of there.

MIND SPINNING, I looked at the picture on my phone then back to the image on my laptop. It was the same. I sat back against the chair and tried to grasp this. Dylan closed the Veil. There was actual proof.

"Beautiful?" Ethan sat down beside me. "You trailed off mid-sentence."

I read the description of the flower again and shook my head. "It's Dylan."

Fingers turned me to Ethan. His gentle chocolate eyes met mine. "How do you know?"

"It's the same flower that has been at every site we've found." I picked up my phone and held it out to him. "It's the Mexican marigold. *Targetes erecta.*"

He took the phone from me and looked at the info on the laptop. "Son of a bitch. How the hell didn't we notice that?"

"They were just there," Issac leaned over my shoulder. "They're used during Dia de los Muertos. They're supposed to attract the dead."

"Then you have your proof," Zeke stated.

Stunned, I simply took off my glasses and sat there as the others began talking around me.

CHAPTER 20

Asher

stepped outside only to be brought up short. My wolf woke and raised my head into the air as soon as I stepped on the front porch. A familiar musky scent came in on a breeze. I stepped out further and looked down the block.

It wasn't hard to spot him. The shifter from the woods wasn't even trying to hide from me. He leaned against a car, his arms crossed over his chest, the scars across half his face catching the light of the morning sun. Shiny scars. Fresh. My wolf rumbled approval before settling down a bit. He didn't go back to sleep, he was simply waiting for something.

Keeping my eyes on him, I pulled my phone out and texted the twins.

Woofy: You two are leaving with me. Houses are being watched.

I turned and opened the door to the house. "Jess! You're driving with me today."

Jessica poked her head out of her bedroom. "Why?"

"Someone is watching the house. Get moving."

She cursed and hurried back into her room. I waited on the porch, watching him watch us.

It wasn't long before the twins were shutting their front door and coming toward my house.

Jessica shut the door behind her, still zipping her bag up. For the first time in years, her hair was down and unstyled. Her natural waves shone in the light.

Ethan noticed. "You're not wearing make up?"

"And you're in flannel," Isaac added, his eyebrows in his hairline.

Jess slung her bag over her shoulder and shot him a look. "I'll put on make-up at school."

Ethan tilted his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. "Eyeliner and a little mascara should do it."

I led the others down the stairs.

"That's all I really had time to grab," she muttered as we headed to my truck.

"You don't need all that crap," I said as I opened the driver side door. "It just makes you look like everyone else."

Jessica shrugged as everyone climbed into the truck.

We pulled away from the curb and headed toward school. We were a block away before I checked my rearview. The shifter was following in a car. With three other people. Shit.

* * *

Lexie

"What's taking so long?" I asked Rory, shifting in my seat in the school office waiting area. "They said eight, right?"

Rory nodded, his mouth a tight line. "Things come up."

Rory and I hadn't really spoken since the talk at Asher's house. He was still pissed. I could tell because he kept grinding his teeth. But to hell with it. "You're still mad at me?"

He turned to me with an incredulous look on his face. "You ditched school after I explicitly told you to keep your head down."

I looked down at my hands in my lap. "Yeah, I know."

"You have to learn to follow the rules, kid," Rory reminded me. "It's the only way to avoid trouble."

I'd never known Rory to be angry so long before. Not knowing what else to do, I kept my head down and my mouth shut.

Eventually, we were called into the office.

"Please, have a seat," Mrs. Weaver said. Jadis leaned against the cabinet with her arms crossed over her chest. A slight bruise on her left hand caught

my eye. Hmm. Someone got hit in the fight.

We both sat down and waited.

Mrs. Weaver eyed me, then Rory. "I'm afraid we can't let Lexie get away with things like she has in the past." She turned to Rory. "For starters, Lexie is suspended for two weeks."

I nodded, expecting it.

"Two weeks?" Rory stated. "She skipped school, that hardly seems like the right punishment."

"There will also be repercussions for trying to use Mr. Huntington's family contacts to get me and Mrs. Weaver fired," Jadis added as she turned to me.

I raised an eyebrow. What the hell was she talking about? "Huh?"

Mrs. Weaver nodded. "Exactly." She turned to me. "You can't do that, Lexie. It's dishonorable and underhanded."

I raised an eyebrow. "I honestly have no clue what you're talking about."

"The head of our school board came to me today and demanded Ms. Hall's termination," Mrs. Weaver announced. "Thankfully, with Ms. Hall's help, we were able to straighten out the entire issue."

Jadis' help? I eyed the woman in question. "And what makes you think I had anything to do with this?"

She shook her head, a small grin on her face. "Who else would stand to benefit?"

The entire school? I barely managed to keep my mouth shut.

"What further punishments were you talking about?" Rory cut to the chase.

"Two more weeks of suspension," Mrs. Weaver announced.

I gaped at her. "A month? This is my last year."

Rory nodded. "I agree, that seems to be excessive."

"It'll be an in-school suspension," Mrs. Weaver assured us. "She'll be able to continue her schoolwork and not fall behind. She'll just be under supervision."

"Whose supervision?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Mine." Jadis smiled a big smile.

I shook my head. "Can't I have the devil instead?"

"Lexie," Rory bit out my name. I shut my mouth. Rory turned back to Mrs. Weaver. "What other punishments?"

"A change in class schedule for one," Jadis announced, pushing away from the cabinet to hold out a sheet of paper.

I took it carefully, being sure my barriers were up. When I skimmed my new schedule, my heart sunk. Everything was different. "You've taken me out of every college prep class I had." I lifted my head and looked at each of them. "Are you really trying to sabotage my chances of getting into art school?"

"Good question." Rory leaned forward, catching Mrs. Weaver's attention.

Mrs. Weaver straightened her shoulders. "No. Obviously the classes you have are too difficult. Otherwise you'd be attending."

That was it. I crumpled the schedule in my hand. "This is fucking bullshit."

Their jaws dropped, but I wasn't done.

"You're actively trying to destroy my future." My voice rose as I met Mrs. Weaver's gaze. "What kind of educator are you that you think this is okay? What kind of person does that make you?"

Her mouth pressed to a tight line.

"Lexie, out!" Rory barked.

I turned to Rory. His face was hard, his eyes throwing daggers at me. Without a word, I picked up my bag and stormed out of the office to sit in the waiting area. This was fucking ridiculous! They took me out of everything.

I was bouncing my knee in the waiting area when my phone chimed.

Snoopy: Has anyone seen Lexie?

Before I even had a chance to finish texting the guys were answering.

Tough Guy: She's not here.

Superman: Not yet.

Cookie Monster: Nope.

My stomach knotted as raised voices from the vice principal's office drew everyone's attention.

Alexis: Currently in the office, getting suspended and possibly expelled for yelling at Mrs. Weaver and Jadis. Rory is in there now.

The yelling suddenly stopped. I didn't know if that was a thing good or not.

When Rory exited his face was etched in rage. When his eyes met mine, I swallowed hard through my suddenly tight throat.

"Home. Now," he bit out.

I picked up my stuff and followed him out of the office and toward the parking lot. Rory walked me to the Blazer and ordered me straight home.

I didn't argue. I didn't say a word. The throbbing vein in his forehead warned me not to. My heart was pounding as I pulled out onto the road. Rory pulled in ahead of me and led me home.

A pressure filled my chest, making it a bit harder to breathe. Rory was beyond furious. And I couldn't blame him.

The drive home seemed to take forever. Eventually, I pulled up to the house behind Rory's squad car. It took me two tries to pull the keys out of the ignition. They tinkled in my shaking hands as Rory followed me to the house.

Hades rolled off the couch as I came inside. His wagging tail wavered as I set my bag down and scratched his ears.

The door shut behind me with finality. This was it. He'd had enough.

I turned to him, already apologizing. "I'm sorry, Rory. I tried—"

"You tried?" he snapped, the lines on his face hard. "School has just started, and you're suspended!"

I nodded. "I know. I just..."

"You just what?" he snapped, stepping toward me. "Couldn't keep your mouth shut? Couldn't control your temper?"

"They took me out of all of my college prep classes, my art class even," I pointed out uselessly. He knew exactly what happened, he had been warning me all summer of it.

"Damn it, Lexie!" he barked. "How many chances do you think you're going to get?"

Hades brushed against the front of my legs. "I know, I fucked up. I'm sorry—"

"Sorry doesn't cut it." He clenched his fists at his sides. "Shit keeps happening and you keep saying it's everyone else's fault!"

My eyes stung as I looked up at him. "No, I know I'm the one who—"

"You can't keep blaming everyone else," he said in a voice I'd never heard from him before. It was quiet. Cold. Empty. My cellphone rang, but I ignored it.

"I'm saying it is my fault, I fucked up," I reiterated.

His eyes were unfocused as he shook his head. An icy shiver ran down my spine as Hades pressed against my legs, forcing me to back up a couple feet.

"At some point..." His gaze focused on mine, his eyes changing, the brown growing darker, almost black. "At some point, we have to face it."

Something about him shifted, changed. I dropped a foot back, shifting my weight.

"It's you, Alexis," he stated, as if it just occurred to him. "You're the cause of all these problems."

My heart dropped. My world stopped. Rory didn't want me. He blamed me. My entire world teetered on the edge of collapse. What I thought was solid was suddenly sinking and flimsy.

His voice was calm as his gaze took me in. A look of pure disappoint filled his face, driving a blade into my heart. "You're the one that needs to go."

My heart shattered. I couldn't breathe, move, think. I simply stood waiting for the next hit that would break me apart. He wanted me gone. My world crumbled around me.

Hades' growl was my only warning. I pulled back only to feel the breeze of the baton as it passed my head. Stunned, I fell back into a defensive position on instinct. Rory's face was red, his veins bulging in his neck and temples. His features contorting as he came at me again.

I barely blocked a blow with my forearm in time. The dull thud of metal hitting flesh echoed through the room. "Rory!"

"It's your fault," he stated in that same empty voice. "You're the reason she knows."

"Stop!" I grabbed his arm before it could come back down. Big mistake. A fist came out of nowhere. I barely dove to the floor in time to avoid it. I rolled to my side in time to see him drop the baton. Drool dripped from his chin as Hades barked and snarled him away from me. Then those dark eyes met mine. Familiar dark eyes. Jadis. Magic.

"Rory, this isn't you," I said in a calm voice.

Brown shone in that black for a heartbeat. He shook his head and turned back to me. Black. Fuck.

Rory came toward me. I scrambled into position to take him down.

Almost as if in slow motion, Rory lunged for me. Hades' form blurred. From one heartbeat to the next, Hades was gone and a large, dark-clothed figure rose from the floor. Black leather hugged a lithe figure. The man

slammed into Rory and took him to the floor. In less than a heartbeat, Rory was pinned and cuffed with his own handcuffs.

The world was silent as the man looked up at me. Black hair, blue soulful eyes....

"Hades," my whisper was barely a breath in the room. My heart pounded in my ears.

"Stellina," he answered in a deep, gentle voice.

I knew that voice. The trail...

Rory began shouting incoherently, taking my attention from my now-human dog.

Hades pressed his weight onto the knee he had on the middle of Rory's back. "He's being compelled."

Compelled? Fuck. It could kill him. Rory fought to reach me with everything he had. "Get him to the bathroom in his room, in the tub." I shoved to my feet and ran up to my room. The whole issue of Hades being human could wait until we saved Rory's life.

Curses and shouts echoed from downstairs as I tore open drawers and slammed them shut as I dug through my supplies, running everything I knew about compulsion through my head. What it all came down to was simple. If we don't cleanse him of it, he dies.

I was rushing down the stairs when the front door opened. Zeke came in, frowning. I stumbled in my rush. He barely caught me before I hit the floor at the foot of the stairs.

"What the fuck is going on?" he grunted as I hit his chest.

"Rory. Bathroom." It was all I had to say. He set me down. I took off at a run. His footsteps echoed mine.

Rory was in the tub, struggling against... Hades. That was fucking Hades. I went to the sink and dropped all my supplies in it.

"Who the fuck are you?" Zeke snapped.

"Hades." I reached over, plugged the tub and turned on the water. "Get his clothes off. We need to soak and wash him in salt and herbs. And talk to him."

Blades suddenly appeared in his hands as if conjured from thin air.

Zeke jerked me back away from Hades and the blades. "Lexie, what the hell is going on?"

I looked up at him, my eyes wide. "Jadis compelled Rory to kill me. Hades shifted into a human. And we're trying to save Rory's life."

He didn't look at me as if I'd lost my mind. He didn't even hesitate. He moved into the bathroom and helped Hades strip Rory in the tub. "Tell me what to do."

Focusing on one thing at a time, I went to the sink and started crushing herbs in my mortar and pestle. Fennel, bay leaves, nettles, jasmine. Salt. Lots of salt. I pulled out the tub we kept in the bathroom and handed it to Zeke. "In the water!"

Zeke did as I said as I started throwing the mixture in over Hades and Zeke's shoulders.

Rory thrashed in the tub, but thanks to Zeke and Hades' size they kept him there.

"It's not working," Hades announced. "His head needs to go under."

"We're not drowning him," Zeke snapped.

I ran out of the bathroom and into the kitchen. Heart racing, I grabbed a large quart measuring thing with shaking hands and ran back. I passed it to Zeke. "We need to talk to him. That's everything I know."

Zeke began to scoop up the water and pour it over Rory's head. Rory's struggling slowed.

"Come on, Rory." Zeke's voice grew patient and calm as he poured more and more water over Rory's head. "Come back to us."

"Hey! Where are you guys?" Isaac's voice called from the living room.

Not knowing what else to do, I backed out of the bathroom and went to meet them.

The twins were there with Asher and Miles.

Tears rolled from my eyes. "Rory..." I pointed at the bathroom. Every one of them grew pale before they bolted past me.

All but Miles. Miles held my face and wiped my tears away. "What happened, Angel?"

It took me several deep breaths, but I explained what happened. He kissed my forehead and held me close. "We need to ground him in reality, right?"

I nodded.

His eyes met mine. "Get Tara. He needs her."

Fuck. Why didn't I think about that? I nodded and pulled out my phone. "Yeah?" Tara's voice was quiet.

"Get home now. Rory needs you." I hung up and clutched my phone as

I went to the bathroom door and hovered. The guys talked to Rory,

reminding him who he was, imploring him to come back. I stood and tried to breathe.

When the front door opened, I headed back out to the living room. Tara's face was pale, her eyes wide and scared. But right now, it didn't matter. Rory did.

"Some witch fucked with Rory's head," I announced. "They tried to get him to kill me."

She scowled at me.

"Right now, he's in the tub, but we need to remind him who he is. He needs you," I stated simply.

She shook her head. "He's not my father. I'm nothing to him."

I couldn't believe that she actually thought that. "You are a fucking idiot."

Her eyes were filling with tears as she turned to me.

"That man loves you more than anything." I took several steps toward her. "You are his world. He's better than a father. He's your dad. Yeah, they lied to you. But they did it so you wouldn't feel different. They got a donor so this fucked up ability that I have wouldn't be passed to you. So he wouldn't have to watch you die like he watched his sister."

"I know!" she shouted, wiping her face. "But that doesn't change the fact he's not my father."

I shook my head. "My own mother beat me with a fucking belt. She'd call me a demon child. She hated me."

Tara's bottom lip trembled.

"Blood doesn't mean shit, Tara!" I bit out. "Blood doesn't make you family. Love, loyalty, support, sacrifice. That is what makes you a family. When you put your own fucking ego aside for the people you love, because it's what's best for them. That's family."

She swallowed hard again.

"And right now, your dad needs you."

Tara met my gaze, her eyes clearing. She took a deep breath and walked past me, through Rory's bedroom door.

I took several deep breaths and looked up at the ceiling. "Please, just... please." I turned and went back into the bedroom and stood at the doorway with Hades.

Tara had taken Zeke's spot. Zeke had taken Hades' so he could keep Rory above the waterline.

Rory growled.

"Daddy..." Tara's voice cracked.

Rory stopped snarling.

Tara grabbed the glass container and dipped it into the water. She slowly poured it over Rory's soaked copper curls. "It's me."

Tears fell down her face as she collected more water. Everyone held their breath.

She poured water over his head again. "I'm still mad, but... I get it. I get why..."

Still nothing.

Tears fell down her face as she continued talking to Rory. Isaac was the first to reach out and set his hand on Tara's shoulder. Ethan was the second, a comforting hand on the knee. Asher was the third. He simply held her hand, giving silent support. Zeke continued to hold Rory, his own eyes overfilling as time went on and Rory didn't improve.

And Miles... I looked around the small bathroom. Where was Miles?

* * *

Miles

I PULLED the car over and shut it off. Everything inside me was silent and still. I should be back in that bathroom. There was nothing I could do there. But here... Another black SUV pulled up beside mine.

I didn't even hesitate. I got out and went into the other car's back seat.

My father was there. And not alone.

Three others were there, in suits.

"Where are they?" I demanded. My voice glacial.

"I have an address," Father stated. "But I'd like you to stay out of it."

I turned to him. "Give it to me."

"What do you plan to do?" he asked.

"Kill them all."

He scowled. "That's quite a change."

Cold rage boiled through me. "They tried to make a man who has been like a father to me, try to kill the woman I love." I met his gaze again. "And he still might die. What would you do?"

He nodded once in understanding, though appearing sad at the same time. "The same."

It didn't deter me. I was done watching the people I loved suffer, especially when I could do something about it.

"Trust me with this," Father said. "Now, go back there."

Still seething, I nodded and got out of the car. I met my father's sad gaze one more time before closing the door.

The black SUV pulled out and onto the road.

* * *

Lexie

RORY BEGAN TO CONVULSE. It was small at first, just a jerk. Then the second one that slammed his feet into the bottom of the tub.

"Dad..." Tara whispered as Rory began to seize. His entire body stiffened and shook.

"Rory, come back, man," Zeke rasped as he kept Rory from slamming against the iron tub.

Rory jerked even more, his lips tinted blue.

"Daddy!" Tara cried out as she held his face above water. Tears rolled down her face. "Please, please stay... please... I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it! Please!" Tara continued to plead through the tears and convulsions while clinging to Rory. Eventually, Rory's color got better. The more Tara talked, the more she cried, the better his color.

By the time Uma arrived, his breathing had evened out. Uma moved through the crowded bathroom and leaned over Zeke's shoulder to check on him.

"The compulsion's gone," she announced. "Boys, could you get him dry and into bed?"

The guys agreed while Uma gently detached Tara from Rory and brought her away.

"He's going to be alright," Uma assured us in a warm voice.

Tara stepped forward and met my eyes. For the first time, I saw my cousin as she was. Terrified, lost, but at the same time... strong. She had her own armor, she had her own problems. But no matter how different, how

opposite we were, tears rolled down both of our faces. For Rory. I don't know who reached for whom, and it didn't matter.

I hugged her tight as the emotions I'd been holding back crashed over me. Us. She shook against me as we cried. I buried my face in her shoulder as she did mine and broke. We broke down together standing in Rory's bathroom, surrounded by family.

Hades sat on one side of the armchair while the guys surrounded and towered over him. His blue eyes stayed on me, as if he didn't see the others. It would be hard not to. They flanked me and kept me at the farthest point of the circle.

"You're Hades?" Isaac asked for the third time.

He nodded. "Yes."

"So, you're a shifter?" Asher asked as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"No." His voice was flat but matter of fact.

"What are you, then?" Miles demanded.

"Familiar."

The guys bombarded him with questions. While he answered, he held my gaze. Horror grew inside me as I ran over our past. Bathing while Hades watched me when he was a puppy. Changing in front of Hades, Hades sleeping on my chest. Oh God. The blood drained from my face. Masturbating with him in the room! "Oh God." My face caught fire as I stepped back away from them. The growing horror doubling as I remembered Hades at the door when I had sex with Isaac! Phone sex with Ethan! "Oh my God." I turned away and covered my face, humiliation crashing through me. I thought I was alone!

Unfamiliar hands wrapped around my wrists and pulled them from my face. "Stellina..."

I looked up at Hades.

"How the hell did you get over there so fast?" Isaac snapped as everyone spun to face us.

Hades ignored him, he simply waited for something from me.

"I've been naked in the room with you!" I barked, jerking away from him and backing up into the guys. An arm went around my waist, while Zeke and Asher moved between me and Hades. His hands went up, warning them off. His eyes stayed on mine. "So?"

"I didn't know you were human!" I snapped.

"I'm not human." He sighed, his arms dropping. "You being naked means nothing to me."

I scowled at him.

Zeke and Asher both took a step toward him, both looking for blood. I grabbed their arms and pulled back on them. They stopped, but mostly because they listened to me. "It means something to me!"

Asher jerked his head away and rubbed his ear, cringing. I made a mental note to use a quieter voice.

"If you can shift, why didn't you help Lexie against Ordin?" Ethan demanded, his voice growing deeper as he stepped between me and Hades.

My stomach knotted. If he could have...

"I was a pup," Hades reminded us. "Only a few months old. I couldn't have helped any more than a three-month-old human could have."

"You could be lying," Zeke bit out.

Hades' eyes flashed. He turned to Zeke, murder in his eyes. "She is my charge. I failed her before I was even able to shift." He stepped forward and went chest to chest with Zeke. "My greatest regret is that I wasn't able to protect her then. I will never let her down again."

The tension in the room doubled.

I'd had enough. "Knock it off! If anyone gets to be pissy, it's me!"

The guys turned, their anger leashed for the moment.

I shook my head, not knowing what to say. "How... how did Miles find you?"

The murder left Hades' face as he turned to me. "He didn't. They found you."

"They?" I was getting tired of these short answers.

"Reapers." That single word plunged the room into silence.

"Reapers?" I asked, my throat going dry. "A reaper knows about me?"

He smiled a gentle, Hades-like grin. "Know about you? They all know about you, and what's happening in Spring Mountain. One is even watching you closely."

I shook my head. "Why?"

His head tilted to the side in a weird dog-like move. "The events here are world-altering. They're the only truly neutral primal beings left in the

world. Angels want to burn everything. Demons want to corrupt. Reapers simply want to do what they're supposed to and keep the world going."

"Who's watching her?" Zeke demanded.

I reached up and wrapped my hand around his without thinking. He took a deep breath and squeezed my hand gently.

Hades met my gaze. "Your many times great-grandmother."

My heart stopped. "Come again?"

"The reaper that started your line of necromancers," he said. "She's been keeping close watch."

"How close?" It just popped out.

"She helped wake Ethan up in New Orleans," he announced.

Oh God. The hand... the hair I thought was mine. "Shit..."

Hands went to my shoulders as Isaac gently moved me to the couch to sit. Everyone relaxed a little more. Hades moved back to his chair and sat slowly.

"She was in New Orleans?" I asked, slowly.

He nodded as the others sat down around me.

"The blur..." I muttered. "That was her?"

"Couldn't be, that was a man." Miles turned Hades and eyed him. "That was you?"

"Yes."

My head snapped up, my eyes focusing on him. "You? You pulled me off the ladder."

He nodded. "And cleared the path for the others to get to you."

"He killed people, Lexie." Zeke made it clear for me.

"How many?" I asked.

"Twenty-seven in New Orleans," Hades answered without an issue.

My eyebrows shot up, my stomach rolled.

"He helped us get to you," Asher reminded me.

I nodded absently. He still killed people.

"You said in New Orleans." Miles pushed his glasses up his nose as his eyes narrowed. "Have you killed anyone here?"

Hades met my gaze. "Yes."

My jaw dropped. "To protect me?"

He nodded again.

"Who?" I rasped.

"The DA, the shapeshifter you injured. Anyone who might be a physical threat to you."

"You killed people. For me?" I asked, dreading the answer.

His eyes held mine. "Yes."

I didn't know what to say, so I stayed silent. That rarely went wrong for me.

"So, you're supposed to protect her?" Isaac asked just to be clear.

Hades nodded. "From anyone."

Isaac straightened.

I met Hades' gaze. "In Boulder, you wouldn't leave Isaac."

He didn't explain.

So, I pushed. "Why?"

Hades' jaw clenched and unclenched before he answered. "Because he's your family. I kept him tethered to this world and gave him what protection I could."

"What does that mean?" Isaac asked, stepping toward him.

Hades' gaze went to Isaac. "It means, if the demon truly began to eat your soul, I would have killed you."

My jaw dropped. "You would have killed him?"

"It would have set him free to move on," Hades said, as if that explained everything.

Isaac turned to me. "He would have saved my soul, Red."

I looked up at him, still stunned. I shook my head. This was just too much right now. I got to my feet and walked away from them to go upstairs.

I sat on my bed and buried my face in my hands and took slow, deep breaths. My dog was a familiar. Rory was compelled to kill me. And Dylan was behind the Veil. I took deep, slow breaths as I focused on not losing my shit.

The smell of musky dog reached me. I lifted my head to find Hades the dog at my door. He walked in and sat between my knees, looking up at me as he always had. But now I knew. I knew what that intelligence really was.

I shook my head as tears filled my eyes. It was all just too much today. "You're not sleeping in my bed anymore."

EPILOGUE

stepped out back with Uma with the small orange crystal in my hand. "Do we really have to do this now?"

"Yes." Uma turned on me. "Rory is awake and Tara is in with him, talking things out. You've been raising the dead in your sleep. You have to raise something or it'll get worse."

I cursed under my breath as I looked around the yard. "I don't see any squirrels around."

"That's too public anyway." Uma started toward the dock. "You're going to raise fish."

"Fish?" I followed her to the very end of the dock. The lake was cold. Fall came hard and fast here in the mountains. By Halloween, the lake would be iced over.

"Yes, they're small and out of sight. It's the perfect way to raise in public." Uma looked down at the water.

I sat at the edge. "Alright, so I'm raising a fish?"

"Not one." She looked down at me. "As many as you can."

My eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"You need to know what you can do and how you'll react to it." She gestured at the water. "You're emotional... it's a good time to try."

I sighed. "With or without the stone?"

"With, otherwise you'll be out for the rest of the day." She stepped back several feet behind me.

I held the stone in my palm and closed my eyes. My barriers dropped.

My energy sank into the wood of the dock. Then into the water, spreading faster than I'd ever felt before. The wind ran over the water and

brushed through me. Each blade of grass danced. The small bugs tickled, as if the grass were my skin. For one single moment, I was connected with everything.

"Now, when you're ready, sink to the bottom and find the dead," Uma said in a soothing, calm voice.

I took a deep breath and sank. My energy poured through everything it touched. The stone grew warm in my hand as its energy gathered inside of me, then back out to take my touch further.

The little bones that lay on the floor of the lake were my bones. Scattered and broken. Spread so far. Some deep in the muck, some fresh and on top. My stomach rolled. I was never swimming here again.

"Got them," I whispered, keeping my eyes closed.

"Now, raise them."

The energy built with my pulse. That's when something strange happened. It was like I was watching myself sitting on the dock with my eyes closed from under the water. All emotion gone, all anger, everything, leaving me. Simply, me. "Rise." My voice was hard and deeper than usual. Demanding, not asking.

Water flicked, disrupting the surface. I opened my eyes as I rushed back into my body. A fish tail splashed water. Then another. And another. Soon enough, the entire lake was filled with waves from fish splashing. Skeletal snakes slithered out from the bushes toward the dock while the lake seemed to boil. Uma moved to my side as I watched it continue.

The lake seemed to be overflowing with fish for exactly eight minutes. When it ended, the energy rushed back through me and into the stone. The high was... terrifying. It shut down my mind and made everything alright. I seemed to crave it for a heartbeat. Then I was reminding myself why that was bad and that I didn't want it.

When I had my head back on straight, I truly understood why witches feared necromancers. I was a granddaughter of Death and Lilith, the first witch. Maybe it was time to remind Jadis of that.

"How many?" Uma asked, her voice a rasp.

"Three hundred and eighteen," I whispered. I had felt them all in my head while they were animated.

"My God..."

It was tense in Rory's living room. I had refused to explain where I had gone, and Angel wasn't taking it well. Well, that and Hades was back in his natural dog form and lying across her lap.

"This can't happen again," Lexie decided, her eyes unfocused, staring at the coffee table.

"I had warned you," Uma reminded us.

Lexie nodded. "I need to move out."

"You can take Sylvie's room," Zeke offered immediately.

I bristled. "She has a room at my house already."

"That room's taken," Zeke countered.

"Not anymore." I turned back to Lexie. "I sent Lucy to a hotel."

"All of us might have to move in with Miles," Ethan announced. "We're putting everyone in danger by living with them."

"Moving out won't be enough." Uma drew everyone's attention. "We need to get all your loved ones out of reach of their people."

Lexie nodded, her eyes tired. "That means Tara, Rory and Susan."

"Sylvie's safe," Zeke chimed.

"Ma," The twins said in unison.

"Jessica," Asher added.

"We'll send them on a trip. A vacation," I offered. "All expenses paid."

"How's your mom going to handle it?" Lexie asked the twins.

The twins shrugged. "She'll manage."

It was moot. If Father managed to do what I asked, there was no point to this conversation.

There was a knock at the door.

Since Lexie wasn't paying attention and Rory was in his room, I answered. It was Liam.

I stepped outside and closed the door, thankful that no one was paying much attention. "What are you doing here?"

Liam's face was a hard mask. "We did as you asked. The house suddenly developed a gas leak. Terrible accident. But there was a complication."

"What complication?" I demanded. Did they get Jadis or not?

"Your father insisted on being right there with us, getting his hands dirty. Unfortunately, we were caught going in. Big battle. Your father," Liam took a breath. "Your father's dead. He'll be found in the rubble by morning."

I scoffed. "As if I'm going to believe that?"

His eyes grew wider. "I felt for a pulse on him myself."

I shook my head. "I don't believe anything from him or about him anymore. I can't." I started to go back inside.

He stopped me. "I'm not joking, man. He's dead. Gut sliced open. We work for you now."

That stopped me. I turned back to them. "You work for me now? 'Cause he's dead? Or because he told you to?"

"Both." Liam's gaze darted to the door and back to me. "He paid in advance."

"For?"

"The girl's protection."

I scowled at him. "That makes no sense. He warned me off her."

"He changed his mind."

I sighed and shook my head. I'd have to watch them, too. "Make a perimeter, and don't get seen. If you can, one follower for each of us. Understand?"

He nodded and stepped backwards. He walked away as I stood there, racking my brain.

Eventually, I headed back inside.

"Who was it?" Lexie asked as I closed the door.

"No one." I left the doorway and took a seat in an empty armchair. What was the game?

Ethan picked up my last box of books and headed out of my bedroom. Now the extra room at Rory's house. I looked around the small, bare room and smiled. Something about leaving made my heart heavy. It wasn't forever, just until this was over. I'd be back, but why did it still make me sad?

Zeke came through the door. "Is that everything?"

I nodded as I turned to him.

He held my gaze.

"Why am I sad that I'm leaving?" I asked, tired of trying to think of everything myself.

His lips quirked. "Why do you think it makes you sad?"

"Because it was the first real home I've had, and I'm scared I'll never find it again." That felt right.

"I felt the same way when I packed up my stuff for Miles' house." His voice grew quieter. "Took a bit to figure it out."

I smiled up at him. "You're pretty smart, Tough Guy."

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. "I try, Baby."

"Can't we just load up Zeke? I mean, his shoulders alone..." Isaac grumbled as he came up the stairs.

"No, he's not a pack mule," Rory chuckled.

"He is a jackass though," Ethan chimed.

I snorted.

Zeke dropped his arm and muttered under his breath.

Rory and the twins stepped in and filled the rest of my bedroom.

"Is that everything?" Rory asked.

I nodded.

"Good." He turned enough so he could see everyone. "Where's Miles?" Isaac shrugged. "He said something came up."

Rory frowned. "Something came up? That's what he said?"

Dread filled my gut. "Yeah, why?"

Rory sighed and shook his head before looking at each of us. "Miles' father was found dead yesterday morning."

Everyone shared looks.

"Does he know?" I asked.

Rory nodded. "I told him this morning. He didn't say anything?"

Everyone shook their heads.

I was spinning. "Where is he?"

"He's probably meeting with lawyers at the house." Zeke started for the door. Everyone followed.

This couldn't be happening. I slammed the old book closed and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and dropped with a heavy thud. It was impossible!

I shot to my feet and began to pace across the study. Well, what was left of it.

I clenched my fist. Huntington and his supernaturals had taken out the old house, burning most of my books along with a lot of my herbal stockpile.

Humans weren't supposed to have access to the energy that formed the universe! We worked with the magnetic energy created naturally!

I scrubbed my hand over my face and picked up my pacing. And that energy certainly didn't belong in the hands of an eighteen-year-old girl! The damage she could do... She could kill millions, wipe out the world! I stopped and took deep, gasping breaths as panic coursed through me. This was a disaster!

All I wanted to do was make the supernatural world make sense. It was my life's work. I wrapped my arms around my myself. Something had to have gone wrong if she could control the energy from the Veil. Something, somewhere. The energy that flew through the basement and knocked everyone back... While everyone else was fighting, protecting our new partner, I was on my stomach watching grass spring up from the stagnant puddle in front of me. The energy of creation itself, and it's in the hands of a teenage girl.

And she'd only get stronger as time went on. The damage she could do... it would be cataclysmic. Screw controlling the supernatural world, we

had to take her out now before she became even stronger. I needed the templars.

EVELYN

Zahur hung up the office line. "It's coming to a head. We need people on the ground in Spring Mountain."

Minerva finally stopped suckling, though with her fingers tangled in my hair I couldn't hand her to Atty yet. I winced and tried to untangle her fingers. "Can I please blast them into oblivion now?"

Astrid snorted as she rocked Alice while she waited her turn.

Atticus was there in a heartbeat, taking over. Warmth filled my heart as he carefully untangled our daughter's fingers from my hair. Holding back a grin, I watched as his warm smile crossed his face.

"Come on, Mini. It's your sister's turn to eat," he said in a soft voice, carefully lifting her from my arms.

"I still don't like Mini," Astrid announced as she passed me Alice. "I like Nerva better."

"She's a lady, not a nerve ending," Atticus shot back as he began to pat our daughter's back.

Astrid narrowed her eyes at him. "Just wait, those white curls are going to destroy your orderly world and I'm going to watch with popcorn."

I rolled my eyes and settled back in the chair with Alice. Her gold eyes smiled up at me as she latched on. I sighed. This kid was always easy. Thank God.

"She already has," Ranulf chimed in, laughing deeply. "I mean, look at him."

Atticus ignored them as he absently rocked back and forth, burping one of our daughters. "Go to…" He glanced down at the baby's head and sent Ranulf a one fingered salute.

Ran and Astrid chuckled again.

I turned back to Zahur, who was waiting patiently. These exchanges had become our norm since the babies were born. "Why not? It'd be a lot simpler."

He sighed wearily. "You never used to be this bloodthirsty."

"My tolerance for BS has dropped drastically," I admitted as I looked down at Alice's sweet little face.

"If the Witch's Council is behind it, then the treaty would have taken care of it already." Astrid jumped back on topic.

"That's true," Atticus muttered as he wiped Minerva's mouth with the burp rag. "There's no proof."

"It's the Witch's Council," Jade announced as she strolled into the office. The small beauty's lithe figure was swathed in a modified kimono. Silk, and split up the sides to show the leather britches she wore, it gave her the movement that she enjoyed while working. Zahur had had the local tailor design it for her comfort specifically. That and he almost killed a gargoyle for looking at her legs.

"Then how are they getting around the treaty?" Astrid asked.

"They're sub-contracting a third party and not being told about events or their plans. They don't care how they get what they want, just the results," she stated simply as she came toward me and bent way too close to look at Alice feeding. She really had no sense of personal space. "Hello, little one."

Alice grinned around my nipple and reached up to touch Jade's chin.

Zahur sighed as he shook his head. "Jade, personal space."

She lifted her head and met my eyes unperturbed. Her nose brushed mine before she stepped back. "Personal space; such an odd thing," she muttered as she moved to Zahur's side.

Zahur had been making strides with Jade and how to act with people, but personal space was a concept the dragon seemed to not be able to grasp.

"We could end this all if you just let Evie destroy the contract and blast them back to bedrock," Astrid reminded them for me.

I sent her a wink. She grinned back.

"No," Zahur stated again. His gaze turned thoughtful. "Though, we could have our own third party on the ground."

Everyone turned to Jade.

She smiled a sharp, dangerous, bloodthirsty smile. "This should be amusing."